

ANCIENT SYNAGOGUES IN PALESTINE

Schweich Lectures on Biblical Archaeology

In 1907, in memory of her father Leopold, Miss Constance Schweich endowed a fund 'devoted to the furtherance of research in the archaeology, art, history, languages and literature of Ancient Civilisation, with reference to Biblical Study'. One fruit of the fund was the foundation of this lecture series. The lectures were first delivered in 1908.

ANCIENT SYNAGOGUES IN PALESTINE

A Re-evaluation Nearly
a Century After Sukenik's
Schweich Lectures

Jodi Magness

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Preface

The invitation to deliver the 2022 Schweich Lectures in Biblical Archaeology is one of the greatest honors of my life. It is a truly humbling experience to follow in the footsteps of the scholarly giants who are immortalized in this series, including Roland de Vaux, Yigael Yadin, Fergus Millar, and others whose work has been central to my own research. It is no less of an honor to be only the third woman invited to deliver these lectures, joining the pathbreakers who preceded me: Kathleen Kenyon and Kay Prag. And, it feels fitting to revisit the topic of ancient synagogues, which was presented in the Schweich Lectures nearly a century ago by Eleazar Lipa Sukenik. It was Sukenik who established ancient synagogues as a prominent subfield of Jewish Studies and founded the Department (now Institute) of Archaeology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, where many years later I had the privilege of studying with Sukenik's son Yadin.

As an undergraduate majoring in archaeology at the Hebrew University, I first learned about ancient synagogues in a course taught by Gideon Foerster. Since then, my own research has led me to question, and ultimately reject, the validity of the typology and chronology of ancient synagogues in Palestine that was formulated by Sukenik and is still widely accepted today, albeit with some modifications. Any differences of opinion that I have with colleagues concerning ancient synagogues should not obscure my respect for their scholarship, on which my own research depends and builds. It is my hope that this volume will promote further scholarly dialogue and the continued evaluation of excavated remains.

In 2011 I began excavations at Huqoq in the hopes of clarifying the chronology of Galilean type synagogues, never expecting to uncover a monumental, late Roman (ca. 400 CE) synagogue building paved with stunning mosaics depicting an array of biblical and other stories. Although the Huqoq synagogue is mentioned in this volume, it is not the subject of any of the chapters as field work concluded only in summer 2023, and it is my staff members – not me alone – who deserve the right to publish the excavated material. I share with them the credit for our extraordinary discoveries.

I am grateful to the members of the British Academy for extending the invitation to deliver the Schweich Lectures, and to the staff for handling the challenging logistical arrangements as the world emerged from the COVID pandemic. I wish to thank Judith Lieu for her gracious hospitality in London, and Richard Bauckham and Martin Goodman for introducing my lectures. I also wish to acknowledge

PREFACE

Maren Niehoff at the Hebrew University and Jonathan Price at Tel Aviv University, who invited me to contribute an article on the history of ancient synagogue studies to a special issue of *Zion*, which is the basis of the second chapter in this volume. The Israel Exploration Society, Nava Panitz-Cohen, Uzi Leibner, Zeev Weiss, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, Hovsep Garo Nabaldian, Zev Radovan, and Yale University Press kindly granted permission to reproduce some of the accompanying illustrations.

I am fortunate to enjoy the love and support of my family, especially my husband Jim Haberman, who prepared the illustrations for this volume. It is dedicated with love to my father, Herbert Magness.

Ancient Synagogues in Palestine: An Overview

Nearly a century has passed since Eleazar Lipa Sukenik delivered the Schweich Lectures on the topic of ancient synagogues in Palestine and Greece, which were published four years later by the British Academy (Sukenik 1934). In the Schweich Lectures, Sukenik established a typology and chronology of synagogue buildings in Palestine, consisting of an earlier (Galilean) type of the second to third centuries, and a later (Byzantine) type of the fifth and sixth centuries. Eventually, the typology was expanded to include a third (Transitional) type dating to the fourth and fifth centuries. It was Sukenik who made ancient synagogues a prominent subfield of Jewish Studies, and the ‘traditional’ typology and chronology that he articulated have been tremendously influential, particularly among the archaeologists who succeeded him at his home institution, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. However, since Sukenik’s time dozens more synagogues have been discovered and excavated, necessitating a reconsideration of his conclusions.

Chapter 1 of this volume sets the stage by providing an overview of ancient synagogues in Palestine and introducing readers to the traditional typology and chronology.¹ Chapter 2 surveys the history and historiography of the study of ancient synagogues in Palestine, highlighting its ideological roots in the early Zionist movement. Chapters 3 and 4 take a deep dive into the evidence for the dating and interpretation of the remains of two synagogues that are central to ongoing debates about the chronology of the Galilean type: Khirbet Wadi Hamam and Capernaum. The results of this fine-grained archaeological analysis, together with recent discoveries such as the excavation of the Huqoq synagogue, indicate that instead of being sequential – as Sukenik thought – different synagogue types were contemporary or overlapped and date to the fourth-sixth centuries CE. This

¹ This overview is intended as a general introduction to provide background for the discussions in the following chapters, and therefore is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive. For recent comprehensive studies, see Hachlili 2013; Levine 2005.

conclusion contradicts a widely accepted view that late antique Jewish communities in Palestine suffered and declined under supposedly oppressive Christian rule.

Introduction

Synagogues (referred to by various terms including Greek *synagoge* and *proseuche*; Hebrew *beth kneset*) are Jewish assembly halls. Like the term ‘church’, synagogue can denote both the congregation itself as well as a building to accommodate the congregation (Schürer 1979: 423-30, 439-40). When synagogues first developed before 70 CE, they served mainly as places for the reading and explanation of the Torah (Pentateuch) to the congregation, which is still the core of a synagogue service. In the centuries following the destruction of the second Jerusalem temple in 70 CE, synagogues assumed an increasingly central role in Jewish religious life, and elaborate prayers and liturgies were added to the Torah readings (Schürer 1979: 447-63; Levine 2005: 530-92). At the same time, synagogue buildings became more monumental and began to be decorated with iconographic programs and symbols that alluded to the Jerusalem temple.

Over one hundred ancient synagogues are known in Palestine, the remains of which have been uncovered in excavations or are attested by architectural fragments or inscriptions (Fig. 1) (Levine 2005: 177; the Bornblum Eretz Israel Synagogues Website at <https://synagogues.kinneret.ac.il/>. Ben David 2021 counts 128). Most of these buildings date to the fourth to sixth centuries (late antiquity) (Levine 2005: 176-7; Levine 1993: 1422). Literary and epigraphic evidence and scattered architectural fragments attest to the existence of numerous other synagogues, the remains of which either have not survived or have not been discovered yet. Outside Palestine, the remains of over a dozen late antique synagogue buildings have been discovered around the Mediterranean and Near East, and inscriptions hint at the existence of many more.² In contrast to Palestinian synagogues, which can be grouped into types and display regional styles, Diaspora synagogues are architecturally diverse because they were not purpose built but were installed in or modified from pre-existing buildings. In addition, all the Diaspora synagogues found to date have been accidental or chance discoveries, even those uncovered in archaeological excavations. All these synagogues – many of which are monumental structures decorated with Jewish symbols and figured images – attest to the existence of vibrant Jewish communities that flourished under Christian rule. They also provide evidence of the relationship between these communities and their non-Jewish neighbors against the backdrop of the rise and spread of Christianity.

² See Kraabel 1995; Levine 2005: 252; for Andriake and Limyra in Asia Minor, see Seyer and Lotz 2013; Çevik et al. 2010. For an evaluation of the evidence from Limyra, see Magness 2017: 41. For Samaritan synagogues, see Magen 1993; Levine 2005: 187-92.

ANCIENT SYNAGOGUES IN PALESTINE: AN OVERVIEW

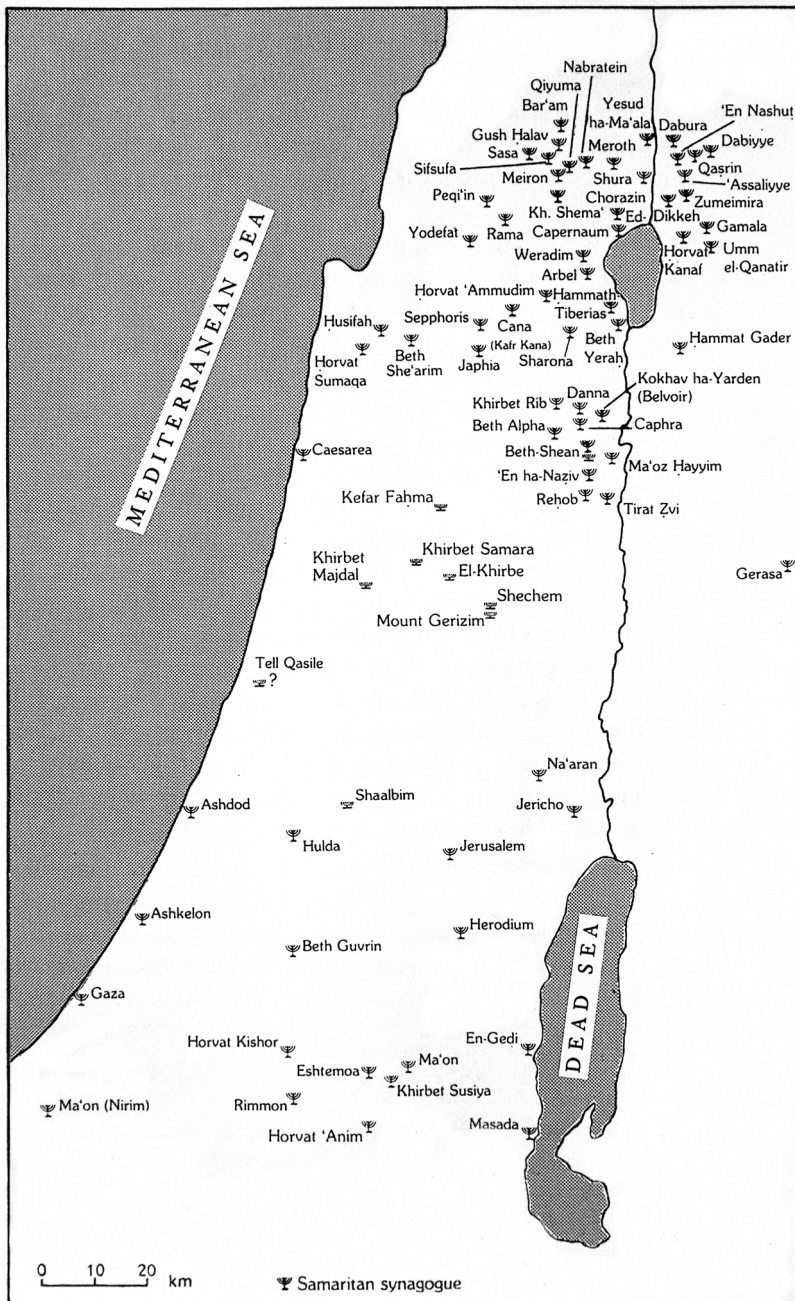


Figure 1. Map of ancient synagogues in Palestine (from Levine 2000: 164) (reproduced with permission of Yale University Press ©)

Synagogue buildings display much greater diversity in layout, decoration, and orientation (referring to the direction of prayer) than churches, probably because unlike Christianity, Judaism never recognized a single authority or unified legislative body. Therefore, congregations were free to commission and build synagogues that reflect different regional styles, liturgies, building materials and the preferences of donors and members. As Lee I. Levine remarks, ‘no two synagogues were identical in either shape, size or design, no matter how close they were to one another geographically or chronologically’ (2005: 319). Nonetheless, a few features are typical of most synagogues, specifically, the use of certain Jewish symbols (especially the menorah [the seven-branched lampstand in the Jerusalem temple], the lulav [a bundle of branches representing four different species used in the celebration of Sukkot/Feast of Tabernacles], ethrog [a citron used with the lulav], Torah scrolls [in the Diaspora] or the Ark of the Tabernacle [in Palestine]), and a platform or niche for the Torah shrine, usually by the Jerusalem-oriented wall.

One ongoing controversy surrounding ancient synagogues concerns their chronology. Did Jews begin to build monumental basilical halls to accommodate their assemblies in the second and third centuries or in the fourth century? The problem of dating is central to an accurate understanding of the historical context of these synagogues and the associated Jewish communities. Although this study focuses on late antique synagogues in Palestine, the following discussion begins with a survey of their origins.

Pre-70 CE Palestinian Synagogues

What did Palestinian synagogues look like in the time of Jesus – that is, before 70 CE? To answer this question, we must first consider the origins of the synagogue (see Levine 2005: 21-44). Scholars have proposed a wide range of dates and settings for the earliest synagogues, including:

- 1) Pre-exilic Judah (pre-586 BCE). According to this view, Josiah’s reforms eliminating temples and shrines around the country and centralizing the cult in the Jerusalem temple would have made it necessary to offer alternative venues to worship the God of Israel. For example, Levine (2005: 30-8) proposes that city gates were a prototype for early synagogues, as both were settings for a variety of communal and religious activities.
- 2) The Babylonian exile. According to this theory, the existence of synagogues explains how the Judahites preserved their distinctive religious identity and continued worshiping the God of Israel while in exile in Babylonia. Although popular and attractive, this theory has no textual or archaeological support.

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- 3) Post-exilic Judah (fifth century BCE). Some scholars understand Ezra's public reading of the Torah to the assembled Judeans (Neh 8:2-9) as the origin of the synagogue.
- 4) Hellenistic Egypt (third-second centuries BCE). This theory identifies the Jewish *proseuche* mentioned in Hellenistic inscriptions from Egypt as a synagogue, based on the usual translation of the term as 'prayer house' and its use interchangeably with the term synagogue in first century BCE and later sources such as Philo.
- 5) Hasmonean Palestine (second-first centuries BCE). This argument from silence claims that since there are no definite literary or epigraphic references to synagogues before the first century BCE and they are not mentioned by Ben Sira, they did not exist before the Hasmonean period.

Several problematic assumptions underlie scholarly attempts to pinpoint the origins of the synagogue. First is the implicit Darwinian assumption that synagogues developed organically over time – an approach that in my opinion is not helpful for understanding early synagogues. A second, larger problem is one of definition. Today the term synagogue generally denotes a building. However, synagogue originally referred to (and still can mean) an assembly or congregation of Jews, not a building to house that gathering (Kloppenborg 2006: 238, 241-2; for different ancient terms used to denote synagogues, see Binder 1999: 91-154). Even today, a purpose-built building is not required to house a synagogue gathering, as attested by the fact that some synagogue congregations meet in churches. Similarly, the term church originally denoted a congregation rather than a building, as for example in the Book of Revelation (or Revelation of John), where the author reports having been instructed to 'Write in a book what you see and send it to the seven churches' (Rev 1.11; NRSV). And, of course, the earliest church gatherings were held in houses and other private settings, not in purpose-built assembly halls (White 1990: 102-26).

Therefore, any attempt to identify the origins of the synagogue must distinguish between assemblies or congregations – that is, between the institution of the synagogue – and purpose-built buildings to house those assemblies (synagogue buildings). This is important because assemblies in and of themselves leave few physical traces. Synagogues only become identifiable in the archaeological record when Jews began to construct purpose-built buildings to house their assemblies, particularly after these buildings were equipped with permanent liturgical furniture and decorated with Jewish symbols and iconography. The question of when and where synagogues first originated depends not on archaeological evidence but on the interpretation of literary and epigraphic sources – that is, on how one defines the institution of the synagogue.

A third problem with pinpointing the origins of the synagogue is the modern understanding of the institution as primarily religious in nature. By religious I am

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referring to scholarly assumptions that early synagogues – like their modern counterparts – were the setting for communal prayer and worship. In contrast, Levine (2005: 169) concludes that, ‘Prayer appears to have played little or no role in the typical [pre-70] Judean synagogue’. Instead, the earliest synagogues were assemblies of Jews, especially on the Sabbath and festivals, primarily (but not only) for the public reading of the Torah.

Archaeological remains associated with a first century CE synagogue were discovered in excavations at the southern end of Jerusalem’s southeastern hill (the City of David) in 1913-1914, when Raymond Weill found an inscribed stone block that had been dumped in a cistern with other architectural fragments (Fig. 2) (see Shanks 2004: 84-93; Hachlili 2013: 523-6; Cotton et al. 2010: 54-5; Levine 2005: 57-9; Binder 1999: 104-9). The inscription, which is in Greek, commemorates a synagogue built by Theodotos son of Vettenos:

Theodotos son of Vettenos, priest and archisynagogos, son of an archisynagogos, grandson of an archisynagogos, built the synagogue for the reading of the Law and teaching of the commandments, and the guest-house and the (other) rooms and water installations(?) for the lodging of those who are in need of it from abroad, which (=the synagogue) his forefathers, the elders and Simonides founded (from Cotton et al. 2010: 54 no. 9.).

The inscription refers to a synagogue building that was part of a complex including a hostel, rooms, and some sort of water installations, perhaps cisterns and/or miqva’ot. Presumably the building associated with the inscription was located nearby and was destroyed in 70 CE. Although Theodotos is a common Greek name

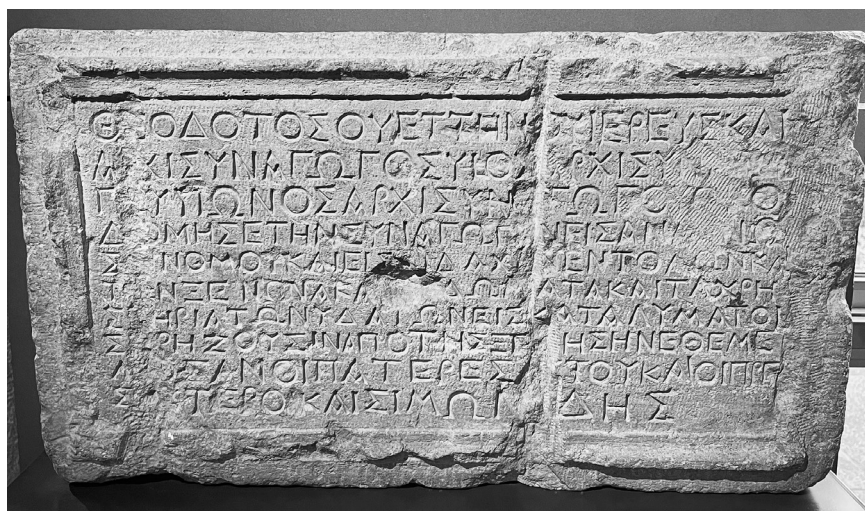


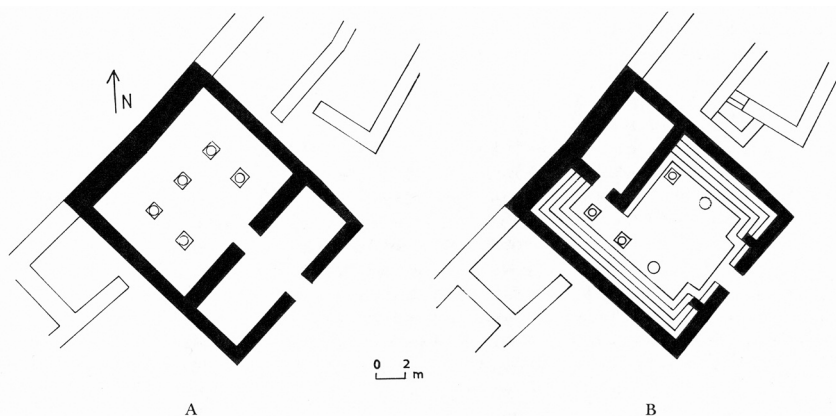
Figure 2. The Theodotos inscription (Israel Museum Jerusalem)

(equivalent to the Hebrew Yehonatan [John] or Netanel [Nathaniel]), Vettanos appears to be Latin, suggesting this was an immigrant family (Clermont-Ganneau 1920: 193; Cotton et al. 2010: 54-5). *Archisynagogos* – Greek for ‘head of a synagogue’ – is the most common leadership title associated with ancient synagogues (Levine 2005: 415). It is unclear whether this title indicates that the bearer had any liturgical and/or administrative responsibilities or was purely honorific. The fact that Theodotos was a priest and a third generation *archisynagogos* and had the means to dedicate a synagogue identifies this as an elite family. The inscription states that the synagogue was built ‘for the reading of the Law [Torah] and the teaching of the commandments’ but without mentioning prayer or worship.

It is unclear if Theodotos’ synagogue served an immigrant or Diaspora congregation like those mentioned in Acts 6:9, or if it replaced an earlier building on the same spot, or if the guest house (hostel) was intended for pilgrims visiting Jerusalem. Some scholars have speculated that the Theodotos synagogue is the ‘synagogue of the Freedmen’ of Acts 6:9 because Tacitus and Philo mention that Jews brought to Rome as captives were soon freed. According to this view, the Vettanos family would have been descended from Jews taken into captivity when Pompey annexed the Hasmonean kingdom in 63 BCE (Clermont-Ganneau 1920: 193, 195-7; Trotter 2019: 98). However, John Kloppenborg refutes this suggestion, noting that if Theodotos was a freedman or the son of a freedman, he should be named Theodotos Vettanos (or, technically, Caius Vettennius Theodotos), not Theodotos *son of* Vettanos (Kloppenborg 2006: 263-5). And the widespread assumption that Vettanos is a Latin name, although reasonable, is unproven. To the contrary, the lack of a reference to the family’s origin in the inscription (e.g., Theodotos son of Vettanos of Rome), which might be expected if they were immigrants, leaves open the possibility that they were natives of Judea.

Archaeological remains of pre-70 synagogue buildings in Palestine accord well with the picture presented so far. These include the synagogues at Masada, Herodium, Gamla (or Gamala), and – more recently – Migdal/Magdala. At Masada and Herodium, synagogues were installed in pre-existing Herodian rooms by Jewish rebels at the time of the First Revolt against Rome (for Herodium, see Foerster 1981a). The Masada synagogue, for example, was installed in a casemate room on the northwest side of the mountain that apparently functioned as a reception hall in the time of Herod. The rebels atop Masada modified the structure by removing the anteroom wall to make a single hall, adding columns and rows of benches along the walls (Fig. 3) (Yadin 1981; Netzer 1991: 402-13; Magness 2019a: 171-2). The columns have nothing to do with the function of the building as a synagogue; they simply supported the roof because the width of the room exceeded the length of the available wooden beams. The benches in the Masada room indicate that it was used for assembly, and, because the population on the mountain at the time of the revolt was entirely Jewish, this room can be identified as a Jewish house of assembly – that is, a synagogue. Had this same structure been

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The two stages of the synagogue at Masada. A: the original Herodian stage; B: the synagogue of the insurgents

Figure 3. Plan of the Masada synagogue (on the right) (from Foerster 1981a: 25) (reproduced with permission of the Israel Exploration Society)

found in a mixed (Jewish and gentile) context or in a gentile context, we would not be able to identify it as a synagogue – that is, we could not say it was a Jewish house of assembly as opposed to any other kind of assembly hall. Like other pre-70 synagogues, the one at Masada lacks other features such as an orientation towards Jerusalem, a Torah shrine, and Jewish symbols and iconography. These features became common in late antique synagogues, with the development of regularized communal prayer and worship and to accommodate liturgical needs, which apparently did not exist before 70 CE. The Masada synagogue also has a room at the back added by the rebels, which seems to have served as a *genizah*—a repository in a synagogue where damaged sacred writings are buried (although not every synagogue has such a repository). The Masada *genizah* consists of two pits dug into the dirt floor of the back room, which contained scroll fragments belonging to Deuteronomy and Ezekiel.

Gamla is the earliest of these synagogue buildings (and, in my opinion, it is the earliest definite synagogue building discovered so far in Palestine), as it was constructed not before the late first century BCE and was destroyed during the Roman siege in 67 CE (Fig. 4). The Gamla synagogue differs from the Masada and Herodium examples in being purpose-built (see Gutman 1981; Ma'oz 1981). Nevertheless, it displays the same features as other early synagogues, most prominently the rows of benches lining the interior. The Migdal synagogue is also purpose-built and displays a similar rectilinear layout surrounded by benches, albeit on a smaller scale. Its interior decoration features mosaic floors with geometric designs, Pompeian style wall paintings, and an enigmatic stone table decorated with the first motifs associated with the Jerusalem temple found in a pre-70

ANCIENT SYNAGOGUES IN PALESTINE: AN OVERVIEW



Figure 4. Interior of the Gamla synagogue

synagogue. A coin of 43 CE reportedly found under the mosaic floor provides a *terminus post quem* for the synagogue building (Avshalom-Gorni and Najar 2013).³

The evidence reviewed here enables us to reconstruct the appearance of pre-70 CE Palestinian synagogue buildings with some confidence. They were rectilinear structures with flat roofs characterized by rows of benches surrounding the interior. The modest size of these structures and the absence of features associated with later synagogues make it difficult to identify archaeological remains of these buildings. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that Jewish assemblies could be held anywhere, not just in purpose-built synagogues. Therefore, it is possible that buildings that housed synagogue assemblies have been excavated but lack identifying features.

³ The excavators mention two earlier phases, the first of which dates to the mid-first century BCE and was not a synagogue; they report that the second phase was a synagogue but without providing a date or other information. A second synagogue similar to the first was discovered at Migdal in 2021; see <https://www.timesofisrael.com/second-ancient-synagogue-found-in-migdal-alters-ideas-of-jewish-life-2000-years-ago/>

The Traditional Typology of Ancient Synagogues in Palestine

A majority of the ancient synagogues in Palestine date to the fourth to sixth centuries and are concentrated in eastern Galilee and the western central Golan, where most of the Jewish population lived in the centuries following the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132-135/6 CE) (Levine 1993: 1422; Ma'oz 1993: 539). Whereas larger towns and cities (such as Sepphoris, Tiberias, and Caesarea Maritima) had mixed populations, villages in Palestine appear to have been segregated (Jewish versus Christian or pagan) (Ma'oz 1985: 65-7). Archaeological evidence increasingly suggests that every late antique Jewish village had its own synagogue building, whereas urban centers such as Sepphoris had more than one synagogue.

In 1905-1907, Helmet Kohl, Ernst Hiller, and Carl Watzinger conducted a survey and carried out limited excavations in eleven Galilean synagogues (including one on the Golan and one on the Carmel), under the auspices of the Deutsche Orient Gesellschaft. Their study, *Antike Synagogen in Galilaea* (Kohl and Watzinger 1916), contains a detailed analysis of the architectural style and decoration of these buildings. Based on stylistic comparisons, mostly to Syrian buildings of the late Roman period, Kohl and Watzinger identified these synagogues as a coherent group (the so-called 'Galilean type') dating to the late second to early third century.

In 1929, Eleazar Lipa Sukenik and Nahman Avigad excavated the synagogue at Beth Alpha. Soon thereafter, Sukenik published a typology assigning Galilean type synagogues, which are characterized by a basilical hall oriented north-south, to the late second to early third century, and synagogues that resemble Christian basilicas with an apse (like Beth Alpha) to the fifth and sixth centuries (Sukenik 1934). Contrary to what the name implies, not all synagogues in Galilee are of the Galilean type, although all Galilean type synagogues are in Galilee. The typology was later expanded by Michael Avi-Yonah, who added a transitional type dated to the fourth and fifth centuries (M. Avi-Yonah 1971; M. Avi-Yonah 1973). As a result, Galilean type synagogues were dated to the second and third centuries, Transitional type synagogues to the fourth and fifth centuries, and Byzantine type synagogues to the fifth and sixth centuries. However, more recently excavated synagogues indicate that all three types are roughly contemporary, dating from the fourth to sixth centuries (as already noted by Kloner 1981: 18; also see Levine 1993: 1422). The following is a review of these types, with descriptions of representative examples of each.⁴ Although this discussion focuses on synagogues, it is important to bear in mind that these buildings did not exist in isolation but stood in the midst of settlements whose communities they served.

⁴ For an overview of synagogues in Palestine, see Levine 1993; for individual synagogues in Palestine see the relevant entries in Stern 1993; Stern 2008; the Bornblum Eretz Israel Synagogues Website at <https://synagogues.kinneret.ac.il/>.

GALILEAN TYPE SYNAGOGUES

Capernaum

The synagogue at Capernaum is the classic example of the Galilean type (Fig. 5).⁵ It is a monumental structure built of well-cut limestone blocks (ashlar masonry) – for which reason it is sometimes called the white limestone synagogue – consisting of the synagogue (assembly hall) and a courtyard on the east side. The building sits on an elevated black basalt platform that contrasts with the white limestone walls and pavement above. The assembly hall is a basilica, with the narrow (shorter) sides oriented north-south, measuring ca. 24.2 × 18.5 meters (dimensions from Grey 2014: 46). Engaged pilasters decorated the building's exterior. The building was covered with a pitched, tiled roof. The main entrances, consisting of one large doorway flanked by two smaller ones, were in the south (Jerusalem-oriented) wall. The interior of the hall was surrounded on three sides (east, west, and north) by a stylobate supporting columns with Corinthian capitals on raised pedestals. The entire structure was paved with large flagstones, and stone benches lined the east and west walls of the hall (Fig. 6). The hall was two stories high, with the columns inside supporting a second-story gallery that overlooked the nave. The inner face

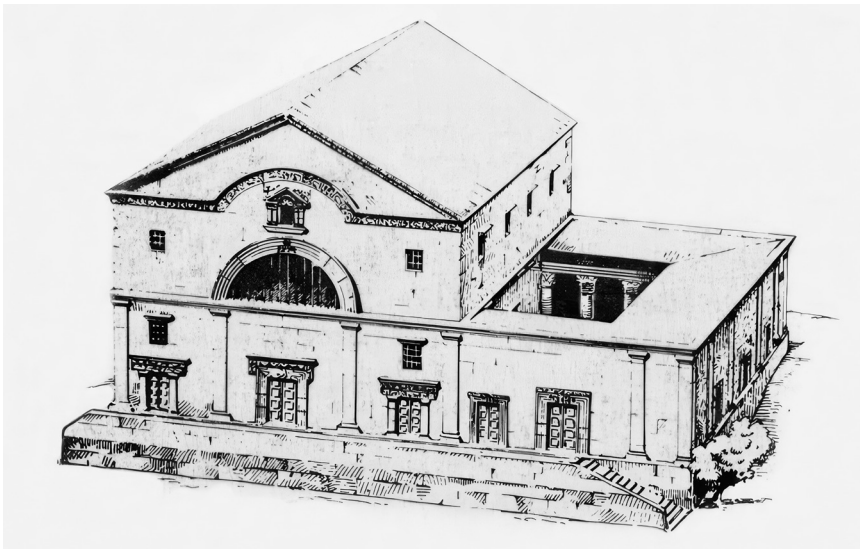


Figure 5. Reconstruction of the Capernaum synagogue (from Levine 1981: 6) (reproduced with permission of the Israel Exploration Society)

⁵ For more on the Capernaum synagogue, see Chapter 4 in this volume.



Figure 6. Interior of the Capernaum synagogue looking north

of the main doorway, which led into the nave, was flanked by two stone platforms for Torah shrines. This means that after entering the hall, worshippers had to turn around to face the direction of prayer.

The exterior of the building was richly decorated with carved stone reliefs, especially on the south (Jerusalem-oriented) façade, around the doorways and windows. A large, semicircular window above the main doorway illuminated the nave. The reliefs consist mostly of geometric and floral motifs, including examples of the seven species (grapes and grape vines and pomegranates) (Fig. 7). Figured images are also depicted in the reliefs, most of which were later damaged, such as a pair of felines facing each other on the lintel of a door. An intact relief is carved with two eagles facing each other and holding a garland in their beaks, and a horse with a fish tail (a sea horse) (Fig. 8). Whereas Jewish art in Palestine before 70 CE was almost completely aniconic, late antique synagogues are filled with figured and even pagan images. Jewish symbols and ritual objects are also represented at Capernaum, such as a menorah flanked by a shofar and incense shovel, which are carved on a Corinthian capital (Fig. 9). One relief shows a wheeled structure with engaged pilasters on the sides, a pitched, tiled roof, and a double paneled door at one short end (Fig. 10). This structure apparently depicts the Ark of the Tabernacle and/or the Torah shrine in ancient synagogues, which may have been modeled after the ark (see Hachlili 1988: 279).



Figure 7. Carved relief from the Capernaum synagogue



Figure 8. Relief from the Capernaum synagogue carved with eagles and a sea horse



Figure 9. Corinthian capital from the Capernaum synagogue carved with a menorah flanked by a shofar and incense shovel



Figure 10. Relief from the Capernaum synagogue showing a wheeled structure, apparently the Ark of Tabernacle and/or Torah shrine

Chorazin

Five kilometers north of Capernaum is the ancient Jewish village of Chorazin. The synagogue in the midst of this village is another example of the Galilean type, although it is constructed of the local black basalt, not white limestone as at Capernaum (see Yeivin 2000; Yeivin 1993; Magness 2007). Otherwise, it has the same features as Capernaum, consisting of a basilical hall built of ashlar masonry, oriented so that one short wall faces south towards Jerusalem; the central doorway is flanked by two smaller ones in the main (south) façade; the interior of the hall is paved with flagstones and encircled by pedestaled columns (with Ionic capitals) carried on a stylobate that divided the interior into a nave surrounded by three aisles; stone benches lined the walls; a platform for the Torah shrine was installed on one side of the main doorway; and carved stone reliefs were concentrated especially on the main façade. The reliefs include the head of a Medusa or the sun (Helios) (Fig. 11) and a series of medallions showing *putti* (cupids) treading grapes – a common motif in Greco-Roman art. There is also a stone seat of Moses (seat for an elder) bearing a dedicatory inscription in Aramaic.



Figure 11. Relief from the Chorazin synagogue showing the head of a Medusa or the sun (Helios)

Kfar Baram

Kfar Baram lies at the north end of Upper Galilee, three kilometers from Israel's border with Lebanon. The synagogue's main (south) façade is still preserved to its original two-story height (Fig. 12) (see Aviam 2004: 169; Avigad 1993a). This building has the characteristic features of the Galilean type described at Capernaum and Chorazin. It also had a porch supported by columns in front of the main façade. A large, semicircular window preserved above the central doorway allowed light into the interior. The lintel of the central doorway was carved in relief with two winged females holding a wreath between them (Fig. 13). In a later period, the female figures were carefully chipped away, leaving only the wreath intact. These figures depicted Nike, the Greco-Roman goddess of victory.



Figure 12. The synagogue at Kfar Baram



Figure 13. The central doorway of the synagogue at Kfar Baram

TRANSITIONAL TYPE SYNAGOGUES

Hammath Tiberias

Hammath Tiberias (Hebrew for ‘the hot springs of Tiberias’) is located on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, just south of the city of Tiberias. The site takes its name from underground sulfur springs that bubble up at this spot. Excavations in the 1960s uncovered a series of synagogue buildings that were built over the course of several centuries, one above the other, in the midst of the village. The synagogue that is the focus of our interest (and is the most famous in the series) dates to the fourth century (see Dothan 1983, who dates it to the early fourth century; Magness 2005a: 8-13, dates it to the late fourth century). It is a classic example of the Transitional type. In contrast to the Galilean type, the synagogue at Hammath Tiberias is built of roughly cut basalt stones (not ashlar) and lacks carved reliefs. Instead, the interior of the building is decorated with mosaics.

The building is a broad house, meaning that the main axis is parallel to the short walls instead of the long walls (Fig. 14). Therefore, the south, Jerusalem-oriented wall and the north wall are the long walls. The main entrance was through a doorway in the north wall, which led into the nave. An extra row of columns created an additional aisle on one side, moving the nave and its associated doorway away from the center of the building. A stone platform in front of the south wall held the Torah shrine. Unlike the arrangement in Galilean type synagogues, at Hammath Tiberias the Torah shrine was opposite the main entrance, so that worshippers faced the direction of prayer upon entering the building.

The floors of the aisles and nave are covered with mosaics, most of which are decorated with geometric and floral motifs, except for the nave, which contains figured images. Just inside the main doorway are square panels framing donor inscriptions in Greek, which would have been seen upon entering the synagogue, flanked by a pair of lions.

The mosaic in the central part of the nave contains a square panel framing a circular medallion. In the center of the medallion is a depiction of the Greco-Roman sun god Helios, riding in a chariot pulled by four horses across the heavens (the chariot and horses were largely obliterated by the foundations of a later wall). Surrounding Helios are depictions of the twelve signs of the zodiac, each with his or her attributes and labeled in Hebrew with their names. In the corners of the square outside the medallion are female personifications of the four seasons with their attributes, also labeled in Hebrew (for discussions of the Helios-zodiac cycle in ancient synagogues, see Talgam 2014: 268-81, 285-7, 298-303; Hachlili 2013: 339-88; Levine 2012: 319-36; Magness 2005a).

Above Helios and the zodiac cycle is a panel that was in front of the Torah shrine. The center of the panel shows the façade of a structure with a double paneled door and pitched roof, apparently representing the Ark of the Tabernacle and/or

ANCIENT SYNAGOGUES IN PALESTINE: AN OVERVIEW

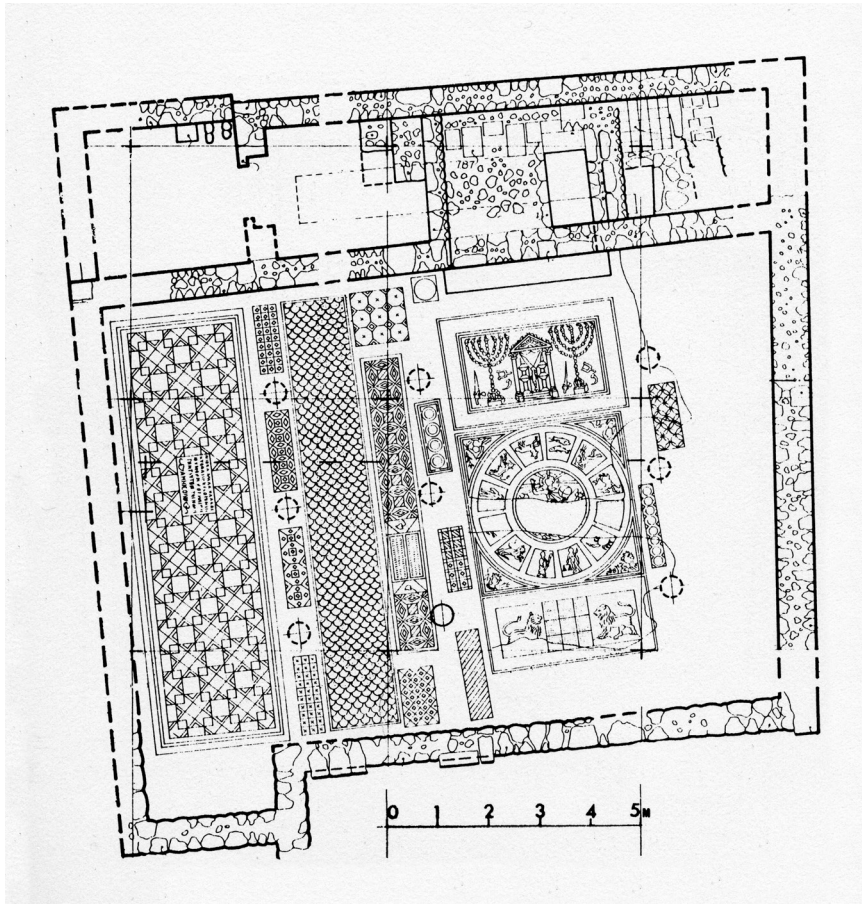


Figure 14. Plan of the Hammath Tiberias synagogue (from Dothan 1981: 66) (reproduced with permission of the Israel Exploration Society)

Torah shrine. This structure is flanked by various Jewish ritual objects: menorahs, shofars, incense shovels, and lulavs and ethrogs.

BYZANTINE TYPE SYNAGOGUES

Beth Alpha

Synagogues of the fifth and sixth centuries are called Byzantine because at this time the Jews of Palestine were living under the rule of the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire, and because the buildings display the influence of Christian

ANCIENT SYNAGOGUES IN PALESTINE: AN OVERVIEW

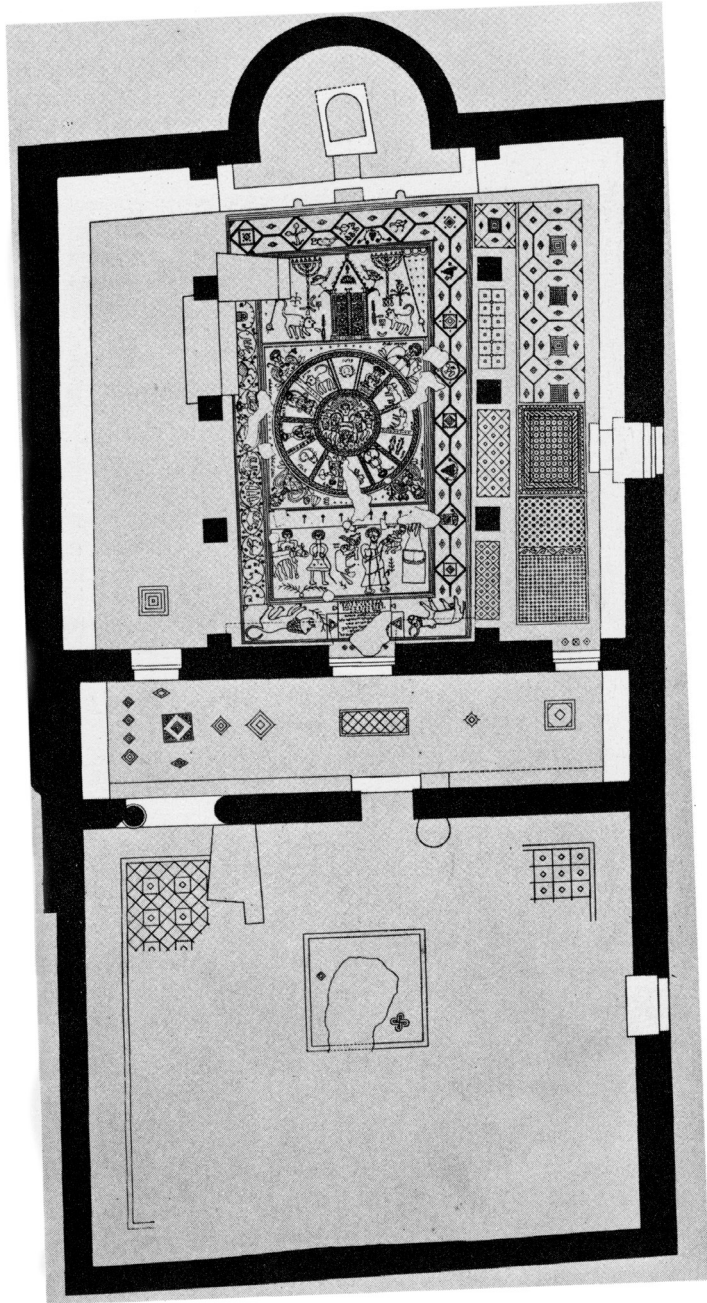


Figure 15. Plan of the Beth Alpha synagogue (from Kloner 1981: 15) (reproduced with permission of the Israel Exploration Society)

architecture. Beth Alpha is a classic example of a Byzantine type synagogue (see Sukenik 1932; Avigad 1993b). Similar to Transitional type synagogues such as Hammath Tiberias, the building is constructed of field stones with no carved reliefs and the floors are covered with decorated mosaics (Fig. 15). However, the building's plan resembles an early church. It consists of a large courtyard (atrium), which provided access to a narrow porch (narthex) in front of the main hall (basilica). The main hall had two rows of piers (square pillars) that supported an arcade and divided the interior into a nave flanked by aisles. A large semicircular niche (apse) in the south (Jerusalem-oriented) wall housed the Torah shrine. This modest building probably did not have a second story or gallery level. Instead, the aisles were only one story high, and the walls on either side of the nave rose to a height of two stories, creating a clerestory pierced by windows to let light into the interior.

The floors of the entire structure (including the courtyard and porch) are paved with mosaics with geometric and floral designs. The mosaics in the nave are divided into three panels containing figured scenes, surrounded by a decorated border. Just inside the main entrance, the mosaic contains two inscriptions flanked by a bull and a lion. One inscription, in Greek, states that the mosaic was laid by two local craftsmen named Marianos and his son Hanina, who are commemorated in other mosaics in this area. The Beth Alpha congregation was a rural (farming) community (in contrast to the urban congregation at Hammath Tiberias), which paid the craftsmen in kind (produce and livestock) instead of cash. The second inscription, in Aramaic, is important because it is one of only three dated inscriptions associated with Palestinian synagogue buildings (the others – from Gaza and Nabratein – date to the sixth century as well). The inscription mentions that the mosaic was laid during the reign of Justin. Although there were two emperors named Justin (Justin I and Justin II), both ruled during the sixth century, providing a general date for the mosaic (unfortunately, the part of the inscription that specified a precise date is not preserved).

The area inside the decorated border (which contains the inscriptions) is divided into three panels. The first panel (closest to the main door in the north wall) is decorated with a biblical scene depicting the binding or offering of Isaac by Abraham. The central panel contains a depiction of Helios, the zodiac cycle, and the four seasons, similar to the panel at Hammath Tiberias but executed in a less skillful artistic style. The uppermost panel (in front of the Torah shrine) is decorated with a depiction of the Ark of the Tabernacle and/or Torah shrine flanked by Jewish ritual objects including menorahs, lulavs and ethrogs, and incense shovels. An 'eternal lamp' is shown hanging from the top of the Ark, and the area around the Ark is filled with additional objects and figures including birds and lions. On either side of the panel two curtains are depicted as if they have been drawn aside to reveal the Ark and surrounding objects, recalling the veil (*parochet*) in the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem temple, as well as the later practice of hanging a curtain in front of the scrolls in a Torah shrine.

Na'aran

Just outside Jericho, by the springs at Na'aran, is another synagogue of the Byzantine type. Its plan is similar to Beth Alpha: a courtyard, porch, and hall with apse in the Jerusalem-oriented wall (see Werlin 2015: 29-70). The floors are paved with mosaics decorated with geometric and floral designs, except for the nave, which has figured scenes. The mosaics were severely damaged by shelling during World War I. Nevertheless, the outline of a Helios and zodiac cycle is still visible, as well as a panel containing a depiction of the Ark of the Tabernacle and/or Torah shrine surrounded by Jewish ritual objects. A narrow panel between these showed Daniel in the lions' den. Daniel is depicted as a man facing the viewer with his hands raised, flanked by two lions.

Sepphoris

In 1993, a fifth century synagogue decorated with stunning mosaics was discovered in excavations at Sepphoris (see Weiss 2005). The building has an unusual plan: the nave is flanked by an aisle on only one side (north); there is a rectangular platform instead of an apse at the end of the nave; and the building is oriented northwest-southeast, with the platform for the Torah shrine located against the northwest wall. The hall was entered by turning ninety degrees through a narthex.

The narthex and aisle are paved with mosaics containing geometric and floral patterns, while the nave is decorated with seven successive registers ('bands' in the excavator's language) of figured scenes and Jewish ritual objects (according to the excavator's numbering, Register 7 was the first one seen upon entering the nave from the narthex, and Register 1 was in front of the platform for the Torah shrine) (Fig. 16). Register 6 is divided into two panels, and Registers 1, 2, and 4 are divided into three panels each. Register 7, which is very poorly preserved, apparently depicts the visit of the angels to Abraham and Sarah, announcing that Sarah will bear a son. Register 6, also poorly preserved, portrays the binding or offering of Isaac by Abraham. The largest register (about twice as wide as the other registers) contains a medallion with Helios surrounded by the signs of the zodiac and the four seasons in the corners. The signs of the zodiac are labeled in Hebrew not only with their names (Libra, Virgo, etc.), but also the corresponding month (for example, Kislev and Tishrei). The figure of Helios is depicted not in human form but as a ball of fire with radiating rays in a chariot pulled by four horses across the heavens.

The registers above this (1-4) show scenes and objects associated with the Tabernacle or Jerusalem temple and the sacrificial cult. The right and central panels of Register 4 depict the basket of first fruits and the showbread table. The left panel of Register 4 displays a lamb, a jar of oil, a vessel containing fine flour, and two

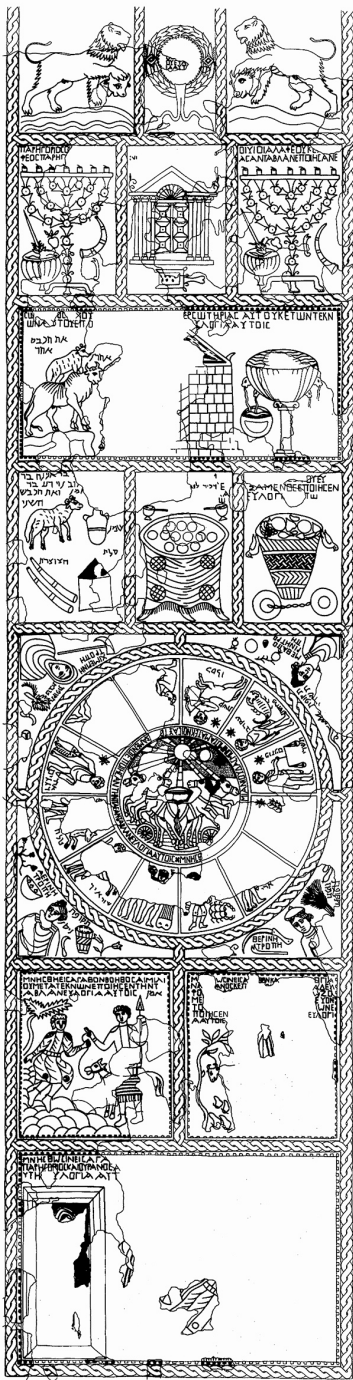


Figure 16. Drawing of the Sepphoris synagogue nave mosaics (from Weiss 2005: 57 Fig. 2) (reproduced courtesy of Zeev Weiss, The Sepphoris Excavations. The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Drawing by Pnina Arad)

trumpets, all of which are connected with the daily sacrifice portrayed in Register 3. Register 3 shows Aaron (poorly preserved) next to a large rectangular altar, flanked on one side by a large water basin with animal spouts and on the other side by a lamb and a bull. Register 2 depicts the Ark of the Tabernacle and/or Torah shrine flanked by menorahs, shofars, incense shovels, and lulavs and ethrogs. Register 1 has a wreath framing a Greek dedicatory inscription flanked by two lions, each holding a bull's head in their front paws.

LATE ANCIENT SYNAGOGUES

Jericho

During the seventh and eighth centuries, all three Abrahamic faiths were impacted by the iconoclastic movement, which opposed the depiction of figured images in religious art. It was at this time that some of the figured images in earlier synagogues, such as the reliefs at Capernaum, were damaged. A synagogue at Jericho that might date to this period is believed to reflect the impact of iconoclasm. The building has the same plan typical of Byzantine type synagogues, and like them, its floors are paved with mosaics (Baramki 1938; Werlin 2015: 70-90). However, the mosaics of the Jericho synagogue contain no figured images. Instead, the nave is decorated with a highly stylized depiction of the Ark of the Tabernacle and/or Torah shrine. Below it is a medallion containing a menorah flanked by a shofar and lulav and ethrog, accompanied by the Hebrew phrase *shalom al-Yisrael* ('peace on Israel') (Fig. 17).⁶

Although there is evidence that some late antique synagogues continued in use after the Muslim conquest, no buildings that were newly founded in its aftermath have been identified in archaeological excavations (Magness 2001: 35-6; for a late medieval synagogue at Huqoq, see Mizzi and Magness 2022). Having concluded this overview of the traditional typology and chronology, we now consider the history and historiography of the study of ancient synagogues in Palestine.

⁶ The eighth century date originally assigned to the Jericho synagogue by the excavator (Dimitri Baramki) is problematic, as the early Kufic coins he cites as evidence were found in a 0.65 m gap between the wall and the edge of the mosaic floor, and therefore indicate only that the synagogue was in use at least until the eighth century (Baramki 1938: 75). Baramki seems to have assumed, nonetheless, that the synagogue dates to the eighth century since the 'fairly good state of preservation' of the mosaic floor pointed to a short period of use (1938: 76). For a discussion of the synagogue's date, see Werlin 2015: 84-90.



Figure 17. Mosaic floor of the Jericho synagogue (courtesy of Zev Radovan/BibleLandPictures.com)

The History and Historiography of Archaeological Research on Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and the Chronology of the Galilean Type

The traditional typology of ancient synagogues in Palestine presented in the previous chapter follows a linear evolutionary model in which many archaeologists are still invested. However, the continued discovery and excavation of ancient synagogue buildings – dozens more than were known in the first half of the twentieth century – have called into question its validity. The greatest challenge to the traditional typology is posed by the Capernaum synagogue. Since the initial excavations by Kohl and Watzinger, the building has been dated to the second to third century because of its architectural style and decoration, serving as a linchpin for the dating of other Galilean type synagogues. However, beginning in 1968 Italian archaeologists conducted excavations in the Capernaum synagogue's hall and courtyard and made an astonishing discovery: under the paving stones they found over 25,000 small bronze coins and large quantities of pottery dating to the fourth and fifth centuries. The latest of these finds identified so far date to around 500 CE or later, indicating that the synagogue was built no earlier than the first half of the sixth century – centuries later than previously thought. The discoveries at Capernaum have sparked an ongoing debate about the chronology of Galilean type synagogues. In this chapter, I review the history of ancient synagogue research in Palestine, demonstrating that the traditional dating of the Galilean type to the second to third centuries has deep roots in the early Zionist movement and has been used to construct an historical narrative according to which Jewish settlements in Eastern Galilee flourished in the wake of the Bar Kokhba Revolt but declined under supposedly oppressive Christian rule.

The History of Research on Ancient Synagogues in Palestine

Archaeological interest in ancient synagogues in general, and Galilean type synagogues in particular, goes back to the beginning of the twentieth century and is intertwined with the history of the Zionist movement. The wealthy German-Jewish businessman Henri James Simon played a pivotal role in the decision of the Deutsche Orient Gesellschaft (German Oriental Society) to focus on ancient synagogues rather than biblical tells, which sponsored an initial exploration of synagogue sites by Gustav Hölscher and Hermann Thiersch in 1903 (Fassbeck 2016). Gabriele Fassbeck situates this nascent interest in ancient synagogues within the context of cultural Zionism in early twentieth century Germany, which sought to create a new Jewish cultural identity by appropriating the past – an endeavor to which archaeology was ideally suited (2016: 115; also see Fine 2005: 23, 34).

Following Hölscher and Thiersch's exploration, a major expedition dedicated to the study of ancient synagogues in Palestine was conducted in 1905-1907 by Kohl, Hiller, and Watzinger, under the auspices of the Deutsche Orient Gesellschaft. They conducted a survey and carried out limited excavations in eleven Galilean synagogues (including one on the Golan and one on the Carmel). The results were published in 1916 in a volume that is still a basic reference. Chapters on the eleven synagogues, including a lengthy (36 page long) description of the Capernaum synagogue, are followed by detailed stylistic analyses (covering 57 pages) of their architecture and decoration (Kohl and Watzinger 1916). Based on stylistic comparisons, mostly to Syrian buildings of the late Roman period, Kohl and Watzinger dated these synagogues to the late second to early third century:

Wenn auch an manchen Stellen in der Wiedergabe local gefärbt, ist doch im ganzen der Stil gleichartig mit dem der heidnisch-römischen Bauwerke seit der Wende des II. und III. Jahrh. n. Chr. . . . Die Heimat des besonderen Architekturstiles der Synagogen darf vielleicht noch etwas enger innerhalb der syrischen Grenzen umschrieben werden. Östlich von Galiläa und vom See Tiberias, im Gebiet der Batanaea und Trachonitis, lagen die Bauten der spätantoinischen und severischen Epoche, deren Formen immer wieder zum Vergleich mit den Synagogen einluden . . . (1916: 172, 173).

Kohl and Watzinger viewed Galilean-type synagogues as the middle link ('Mittelglied') between Roman civic basilicas and Christian churches (1916: 219). As Levine writes, 'these scholars established criteria that became axiomatic in synagogue studies for decades, i.e., that the Galilean synagogues were built in the late second and early third centuries, constituted a recognizable architectural group, and were modeled architecturally and artistically after buildings in Roman Syria, especially the Roman basilica' (2005: 10; see Kohl and Watzinger 1916: 172, 174, 219).

Permanent Jewish involvement in the archaeological exploration of Palestine began in 1914, when a group of local Jewish intellectuals founded the Society for

the Reclamation of Antiquities or the Jewish Society for the Exploration of Eretz-Israel, which was reorganized in 1920 as the Jewish Palestine Exploration Society (now the Israel Exploration Society [IES]) (<https://www.israelexplorationsociety.com/about> [accessed 9/26/2022]; Silberman 1982: 200; Fine 2005: 23; Reich 2011: 117, 119). In 1920-1921, the JPES sponsored excavations by Nahum Slouschz at Hammath Tiberias. Thus, the first excavation in Palestine sponsored by a Jewish society and conducted by a 'Hebrew' (Jewish) archaeologist was at a synagogue site, illustrating the foundational role played by ancient synagogues in the construction of an early Zionist identity (Fine 2005: 23-7; Silberman 1982: 200; Reich 2011: 120).

But it was Sukenik who established ancient synagogues as a prominent subfield of Jewish Studies (Fine 2005: 23, describes him as 'the true father of Jewish archaeology'). Sukenik was born in 1889 in Bialystok (then in Russia) and immigrated to Palestine in 1911 (Yadin 1967: 12). He devoted much of his career to the study of ancient synagogues, which were the subject of his 1926 Ph.D. dissertation at Dropsie College in Philadelphia (Yadin 1967: 13; Fine 2005: 28). Soon afterward, Sukenik introduced the teaching and research of archaeology at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and in 1934 he founded the Department of Archaeology (now the Institute of Archaeology), serving as its head until his death in 1953 (Avigad 1967: X; archaeology.huji.ac.il). Yigael Yadin, Sukenik's son, reports that in 1928 his father wrote, 'I face the important work of creating a Jewish archaeology' (1967: 13; my translation from the Hebrew). As Avigad, Sukenik's assistant, notes, 'From the first, Sukenik had a special interest in Jewish archaeology, which was then a mere fringe of Palestinian archaeology. Sukenik made it a field of its own' (1967: X). That same year, Sukenik and Avigad excavated the synagogue at Beth Alpha, and two years later Sukenik delivered the Schweich Lectures on ancient synagogues at the British Academy, which were published in 1934 – the same year he founded Hebrew University's Department of Archaeology. In the Schweich Lectures, Sukenik established a typology of synagogue buildings in Palestine: an earlier (Galilean) type represented by Capernaum, Chorazin, and Kfar Baram, dated to the late second-early third centuries following Kohl and Watzinger; and a later (Byzantine) type of the fifth and sixth centuries exemplified by Na'aran, Beth Alpha, and Jerash (Gerasa) (1934: 3, 27-8; Fine 2005: 29-31). Among the differences between these types is the presence or absence of a fixed place for the ark/Torah shrine (based on the erroneous assumption that Galilean type synagogues do not have this feature), and a flagstone pavement versus a mosaic floor (Sukenik 1934: 27; also see M. Avi-Yonah 1971: 71-3).

Avigad makes clear that ancient synagogues were not only a focus of Sukenik's research but a key component in his vision of a 'Jewish archaeology':

Jewish archaeology was sacrosanct for Sukenik, with ancient synagogues as its main focus. . . . The excavations [at Hamat-Gader, Salbit and Japhia], which raised synagogal research to new levels and placed it on a firm basis – as well as Sukenik's

articles delving into the problems of synagogues in Palestine and the Diaspora, and his introductory book into this field, which brought ancient synagogues to the notice of the general public – *enabled Sukenik to shape synagogal research for many years* (1967: XI; my emphases).

Similarly, as Avi-Yonah writes, ‘It was only natural that Jewish archaeologists . . . should concentrate upon the study of ancient synagogues’ (M. Avi-Yonah 1973: 32).

Sukenik’s establishment of a Department of Archaeology and his vision of a ‘Jewish archaeology’ were intertwined with the mission of the Hebrew University, especially as articulated by Judah Magnes (Fine 2005: 28-9). The university opened its doors in 1925, one year before Sukenik introduced the teaching and research of archaeology. The inclusion of archaeology indicates that the university’s founders, most of whom were secular Jews educated in Central Europe, viewed the discipline as an integral part of the Zionist endeavor, as David Biale observes: ‘Magnes, on the other hand, advocated first establishing an institute of archaeology as a way of emphasizing the Jewish nature of the university’ (1987: 129; also see Fine 2005: 28-9). Sukenik’s vision of a ‘Jewish archaeology’ and Magnes’ vision of a ‘Jewish university’ were motivated by secular Zionism, not religion. The interest in ancient synagogues was consistent with the secular Zionist agenda, which often invoked biblical and rabbinic prototypes as a means of legitimization (Fine 2005: 27, 31, 33; Myers 1995: 41). Archaeology was considered a means of establishing a physical, historical, and scientifically based connection of the Jews to the Land of Israel, and, by way of extension, their right to the land (see Myers 1995: 90; Fine 2005: 26, 31). Ancient synagogues, particularly those of the Galilean type, were viewed as evidence that vibrant Jewish communities flourished in the wake of the two Jewish revolts against Rome (M. Avi-Yonah 1973: 31). Due to a concern with establishing Judaism as a legitimate, scientific field of study (*Wissenschaft des Judentums*) equal to other western disciplines, early Zionist archaeological scholarship was not overtly ideological. Instead, by focusing on ancient synagogues, early Zionists countered the image of Jews as artless and demonstrated that, like in western Europe, there is a long history of Jewish creativity and visual culture (Fine 2005: 32-3).

In many respects, the Hebrew University, especially in the first decades of its existence, was as German as it was Jewish. As Yoram Bar-Gal puts it: ‘during that period [1925-1950] the academic and personal atmosphere at the Hebrew University was strongly influenced by German institutions, to the point that the University became, in effect, an overseas extension of German higher education. In various disciplines (e.g., history, natural sciences, and math), the scientific language and professional world view of the teachers and researchers during the 1920s and 1930s was oriented toward the German world’ (2000: 113). Many German-Jewish academics joined the faculty after the rise of Nazism in 1933 (Bar-Gal 2000: 116-7). Although Sukenik was not German and spent only one year (1922-1923)

studying archaeology at the Humboldt University of Berlin, the influence of Kohl and Watzinger's detailed stylistic analyses are evident in his typology, as is the assumption that synagogue development follows a linear Darwinian evolutionary model. This formalist approach to style was articulated by the Viennese art historian Alois Riegl in the late nineteenth century and was hugely influential in German-language scholarship in the following decades (Riegl 1893. For Riegl's approach and impact, see Elsner 2006; Frank 2006 [especially pp. 300-1]; Podro 1982: 71-97). As Jas' Elsner observes, 'This [Riegl's definition of *Kunstwollen* = 'the artistic will'] implies not only period-specific *Kunstwollens* but their evolutionary relationship with each other so that one can be analyzed as transmuting into another, rather like the evolution of biological species' (2006: 751).

Sukenik's two-part typology of ancient Palestinian synagogues was later expanded by Avi-Yonah to include a third, 'Transitional' type of the fourth and fifth centuries, as exemplified by Hammath Tiberias, Husifa (Isfiya), and Yafia (M. Avi-Yonah 1971: 68, 74-5, 77; M. Avi-Yonah 1973: 32-3). Avi-Yonah was born in 1904 in Lemberg, Galicia (then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire). In 1919 he emigrated to Palestine with his parents. After graduating from high school in Jerusalem, he enrolled at the University of London, where he earned B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. degrees in Classical Archaeology. In 1953 (the year of Sukenik's death), Avi-Yonah was appointed Lecturer (and later, Associate Professor/Professor) in the Department of Archaeology at the Hebrew University (Barag [?] 1974: 1). The obituaries for Avi-Yonah, who passed away in 1974, highlight the influence of Zionist ideology on his research and worldview. As the obituary in the *Israel Exploration Journal* reads:

These and several additional studies, mainly on mosaic pavements, focused his [Avi-Yonah's] attention on the re-emergence of the oriental civilizations in the art of the late Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine periods. This re-emergence, in the period of the struggle for the creation and survival of the State of Israel, probably had a very special meaning for one who, though not an orthodox Jew, was a dedicated Zionist. . . . Avi-Yonah was a prominent [*sic!*] member of the generation of Jewish Zionist students of ancient Palestine who combined deep roots in western culture with the belief in the role and contribution to be made by Israeli scholars in these fields (Barag [?] 1974: 2).

Reuven Avi-Yonah says of his father, '. . . it would be impossible to understand Avi-Yonah's archaeological and historical studies without the background of his deep Zionist feelings' (R. Avi-Yonah 1987: X). Similarly, Dan Barag, Gideon Foerster, and Avraham Negev observe that 'Avi-Yonah represented a blend of broad European education and a warm Zionist fervour. This is reflected in his scientific career, at the centre of which stood the Land and People of Israel between eastern and western culture, from the days of Alexander the Great until the Muslim conquest' (Barag et al. 1987: VII). Like Kohl and Watzinger, Avi-Yonah relied on stylistic criteria to date Galilean type synagogues: 'The dating of the early type of

synagogue has to be based on stylistic considerations, as only one dedicatory inscription has been found – that at Qisyon – prayers for the peace and prosperity of the Emperor Septimius Severus and his family (192-211). Some scholars, however, believe that this inscription is from a secular building’ (M. Avi-Yonah 1971: 68). He attributed the construction of Galilean type synagogues to the ‘relaxation of the persecution [of Jews] by Hadrian’ beginning in the late second century (M. Avi-Yonah 1971: 67).

Barag, Foerster, and Negev note that for two decades, Avi-Yonah ‘raised numerous disciples’ (Barag et al. 1987: VIII). Among them was Foerster himself, who was born in Afula in 1935, one year after his parents immigrated from Germany. Like Avi-Yonah, Foerster was a secular Zionist. As a youth, he was an active member of *HaNoar HaOved VeHalomed* (‘The Working and Studying Youth’) – the first Zionist youth movement in Israel, whose mission is ‘to fulfill the Zionist vision laid out by the founders of the State of Israel’ (<https://noal.org.il/english/>; Peleg-Barkat 2021: 219). Foerster earned B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. degrees in archaeology at the Hebrew University, where he completed a dissertation in 1972 on *Galilean Synagogues and Their Relation to Hellenistic and Roman Art and Architecture* under Avi-Yonah’s supervision (Peleg-Barkat 2021: 219-20). As Orit-Peleg Barkat writes, ‘Jewish art and architecture remained since then [Foerster’s dissertation] one of the major foci of his research’ (2021: 220).

Although Foerster participated in and conducted a number of archaeological excavations, much of his research was based on art historical analyses. Nowhere is this more evident than in Foerster’s dissertation, in which he argues that Galilean type synagogues comprise a ‘uniform’ stylistic group dating to the late second to third century, citing – like Avi-Yonah – the Qisyon (Qazion) inscription in support (1972: XIII).⁷ And, like Avi-Yonah, Foerster attributes the construction of these synagogues to improved conditions for Jews under Roman rule beginning in the late second century:

The chronological setting of the Galilean synagogues is mainly based on artistic and architectural considerations. We have seen in this study that the connections and comparisons with Roman art and architecture are not earlier than the second half of the second century while the style and quality of carving and sculpture point to the third century as the main building period of the synagogues. . . . The second-third centuries date for the building of the synagogues was first suggested by Kitchener and others, already in the 19th century and was accepted by Kohl and Watzinger following a thorough comparative study. Since then this has remained the accepted date by most scholars. . . . There seems to be little doubt that the well appointed monumental uniform group of Galilean synagogues were built within a period of two or three generations. This period must have been characterized by an economic prosperity and cultural growth, since such monumental activities would otherwise

⁷ Rachel Hachlili and Ann Killebrew, who conducted excavations at Qazion in 1992 and 1997, conclude that the building is not a synagogue; see Hachlili 2013: 617-82.

have been incomprehensible in the rural areas and small villages in Galilee, where the synagogues had been erected. Historically speaking, we find such an economical and political prosperity in the days of the patriarch Judah I under the Severan dynasty. This period at the end of the second and the third centuries not only agrees with the suggested dating of the Galilean synagogues, but is also distinguished by the excellent relations between the Jewish authorities and the Severan emperors. The agreement between the artistic and architectural evidence and the historical evidence further strengthens the supposed dating of the synagogues to the last decades of the second and third centuries. *This dating, however, is not based on direct chronological or literary evidence, which is still almost entirely lacking*" (1972: XVIII-XX; my emphasis).

Both Avi-Yonah and Foerster acknowledged the absence of direct evidence for a late second to third century date for Galilean type synagogues. However, when such evidence began to come to light but indicated a later date, it was dismissed as inconsistent with the accepted consensus. First, in 1960 Avigad deciphered the inscription on the lintel of the Nabratein synagogue and found that it dates to 564 CE. Astonished, Avigad concluded that the inscription must have been added during a renovation:

The date in our inscription raises a special problem: the year 494 after the destruction of the second temple is 564 CE. It is difficult to suppose that this is the year of the original construction of the Nabratein synagogue. According to the style of the building and its decoration as well as the orientation of the main entrance towards Jerusalem, the synagogue must be associated with the early Galilean type synagogues, which according to the accepted consensus date to the late Roman period, that is, between the end of the second century to the mid-fourth century. And even if these dates can be moved a bit one way or another, they are based overall on parallels to Syrian buildings that carry dates, as well as on historical considerations. This is the period when Jewish settlements in Galilee flourished and reached the height of their power [enabling the Jews] to erect monumental public buildings. . . . Synagogues of the Byzantine period in the Land of Israel are constructed in a completely different style. We must conclude, therefore, that the inscription is not contemporary with the lintel itself but is a later addition (1960: 144; my translation from the Hebrew).

In other words, by the time a dated inscription associated with a Galilean type synagogue was deciphered, it was assumed to be a later addition because the date did not accord with the accepted chronology. For this reason, Avi-Yonah, Foerster, and others dismissed the possibility that the Nabratein inscription indicates a later date for Galilean type synagogues:

Sometimes, however, even dated inscriptions can be misleading. For instance, Professor Avigad of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem has finally deciphered an inscription found a century ago on a lintel of the synagogue at Kfar Neburaya, another Galilee synagogue of the 'early' type, and which had hitherto defied all efforts to read it. It is dated 565, from which it may be presumed that the building was constructed at that time. Now, it can hardly be an accident that 565 was the year of the death of Justinian, a bigoted enemy of the Jews. The building of new synagogues and the

embellishment of existing ones had been forbidden for many years, in fact since as far back as 439. All that was permitted was the repair of buildings on the point of collapse. Yet the circumstance that so many of the synagogues described here seem to have been built during the very period shows that, on the local level, the Byzantine officials could ignore the imperial decrees. Perhaps they were not entirely insensible to bribery (M. Avi-Yonah 1973: 41).

Avi-Yonah's rejection of a mid-sixth century date for the construction of the Nabratein synagogue was dictated by his assumptions about the historical situation at that time. Even Eric Meyers and Carol Meyers, who excavated the Nabratein synagogue in 1980-1981, accept Avigad's explanation: 'Finally, Avigad's explanation of the difference in date between the lintel's sixth century inscription and its Late Roman, Period III decoration – that is, that an existing and older lintel is re-used and inscribed in a later restoration – is not only still compelling but also has been corroborated by our excavations of the synagogue' (Meyers and Meyers 2009: 95).⁸

Similarly, when excavations beginning in 1968 by the Italian archaeologists Virgilio Corbo and Stanislao Loffreda brought to light thousands of coins accompanied by pottery dating to the late fourth and fifth centuries sealed beneath the flagstone pavement of the Capernaum synagogue, this evidence was immediately dismissed by Avi-Yonah, Foerster, and other Israeli archaeologists. For example, Foerster writes:

The late second or third century C.E. dating [of the Capernaum synagogue] is based on architectural and stylistic parallels in contemporary Roman art and architecture in Syria and Asia Minor. The synagogue at Capernaum is in harmony with the classical architectural concept that stresses the outer appearance of a building. In contrast, Byzantine architecture concentrates on the interior (e.g., the lavish mosaic pavement of the synagogue of Hammath-Tiberias, which dates from the first half of the fourth century C.E.). . . . Historical considerations are also in line with the date suggested above. In the second century, the Jewish authorities, together with a large number of Jews, left Judaea and settled in the Galilee after two wars against the Romans. The prosperous condition of the Jewish communities, as a result of their political, economic and, not least, spiritual strength was the proper background for unusual building activity, of which the Capernaum synagogue can serve as one example (1981: 57).

Foerster questions the reliability of coins found in places where the stone pavement of the Capernaum synagogue was missing but the bedding was intact:

Two thousand sherds were found (glass is not mentioned in the report) and 170 coins, of which only three fourth century C.E. coins were attributed by the excavators to the fill below the sealed floor. To accept the excavators' date of the second half of the fourth century C.E. for the synagogue and the first half of the fifth century C.E. for

⁸ For a critique, see Magness 2010. Limited excavations were conducted by Kohl and Watzinger in 1905. Tsafir 1995a: 72-3, accepts the excavators' conclusion that the inscription is from a later phase.

the courtyard would mean that this synagogue was founded not at one of the most prosperous periods of Judaism in the Galilee, but under Byzantine rule. It would be a strange example of anachronism in Roman provincial art and architecture of the fourth and fifth centuries C.E. for a style to appear simultaneously with Byzantine church architecture and synagogues in the style of Ḥammath-Tiberias. It seems, therefore, that *Corbo's conclusions are in contradiction to the accepted dates for the architectural style and decoration of the early group of "Galilean" synagogues on the one hand, and the historical situation on the other* (1981: 59; my emphasis; also see Tsafirir 1995b: 152-7).

Foerster rejects the direct (archaeological) evidence of a fourth to fifth century date for the Capernaum synagogue because it contradicts the accepted chronology, which – as he says – is based on stylistic and historical considerations. He concludes by attributing the later coins sealed beneath the intact flagstone pavement to repairs to the building, just as Avigad explained the Nabratein inscription as a later addition. In an article published in the same volume as Foerster's, Avi-Yonah argues that archaeological evidence (in this case, coins and pottery from sealed contexts under the floor) does not override stylistic and historical considerations: 'We must definitely take issue with Fr. Loffreda on one point of his argument, his statement that for dating we should use *only* archaeological evidence. This might be true in the case of prehistoric research, where the only evidence available is from excavations. In the later periods we should certainly take into account *all* the relevant material, including written sources and stylistic parallels' (M. Avi-Yonah 1981: 61).

Avi-Yonah continues by citing three problems raised by the later dating of the Capernaum synagogue:

Let us now consider three possible ramifications of accepting the late dating proposed by Fr. Loffreda. First (as G. Foerster has already pointed out), the Capernaum synagogue would have been built at one end of the Sea of Galilee – a solid stone structure, with its façade pointing to Jerusalem, and with a stone pavement and architectural details resembling those of 3rd century Roman buildings in Syria. At the same time the synagogue at Ḥammath-Tiberias would be erected, barely twenty km. away, with a niche in its back wall facing Jerusalem, a mosaic pavement with figurative mosaics, and quite a different architectural character. The dating of the Ḥammath-Tiberias pavement is certainly no later than the middle of the fourth century. If we consider all we know of the development of the architectural styles, we would probably find this to be the only case of such astounding architectural diversity within so small an area. The second point is a historical one: a date in the middle of the fourth century would mean that one of the most magnificent of the 'Galilean' synagogues was built during the reign of emperor Constantine or his son, Constantius II, neither of them friendly toward the Jews or Judaism (M. Avi-Yonah 1981: 61; also see M. Avi-Yonah 1973: 38, 41).

The third problem cited by Avi-Yonah is the co-existence of the synagogue and the church over the house of St. Peter: 'Such a state of affairs might be conceivable in our ecumenical age, but it seems almost impossible to imagine that it would have

been allowed by the Byzantine authorities of the fourth century' (M. Avi-Yonah 1981: 62). He acknowledges that synagogues were built during the Byzantine period despite legal prohibitions, which he attributes to 'efficient bribery', but says that 'these late synagogues are entirely different in architectural character from the Capernaum synagogue, which proclaims its purpose boldly for all to see. All the splendors of the Byzantine synagogues were saved for the interior; from the outside they could hardly be distinguished from the private dwellings surrounding them' (M. Avi-Yonah 1981: 62; also see M. Avi-Yonah 1973: 41).

Avi-Yonah concludes that although the (then) recent discovery of other synagogues calls into question the validity of the traditional typology and chronology, 'we ought to await further developments at Capernaum and elsewhere' (M. Avi-Yonah 1981: 62). Since then, the discovery of the same stratigraphic sequence in the twenty-five trenches excavated in the hall and courtyard of the Capernaum synagogue, and evidence from other sites indicates that Galilean type synagogues date to the fourth (especially the latter half of the fourth) to sixth centuries (see Magness 2001; Magness 2010; for Wadi Hamam, see below). Nevertheless, these discoveries did not change the minds of proponents of the early dating of Galilean type synagogues, who continued to repeat the same stylistic and historical arguments. For example, in 1987 Foerster wrote, 'The dating of the Galilean synagogues is based on art-historical and architectural considerations. The connections to and parallels with Roman art and architecture begin during or later than the second half of the second century, and the style and quality of carving and sculpture point to the third century as the main construction period of these synagogues' (1987: 144). He then cites the Qisyon (Qazion) inscription (but not the Nabratein inscription) in support, before attributing the fifth to sixth century date of Golan synagogues to 'cultural conservatism' in that region (Foerster 1987: 144). Of course, it makes no sense that the Golan synagogues would be centuries later than Galilean type synagogues, to which they are clearly related as a regional variant (see Ma'oz 1995, who dates the Golan synagogues to the fifth and sixth centuries based on excavated evidence but argues that Galilean type synagogues are earlier based on stylistic considerations).

By the 1990s, in the face of mounting evidence from new excavations, Foerster and others acknowledged that diverse synagogue types co-existed, but continued to argue for a late second to third century date for Galilean type synagogues based on stylistic and historical considerations (Foerster 1995: 87-8; Tsafirir 1995a: 80; Tsafirir 1995b, who on p. 157 says that 'Scholars who support an earlier date for Capernaum base their arguments chiefly on the architecture and art'). In fact, already in 1973 Avi-Yonah noted that 'the whole question of the development of synagogal plans from the third to sixth century will have to be reconsidered, allowing more weight perhaps to local variants than to an overall style to be encountered throughout the country' – even as he insisted on a second to third century date for Galilean type synagogues (M. Avi-Yonah 1973: 41-2).

The claimed early date for Galilean type synagogues has been reinforced by a series of circular arguments. First, in the early twentieth century, they were dated to the late second to early third century based on stylistic comparisons with non-Jewish buildings in Roman Syria. In the following decades, Galilean type synagogues came to be viewed as a uniform group constructed during a relatively short period – proof that Jewish settlements in Eastern Galilee flourished in the decades following the Bar Kokhba Revolt. In other words, this historical picture was created based on the early dating of the synagogues, which in turn is based on purely stylistic criteria. This picture has been further reinforced through the association of Galilean type synagogues with the period of ‘rabbinic Judaism’ – that is, the period of the redaction of the Mishnah and the Palestinian *amoraim* – a connection that has become an increasingly prominent factor in scholarly arguments over time (see Fine 2005: 34 for this connection already in the early Zionist movement). Thus, when archaeological evidence began to come to light indicating a fourth to sixth century date for Galilean type synagogues, it was dismissed as inconsistent with stylistic and historical considerations, including that Jews could not have constructed these monumental halls of worship under Byzantine Christian rule.

By the time I studied with Foerster in 1974-1975 as a first-year undergraduate majoring in archaeology, the tripartite typology of ancient synagogues, including the dating of the Galilean type to the late second to third century was set in stone at the Hebrew University, having been passed down from Sukenik and Avigad to Avi-Yonah to Foerster. As the Institute of Archaeology’s website states:

For more than 30 years since its opening, until the Institute of Archaeology at Tel Aviv University was founded in the late 1960s, the Department of Archaeology of the Hebrew University was the only institution in the country in which teaching and research in archaeology took place. Consequently, this is the birthplace of Israeli archaeology. The first teachers were E. L. Sukenik (ancient synagogues, the Dead Sea Scrolls) and E. L. Mayer (Islamic archaeology). In the following years they were joined by N. Avigad (archaeology of the First and Second Temple periods), M. Avi-Yonah (classical archaeology), Y. Aharoni (archaeology and historical geography), M. Stekelis (prehistoric archaeology) and Y. Yadin (archaeology of Israel and the ancient Near East). *These are indeed the founding fathers of Israeli archaeology: anyone currently active in the field in this country is a first- or second-generation student of these scholars* (<https://archaeology.huji.ac.il/book/institutes-history> [accessed 13/10/23]; my emphasis).

In his 2000 book (revised edition 2005), Levine writes: ‘With the discovery of the remains of numerous additional structures, the earlier-mentioned concept of a linear development of architectural types of synagogues has generally become passé and has been replaced by the assumption that different architectural types were in use at one and the same time’ (2005: 12; also see 319-22). Nevertheless, the ongoing debate about synagogue chronology shows that many Israeli archaeologists are still invested in the early dating of Galilean type synagogues,

and, by way of extension, the traditional typology. However, whereas earlier generations were secular Zionists, advocates of a late second to third century date for Galilean type synagogues now include religiously observant Israeli Jews who place a greater emphasis on the rabbinic context. Perhaps the most prominent advocate of the traditional typology today is Uzi Leibner, a professor at the Hebrew University Institute of Archaeology (and currently its head). Although he earned B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. degrees at Bar-Ilan University, Leibner's dissertation advisor (David Adan-Bayewitz) is a graduate of Hebrew University's Institute of Archaeology and a former classmate of mine, illustrating the Institute's website statement quoted above: *'These are indeed the founding fathers of Israeli archaeology: anyone currently active in the field in this country is a first- or second-generation student of these scholars'*. Leibner claims that Jewish settlement in Eastern Galilee experienced a dramatic decline beginning in the mid-fourth century (see Leibner 2004; 2009a; 2009b; 2010; Ben David 2005; Leibner and Ben David 2014. For my position and responses to Leibner, see Magness 2001; 2009; 2012; Magness and Schindler 2015; also see Lapin 2017). He connects the construction of Galilean type synagogues to the flourishing of Jewish settlement in the late second to third century, as attested by the redaction of the Mishnah and the work of the Palestinian *amoraim* at this time (2009a: 396-401; 2018: 10, 630). Leibner attributes the [supposed] decline in Jewish settlement beginning in the mid-fourth century to oppressive Christian rule, a view influenced by literary sources such as the writings of the Church Fathers and later Roman legislation, and (in his opinion), evidenced by the non-completion of the editing of the Palestinian (Jerusalem) Talmud and the elimination of the Patriarchate at around this time (see Leibner 2009a: 397-8). Leibner and others also point to the supposed devastation wrought by the earthquake of 363 as having caused or contributed to a settlement decline (Leibner and Ben David 2014: 193; Foerster 1995: 94). And, echoing earlier generations of Israeli archaeologists, Leibner cites stylistic considerations in support of a late second to third century date for Galilean type synagogues:

If these [Galilean type] synagogues were indeed built two or three hundred years later than the period during which their architectural style is known to have flourished, then the standard art-historical method of stylistic dating would be problematic, to say the least. Furthermore, adopting the late chronology [of Magness] would leave us with no synagogues from the 2nd to early 4th c., the heyday of the Galilean Jewish community, and would date them instead to an era characterised by the sources as one of a declining Jewish population suffering from oppression under a Christian regime (Leibner 2010: 223).

Leibner's statement sets me up as a straw [wo]man who denies the existence of rabbinic period synagogues – something I have never claimed. Instead, in my opinion, synagogues of the second and third centuries, like Jewish public buildings before 70, seem to have been relatively modest structures, as I wrote in 2001:

. . . I am not denying that synagogues existed in Palestine in the second and third centuries (and earlier). I also believe that each synagogue building should be dated independently of typological or historical considerations, on the basis of well-excavated and thoroughly published archaeological evidence. However, I am beginning to suspect that (monumental) synagogue buildings with a distinctive plan and clearly Jewish iconography or decoration (what I describe as ‘archaeologically identifiable synagogues’) did not develop in Palestine until the fourth century, especially the later fourth century. It would be interesting to consider whether this may be related to (or in response to) the rise and development of churches (2001: 90; also see Magness 2012: 240).

Although Leibner dates the earliest Galilean type synagogues to the second to third centuries (citing as examples Khirbet Wadi Hamam, Horvat `Ammudim, Beth Netofa, Meiron, Gush Halav, and Nabratein), he acknowledges that in many Jewish settlements of this period ‘either there were non-monumental buildings for public gatherings (difficult to identify in a survey and even through excavation) or that there was an absence of public buildings altogether at some of the settlements’ (2009a: 403). He explains the presence of monumental synagogues at nearly all the Byzantine period settlements ‘against the background of the confrontation with Christianity, the strengthening of community status and issues involving the self determination of the Jewish communities. The extensive construction of churches in Palestine, particularly from the fifth century onward, appears to have led to a ‘struggle of monuments’. If previously only the largest Jewish settlements had monumental synagogues and most made do with simple structures for public gathering, now smaller Jewish settlements began to invest in construction of outstanding structures’ (Leibner 2009a: 403). In other words, Leibner acknowledges that most Galilean type synagogues date to the fourth to sixth centuries, but, unlike me, he assigns the first (earliest) examples to the second and third centuries. This attempt to reconcile the evidence is undermined by glaring contradictions. For example, how can it be that most Galilean type synagogues date to the fourth to sixth centuries but are constructed in a style characteristic of the second to third centuries? Does this not render the stylistic argument chronologically meaningless? Furthermore, the construction of monumental synagogue buildings even at smaller sites contradicts a picture of decline of Jewish settlement in Eastern Galilee from the mid-fourth century on.

In fact, decades ago Shaye Cohen noted a scarcity of references to synagogues in rabbinic sources of the second and early third centuries (1987: 161). Yoram Tsafrir published a similar observation in the same volume concerning second century synagogues: ‘Recent excavations have provided no evidence for the construction of even one synagogue during the second century C.E. . . . It is probable that the common prayer houses of the second and even early third centuries had the shape of simple residences’ (1987: 148; also see Tsafrir 1995a: 79). Like his colleague Foerster, Tsafrir (who was also my undergraduate professor) earned B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. degrees in archaeology at the Hebrew University, under

Avi-Yonah's supervision (for Tsafrir's obituaries, see Dauphin 2016; Humphrey 2016; Patrich and Talgam 2016). Nevertheless, Tsafrir took for granted a third century date for Galilean type synagogues based on stylistic and historical considerations, citing Kohl and Watzinger: 'The immediate conclusion is that the 'earlier' Galilean synagogues are a result of an early third-century C.E. Jewish invention. . . . Today no one denies Heinrich Kohl's and Carl Watzinger's conclusion that the Galilean synagogues belong to this architectural world, at least in their general design and stone moulding' (Tsafrir 1987: 148-49; also see Tsafrir 1995a: 81). As late as 1995, Tsafrir concluded, 'But the synagogues of the category designated 'early' that are in the Galilee and the Golan, headed by the most magnificent building of them all at Capernaum, cannot possibly be extracted from their temporal background, the third century, or at the latest, the beginning of the fourth century C.E.' (1995a: 86).

Astonishingly, despite being an archaeologist, Tsafrir dismissed the need to base the dating of synagogues on excavated evidence: 'We can date a synagogue to the Roman or Byzantine period by its architecture, even when there are no clear archaeological data' (1987: 153). This statement recalls Avi-Yonah's argument that when it comes to dating synagogue buildings, archaeological evidence does not override stylistic and historical considerations (M. Avi-Yonah 1981: 61; see above). Similarly, E. Meyers has accused me of dating synagogues based on 'archaeological minutiae' while ignoring stylistic considerations and historical circumstances:

By suggesting that the Gush Halav and Capernaum synagogues are constructed in the fifth and sixth centuries respectively, Magness not only throws out the older typology but, indirectly as a result of her suggestion, would question the very nature of Jewish life in Byzantine Palestine. . . . both synagogues in question would have to have been constructed in an era when Christianity also flourished in the community, both possibly as communities in which Christian pilgrimage flourished. At the least, Professor Magness might have offered an explanation about why the Jewish community would have undertaken such huge building campaigns at these times. But no, she is content to stay with archaeological minutiae, and I would only say that the situation of the Jewish community in Christian, Byzantine Palestine was less than sanguine at the time and that the building restrictions on synagogues imposed by Theodosius II in 439 C.E. are surely relevant. Similarly, many archaeologists and art-historians maintain that they can distinguish between a Roman-period and Byzantine-period building (2001: 50; for my response, see Magness 2001: 79-80, 89-90).

The mounting evidence of diversity in contemporary synagogue types and of a fourth to sixth century date for Galilean type synagogues has led some archaeologists to propose elaborate 'solutions' to reconcile the apparent contradictions. For example, in 1995 Tsafrir argued that the Capernaum synagogue (and possibly others) indeed dates to the second to third century – that is, the period of the *tannaim* and the beginning of the period of the *amoraim* – but was destroyed in the mid-fourth century and lay in ruins for decades before being rebuilt in the fifth century:

The knowledge that the structures, which according to their construction belong to the 'early' type, stood for hundreds of years, can supply a certain explanation for the difficulties raised by the Capernaum find. It might be that this synagogue, indeed, was destroyed for some reason or other (perhaps in the earthquake that occurred in the days of Julian 'the Apostate' in 363 . . .). When the synagogue stood in ruins, its paving stones were removed and broad gaps were opened in its foundations. When it was rebuilt at the beginning of the fifth century, the entire area was leveled with new filling to a depth of several tens of centimeters beneath the floor. It is in this fill that the later coins were found (1995a: 77).

Although Tsafir acknowledged that this 'solution' seems forced, he said it is 'more palatable and logical' than positing that the Capernaum synagogue dates to the fifth century, since 'in its plan, its architectural façade, and in its architectural and artistic details – the carvings and the inscriptions – the synagogue fits the third century, and not the fifth' (1995a: 77).

One ingenious 'solution' to resolve the apparent 'discrepancies' in the evidence for the dating of the Capernaum synagogue was proposed by Zvi Uri Ma'oz (1999). He suggests that in the fifth century, the local villagers (who he assumes were Christian) dismantled Galilean type synagogues of the second to third centuries in the surrounding countryside which were lying in ruins and reassembled them at Capernaum, so that Christian pilgrims would be able to visit 'the synagogue of the centurion' mentioned in the Gospel of Luke (7:1-5). According to Ma'oz, the synagogue – which (he says) was only partially [re]constructed – incorporated spolia from a number of different buildings and never functioned as a Jewish synagogue at Capernaum. Even if this proposal is correct, it would not account for the evidence for the later dating of other Galilean type synagogues. Nevertheless, the idea has been adopted enthusiastically by some archaeologists, who argue that the incorporation of spolia in other Galilean type synagogues proves that they, too, originally were built in the second to third century or were taken from earlier buildings somewhere in the vicinity. For example, Mordechai Aviam claims that the large synagogue at Kfar Baram is built entirely of spolia – a phenomenon which he proposes may have been a way for Jews to circumvent later Roman legislation prohibiting the construction of new synagogues (2004: 159, 168).

Proponents of the early dating of Galilean type synagogues point to recent excavations conducted by Leibner at Khirbet Wadi Hamam, which brought to light a synagogue of this type that he dates to ca. 200 CE. In the next chapter, I present a fine-grained analysis of the final report, the results of which demonstrate that the excavated data can be interpreted differently, indicating a later date for the synagogue building.

The Date of the Khirbet Wadi Hamam Synagogue(s): An Analysis⁹

Introduction: Khirbet Wadi Hamam

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Leibner is currently one of the leading proponents of a second to third century date for Galilean type synagogues. From 2007-2012, he conducted excavations at Khirbet Wadi Hamam (henceforth: Wadi Hamam), an ancient Jewish village in Lower Eastern Galilee spread over a steep slope at the base of Mount Nitai and opposite Mount Arbel, overlooking Magdala and the Sea of Galilee (Fig. 18) (for the final report see Leibner 2018; also see Leibner 2020). The excavated remains consist of a Galilean type synagogue, houses, olive presses, as well as soundings along the fortifications on Mt. Nitai and a survey of the caves in the cliffs. Four strata were distinguished:

Stratum 4: Late Chalcolithic period and Early Bronze Age (ca. 4500-3300 BCE)

Stratum 3: Hasmonean-Early Roman periods (ca. 100 BCE-135 CE)

Stratum 2: Middle-Late Roman periods (ca. 200-400)

Stratum 1: Byzantine to Ottoman periods (ca. 400-1950)

Like the village houses, the synagogue was constructed on an artificial terrace, and was surrounded by alleys to the north and south and buildings to the east and west (Fig. 19). According to Leibner, the terrace was built in the early first century CE to support a public building (presumably a synagogue) that was destroyed ca. 130 and subsequently dismantled. Ca. 200, a Galilean type synagogue was erected on the terrace (Synagogue I; Stratum 2, Phase I). This phase ended in the late third century when the building was severely damaged, and its eastern half collapsed. Soon afterwards, ca. 300, the synagogue was rebuilt (Synagogue II; Stratum 2, Phase II). Synagogue II is a rectangular basilica (ca. 17 × 15 m) oriented north-south, with three rows of columns on pedestals encircling the interior on the east, north, and west. The collapse and rebuilding of the eastern half of the structure are evident in its visibly different construction from the western half. The mosaics –

⁹ A much briefer analysis is published in Magness 2019b.

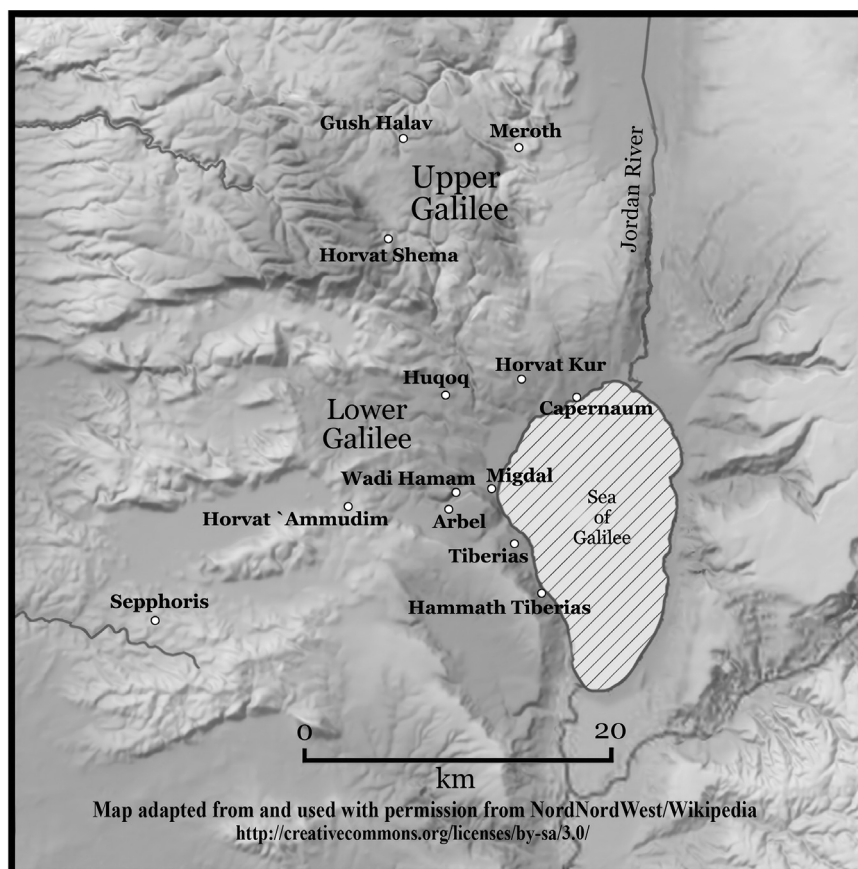


Figure 18. Map showing the location of Khirbet Wadi Hamam and other synagogue sites in the area (prepared by Randy Mohr)

only six percent of which survive – include panels depicting the building of the tower of Babel; Samson smiting the Philistines with the jawbone of an ass; Pharaoh’s soldiers drowning in the Red Sea; and a Helios-zodiac cycle (see Miller and Leibner 2018). In the late fourth century, portions of the mosaics were replaced with plaster, and a stone bema was added on top of the floor (Stratum 2, Phase IIb). Although Synagogue II was paved with a mosaic floor decorated with figured panels, it is said to be inferior in construction to its predecessor. Leibner’s description of this building as less monumental and more ‘introverted’ than its predecessor echoes similar characterizations of Byzantine period synagogues by previous generations of scholars (see, e.g., M. Avi-Yonah 1981: 62; and the discussion above). According to Leibner, the final phase attests to the decline of the synagogue and village before its abandonment ca. 400.

THE DATE OF THE KHIRBET WADI HAMAM SYNAGOGUE(S)

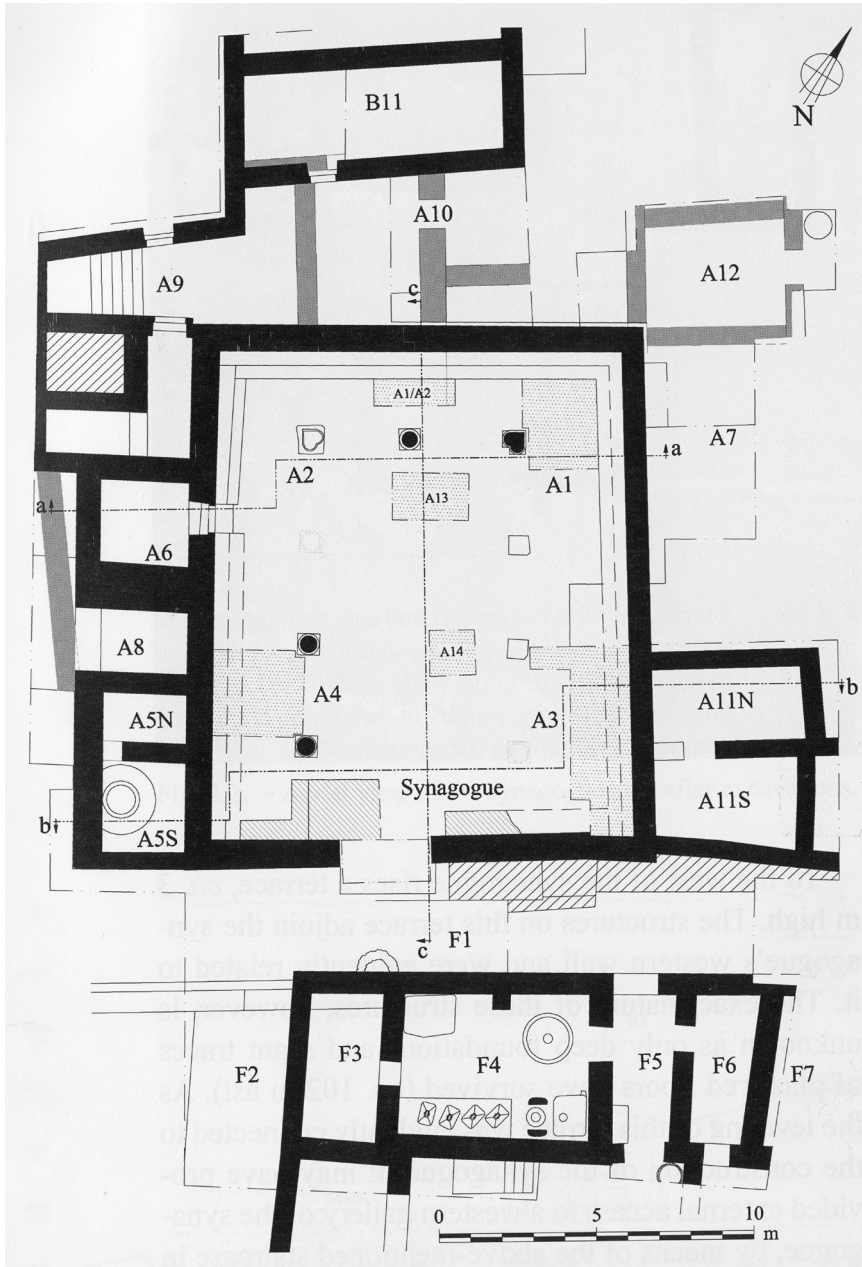


Figure 19. Block plan of the Wadi Hamam synagogue and surrounding areas (from Leibner 2018: 28 Fig. 2.5) (reproduced with the permission of the Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem; drawing by Benjamin [Benny] Arubas)

Leibner claims that the data from his excavations support the traditional second to third century date for Galilean type synagogues: ‘Thus, the results of our research seem to have brought the study of these synagogues to full circle, returning us to the chronological and stylistic conclusions reached by Kohl and Watzinger over a century ago, and disproving the claim by some current scholars that this building tradition emerged only in the Byzantine period’ (Leibner 2020: 64). Leibner’s chronological framework for the remains at Wadi Hamam is based largely on pottery, most of which consists of types with ranges of 200-300 years or more, particularly Kefar Hananya (KH) Ware, a locally produced coarse ware that was the subject of a seminal study by his dissertation advisor, Adan-Bayewitz (1993). Leibner generally adopts the earliest possible dates within the chronological ranges, although the pottery provides only a *terminus post quem* for the associated contexts, especially when the types are represented by fragments of unrestorable vessels from fills or secondary deposits. Leibner supports his early chronology by citing the rarity or absence of ‘Byzantine’ types and Late Roman Red Wares (LRRW) that postdate the fourth century. The problem is that there is no published typology and chronology of the local ‘Byzantine’ types (nor indeed, for most of the local late Roman types aside from KH Ware; see Leibner 2018: 315), and LRRW – which are imported fine wares – are rare in Galilean villages before the fifth century and only become relatively common from the second half of the fifth century on (see Magness and Schindler 2015; Schindler 2017: 268-73).

In many cases, Leibner’s dating is based on the predominance of earlier ceramic types in an assemblage, with later material being dismissed as ‘intrusive’ or attributed to later activity or disturbances. The large quantities of earlier material in many of these contexts are a result of their origin in fills or dumps that were imported from other parts of the site, as also indicated by the fact that the pottery consists mostly of fragments rather than whole or restorable vessels. It is not the quantity of datable artifacts that matters; instead, it is the latest datable artifact(s) which provide a *terminus post quem* for the associated contexts. In particular, coins often remained in circulation for decades or even centuries before they were lost or deposited – a phenomenon that is especially true of issues of the House of Constantine, which were minted in large numbers (see Bijovsky 2012: 167, 169).

The following analysis indicates that the ceramic and numismatic finds point to a range from the second half of the fourth century through the fifth century for the terrace, synagogue(s), and adjacent buildings. These finds come from different contexts and levels throughout the area and therefore cannot all be dismissed as due to intrusions or later disturbances. Although Daniel Schindler and I have proposed that Adan-Bayewitz’s dates for some of the KH Ware types need to be adjusted, here I follow Leibner in citing Adan-Bayewitz (see Magness and Schindler 2015; Schindler 2017, especially 167-73, 187-9, 194-8) (for the dates of the ceramic types mentioned in Chapters 3 and 4, see Table 1). My analysis begins with the synagogue (Fig. 20) and proceeds to the surrounding areas.

THE DATE OF THE KHIRBET WADI HAMAM SYNAGOGUE(S)

Table 1. Dates of the main ceramic types mentioned (all dates are CE)* (prepared by Daniel Schindler and Jodi Magness)

<i>Ware type</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Reference</i>
KH 1a	Latter 1st century to latter 3rd century	1993: 91
KH 1b	Late 1st/early 2nd century to mid-4th century	1993: 97
KH 1d	Mid-3rd century to latter 4th century	1993: 103
KH 1e	Mid-3rd century to earlier 5th century	1993:109
KH 3b	Early 2nd century to latter 4th century	1993: 124
KH 4b	Mid-1st century to mid-2nd century	1993: 128
KH 4c	Early 2nd century to mid-4th century	1993: 130
KH 4d	Latter 3rd/early 4th century to earlier 5th century	1993: 132
KH 4e	Earlier 4th century to earlier 5th century	1993: 135
KH 5b	Early 4th century to earlier 5th century	1993: 141
KH 6a	Earlier to about mid-2nd century	1993: 143
CP C3a	Mid-4th century to Byzantine/early Islamic period	2018: 315
CP C4a	Mid-4th century to Byzantine period	2018: 315
CP C4b	Mid-4th century to Byzantine period	2018: 316
ARS 58	Ca. 290/300-375	1972: 96
ARS 59	Ca. 320-420	1972: 100
ARS 61	Ca. 325-450	1972: 107
ARS 67	Ca. 360-470	1972: 116
ARS 91	Ca. 380/400 to 600-650	1972: 144; 1980: 516; 2008: 80
LRC (PRS) 1	Ca. late 4th century to third quarter of 5th century	1972: 327
LRC (PRS) 3	Early 5th century to third quarter of 6th century	1972: 337-8; 2008: 87
LRC (PRS) 10	Mid-6th century to mid-7th century	1972: 346
CRS 1	Ca. 370/380 to third quarter of 5th century	1972: 373; 1980: 528; 2008: 249 no. 1421
CRS 2	Third quarter of 5th century to mid-6th century	1972: 375-6
CRS 7	Mainly second half of 6th century to early 7th century	1972: 379
CRS 9	Ca. 550 to end of 7th century	1972: 382

*Kefar Hananya Ware, Byzantine Cooking Vessels, and Late Roman Red Wares (according to Adan-Bayewitz 1993; Leibner 2018; and Hayes 1972, 1980, 2008)

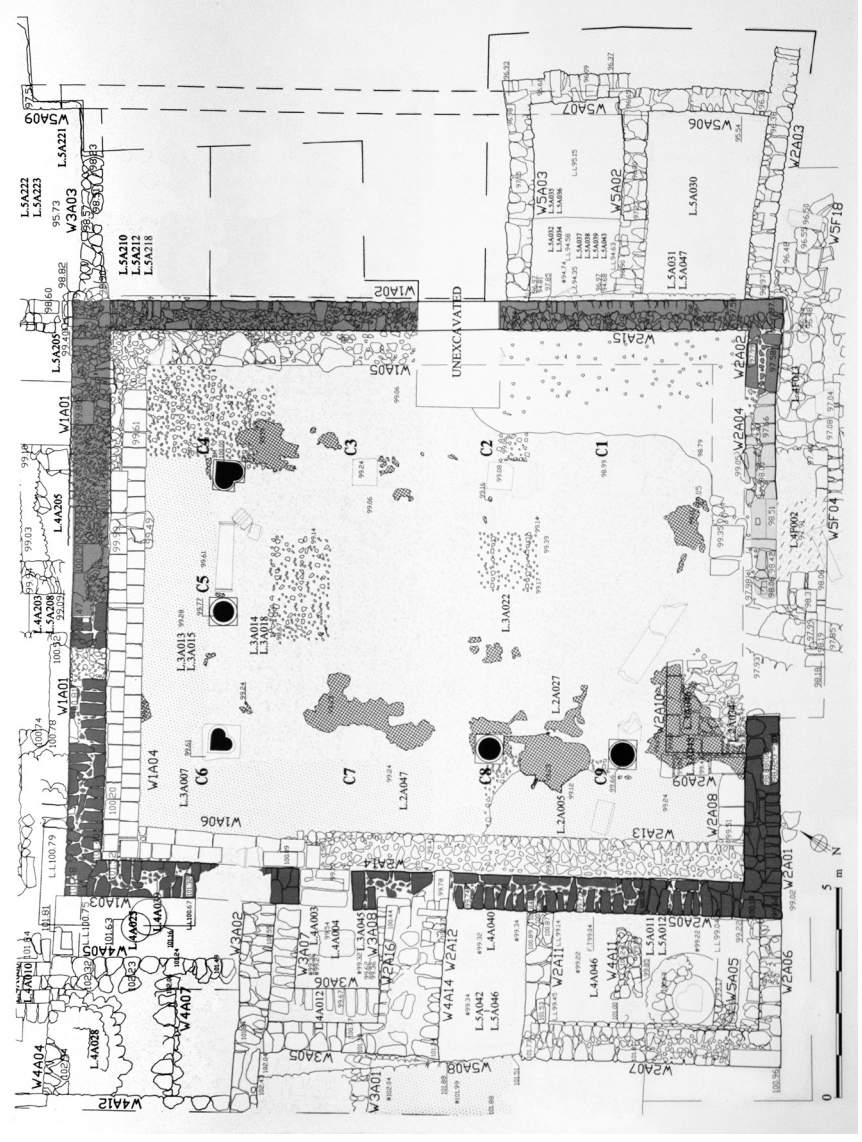


Figure 20. Detailed plan of the Wadi Hamam synagogue (from Leibner 2018: 31 (reproduced with the permission of the Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem; drawing by Benjamin [Benny] Arubas)

Stratigraphic Analysis: The East Side of the Synagogue

Unit A12

At the northeast corner of the synagogue, a ‘Hauran’ style building (Unit A12) was found buried in an intentional fill of stones and earth. It was overlaid by an alley running along the synagogue’s north side. A balanceolate oil lamp – a type characteristic of Galilee in the fourth and fifth centuries – and a piriform oil lamp were found on the alley’s surface (Leibner and Arubas 2018: 77; Gärtner and Leibner 2018: 425; 438, Pl. 11.4:2. For balanceolate oil lamps, see Hadad 2002: 26-9, Type 16). The northeast corner of the synagogue sits atop a partition wall in the building (Leibner and Arubas 2018: 77).

According to Leibner and Benjamin Arubas (who co-published the architecture and stratigraphy), the finds from the building indicate that it ‘was in use up to the early second century and was probably filled and covered over in the early third century’ – a key piece of evidence for dating the establishment of Synagogue I to ca. 200 (Leibner and Arubas 2018: 79). These finds include a coin of Lucius Verus (161-169 CE; cat. no. 169), and examples of KH 1b (late first or early second century CE to the mid-fourth century), 3b (early second to latter fourth century), and 4b/c (early to mid-second century) (Bijovsky 2018: 544; Leibner 2018: 374, Pl. 9.16: 11, 13, 14; see Adan-Bayewitz 1993: 97, 124, 128, 130). All these come from critical loci attributed to Stratum 3, which are described as belonging to the floor (or possible floor) in this room (L.5A225, L.5A227; Sabar et al. 2018: 649), as shown in the sections (Leibner and Arubas 2018: 78-9). The presence of ceramic types that first appeared in the early second century and continued through the fourth century points to a later date for this house’s occupation. They are consistent in date with the coin of Lucius Verus, which therefore should not be dismissed as having been brought in with the fill. Furthermore, the presence of KH 1b/d in the foundation trench of the synagogue’s north wall (W1A01) (L.5A205; a critical locus assigned to Stratum 2) contradicts Leibner’s dating of Synagogue I to ca. 200, as KH 1d appeared in the mid-third century, which presumably is the approximate transition date between 1b and 1d (Leibner 2018: 374, Pl. 9.16:2; see Adan-Bayewitz 1993: 97, 103). Leibner and Arubas also note that a few Middle-to-Late Roman pottery sherds were found in the foundation trench (2018: 78; see the MR-LR storage jar in Leibner 2018: 374, Pl. 9.16:5. Leibner 2020: 53, attributes these sherds ‘probably’ to later repairs).

East Wall of Synagogue Terrace + Unit A11

According to Leibner and Arubas, ‘the wide terrace on which the ‘Galilean’-type synagogue was built dates back to Stratum 3, apparently erected to accommodate

some large structure. The terrace is supported by a massive north-south retaining wall. The lower part of this wall [The Eastern Wall] has survived from the early first century CE' (2018: 29). This wall is divided into two distinct parts, one above the other: the lower part (W2A15b) is preserved from bedrock up to ca. 2 m below the floor level of Synagogue II, while the upper part (W1A02=W2A15a) continues upward to floor level. The upper part of the wall had collapsed inward, and there is evidence of an earlier collapse. The excavators state that W2A15b was built in the early first century CE and originally terminated 0.9 m south of the current northeast corner of the synagogue. This wall also served as the western back wall of a domestic structure (Unit A11), which was built on the lower terrace to the east of the synagogue. Here the wall was founded on bedrock, some 5 m below the floor level of the synagogue. The fact that the perpendicular walls of Unit A11 lean against W2A15b indicates that the domestic structure postdates the wall (Leibner and Arubas 2018: 38, 83).

Unit A7 refers to an excavated square at the north end of the synagogue's east wall, separated from Unit A11 to the south by a partially excavated space. The earlier phase of the terrace's east wall (W2A15b) was exposed here ca. 3.6 m below the level of the synagogue floor and was founded on bedrock. According to Leibner and Arubas, 'The fill against the lower wall, down to its foundations (L.5A210, L.5A212, L.5A217, L.5A218) seemed to have been disturbed and contained many boulders and few finds – mainly Early to Middle Roman with a few Late Roman pottery sherds' (2018: 79, 81). The evidence of 'disturbance' appears to be the presence of Late Roman sherds including KH 1d and KH 1e, which date from the mid-third to latter fourth and early fifth centuries, respectively (Leibner 2018: 375, Pl. 9.16:25, 30; also see the 'LR SJ' [no. 28] on this plate; see Adan-Bayewitz 1993: 103, 109).

Unit A11 was buried to the top of its first story in a 2 m thick stone collapse, which Leibner and Arubas attribute to the collapse of the east wall of Synagogue I (W2A15b) in the last third of the third century, after which time the unit went out of use and was filled up (2018: 82, 88). The upper part of the synagogue's east wall (W2A15a) was constructed with Synagogue II around 300, until it collapsed in the early fifth century (Leibner and Arubas 2018: 88). The collapse of the upper part of the east wall (W2A15a) was found immediately below topsoil above Unit A11, overlying a surface (L.5A013, L.5A014). The finds from the collapse and on top of the surface included 'Late Roman and Early Byzantine pottery', bilanceolate oil lamps, two late fourth century coins, and an Umayyad coin, all of which Leibner and Arubas say point 'to activity here during the final stage of the synagogue' (except for the Umayyad coin; 2018: 82). Although none of the pottery is illustrated, the description indicates a fourth to fifth century range instead of an end date in the early fifth century.

According to Leibner and Arubas, after Unit A11N was filled with collapse, it appears to have remained undisturbed (2018: 83). The beaten earth floor (L.5A039)

of the room, which is buried in the collapse, relates to the lower courses of W2A015b. Beneath the floor makeup was a fill of small stones and soil that leveled the uneven bedrock (L.5A043; Leibner and Arubas 2018: 84, 87):

The floor of the structure [Unit A11N] (L.5A039), which could not be clearly distinguished from its makeup, yielded a few Early to Late Roman sherds and three first-century coins, indicating that activity here continued up to the second half of the third century. The fill beneath the floor (L.5A043) yielded mainly Early Roman pottery. However, no evidence for an Early Roman structure on this lower terrace was detected, and it seems to have been an open space in that period. Excavation beneath a similar floor in A11S and up to the base of W2A15b (L.5A031, L.5A047) yielded Early and Middle Roman pottery (Leibner and Arubas 2018: 87).

. . . The dating of the lower wall (W2A15b) presents an archaeological challenge. The excavation beneath the floor of Unit A11, including the fill against the outer face of this wall, revealed Early to Middle Roman pottery (L.5A031, L.5A047, L.5A043). However, the deep part of Sounding A3 in the synagogue hall revealed clean, rich Early Roman assemblages along the inner face of this wall. It seems that while the inner face of this wall was sealed by the synagogue floor and remained undisturbed, continued building activity to the east outside the synagogue deposited later material quite deep along the outer face of this wall. Based on the deposits along the inner face of the wall it seems that it was the original Early Roman wall built to support the huge terrace (Leibner and Arubas 2018: 39, 41).

Based on pottery from fills under the floor of the room, Leibner and Arubas conclude that ‘the structure in Unit A11 was apparently built in the early third century against W2A15b, which dates back to the first half of the first century CE’, making it contemporary with Synagogue I (2018: 88). The locus list designates both the floor of Unit A11N (L.5A039) and the fill beneath it (L.5A043) as critical loci of Stratum 2 (Sabar et al. 2018: 646-7).

Leibner and Arubas describe the pottery found in the collapse as ‘a mixture of Late Hellenistic to Late Roman sherds’, none of which postdates the late third century except for two ‘Early Byzantine’ sherds from the uppermost locus (L.5A020) (2018: 84, 86). Their dismissal of the ‘Early Byzantine’ sherds allows them to adopt the earliest possible range of the latest Late Roman types. Among these are two large pieces of KH 1e from L.5A037 – the collapse in the room, and L.5A039 – the floor and its make-up (Leibner 2018: 376, Pl. 9.17:5, 13). There is also a fragment of KH 1d from the fill under the floor immediately overlying bedrock (L.5A043; Leibner 2018: 376, Pl. 9.17:22). The presence of KH 1d and 1e in the floor and in the fill under the floor overlying bedrock contradicts the dating of Unit A11 (and, by way of association, Synagogue I) to the early third century, as both types appeared in the mid-third century, and calls into question the assignment of the synagogue’s east wall (W2A15b) to the first century.

Leibner and Arubas date the collapse in Unit A11 to the last third of the third century based largely on a dispersed hoard of 37 coins, mostly of the mid-third century, found in the debris: ‘While the pottery assisted in broadly dating the

collapse and the burial of the structure, the abundance of numismatic finds was of great importance. . . . assisting to date the end of Synagogue I' (2018: 86). Because the latest coins in the hoard are issues of Gallienus, they conclude that 'they provide a terminus post quem for the collapse that was not before, and apparently not long after, 264-265 CE' (Leibner and Arubas 2018: 86). Five more coins from Unit A11N that are not part of the hoard are cited as supporting a late third century date for the collapse (Leibner and Arubas 2018: 86-7). But whereas Leibner and Arubas dismiss the Early Byzantine sherds from L.5A020 on the grounds that it is the uppermost locus in the room, they have no hesitation in relying on the earlier coins from this locus, some of which are ascribed to the hoard. No less problematic is the presence of a late fourth century coin (cat. no. 335, dated 383-385; Bijovsky 2018: 556) in L.5A032, which is dismissed as 'apparently intrusive' (Leibner and Arubas 2018: 87), although this is a critical locus ascribed to Stratum 2 that lies below L.5A020 (Leibner and Arubas 2018: 87, and section on 85; Sabar et al. 2018: 646). The pottery and coins thus point to a late fourth century *terminus post quem* for the collapse of W2A15b and the fill of Unit A11 – and, by way of extension, the end of Synagogue I.

Stratigraphic Analysis: Inside the Synagogue

Sounding A3

Sounding A3 is located along the southern inner face of the synagogue's east wall, that is, on the other side from Unit A11. This large probe reached a depth of ca. 2.5 m below the synagogue's floor level. The inner face of W2A15a was exposed to its entire height, but only the top of W2A15b was exposed. According to Leibner and Arubas, 'the deeper loci in this sounding (the lower part of L.2A049 and L.2A051) contained clean, rich Early Roman material' (2018: 57). They report that the foundation trench of W2A15a was 'clearly visible' in the northern section (see the section on Leibner and Arubas 2018: 58, Fig. 2.71), and that 'the findings in the foundation trench point to a Middle Roman date for this wall' (2018: 57). Unfortunately, the locus number(s) of the foundation trench does not appear to be indicated in the final report. Leibner and Arubas state that 'The lower wall (W2A15b), which differs in its width, construction technique, materials, and the date of the associated finds, is Early Roman (prior to the mid-first century CE), and is the original retaining wall of this huge artificial, elevated terrace' (2018: 58). L.2A051, which is the bottommost locus in this sounding, appears to be associated with the lower wall, as in the locus list it is designated a critical locus of Stratum 3 (Sabar et al. 2018: 640). The pottery from L.2A051 includes a KH 6a jug of the second to third century (Leibner 2018: 359, Pl. 9.8:19; see Adan-Bayewitz 1993: 143; also see Leibner 2018: 311), which contradicts the dating of the terrace's

construction to the early first century CE. Additional evidence might be provided by a KH 1a bowl of the latter first to latter third century CE, and an Early-to-Middle Roman storage jar, both of which were found in L.4A053, a critical locus of Strata 2-3 that is an extension to the north of Sounding A3 (Leibner 2018: 359, Pl. 9.8:20, 24; Sabar et al. 2018: 644; see Adan-Bayewitz 1993: 91).

Sounding A1

Sounding A1 was in the northeast corner of the synagogue's hall, under the mosaic floor in the east aisle and the plaster floor in the north aisle (where there were two layers of plaster). Although 'the vast majority of the pottery from Sounding A1 was Early Roman (or earlier) in date', there are later pieces (Leibner and Arubas 2018: 57). An example of KH 1e was found in L.2A015, a critical locus attributed to Strata 2-3, consisting of brown soil directly under the synagogue floor (Leibner and Arubas 2018: 353, Pl. 9.5:11; Sabar et al. 2018: 638). A fragment of KH 4c of the early second to mid-fourth century comes from L.1A016, a critical locus below the floor assigned to Stratum 3 (see Leibner and Arubas 2018: 57; Sabar et al. 2018: 638; Leibner 2018: 353, Pl. 9.5:5; Adan-Bayewitz 1993: 130). Other loci in this sounding attributed to Stratum 3 (see Sabar et al. 2018: 638-9) yielded Middle-to-Late Roman or possibly Byzantine pottery: an ER/MR juglet (L.1A016; Leibner 2018: 353, Pl. 9.5:7); ER/MR storage jars (L.2A017; Leibner 2018: 353, Pl. 9.5:22; L.2A017; 353, Pl. 9.5:31; L.2A030; 355, Pl. 9.6:18); an MR/LR/B1 lid (L.2A029 [the 'floor foundation' in the northeast corner of the synagogue]; Leibner 2018: 355, Pl. 9.6:11); and a possible example of KH 4c (L.2A045; Leibner 2018: 355, Pl. 9.6:23).

Leibner and Arubas conclude:

The finds from the soundings indicate that the wide terrace on which the synagogue was built was originally leveled in the first half of the first century CE . . . Middle Roman pottery sherds were retrieved in certain locations and attest to works that penetrated below the surface of the terrace when the 'Galilean'-type synagogue was constructed; for example, in the vicinity of the column foundations and the foundation trench of the eastern wall. A few Late Roman pottery sherds were found in the bedding of the mosaic floor and in the drainage channel, indicating works performed during Phase II of the 'Galilean'-type synagogue (2018: 61).

However, there is no indication in the text or locus list of disturbances in these loci, all of which are attributed to Stratum 3. Therefore, the presence of these types contradicts the dating of the terrace to the early first century CE and calls into question the dating of Synagogue I to ca. 200.

Sounding A4

Sounding A4 was excavated under the mosaic panel in Synagogue II's southwest aisle, where the western part of the damaged mosaic was repaired with a plaster patch. The bottommost loci – which are critical loci assigned to Stratum 3 – consisted of stones mixed with earth overlying bedrock (L.3A042 = L.4A011) (Leibner and Arubas 2018: 53-4; Sabar et al. 2018: 641-2). The pottery from these loci included Early-to-Middle Roman vessels and a KH 3b cooking pot dated to the early second to latter fourth century (see Leibner and Arubas 2018: 54; Leibner 2018: 311; 360, Pl. 9.9:21, 25, 34-7). The presence of these types contradicts the dating of the terrace to the early first century CE and instead provides an early second to latter fourth century *terminus post quem*.

Stratigraphic Analysis: The North Side of the Synagogue

Along the north side of the synagogue, an alley ascends from the lower village in the east to the upper terraces on the west. The alley is bounded on the south by the synagogue's north wall, and on the north by the south wall of a domestic insula, the doorways of which open onto it. Although Leibner and Arubas attribute an assemblage of 'late fourth-early fifth century pottery' (including restorable vessels) and a mid-fourth century coin found on the surface of the alley to 'squatters' (2018: 73), pottery and coins of the same date from other parts of this area suggest more substantial occupation. These include 'fourth century pottery' and two mid-fourth century coins (cat. nos. 269 [321-323 CE], 359 [mid-fourth century]; Bijovsky 2018: 552, 558) on the floor of a room in Unit B11 to the north of the alley, which, according to Leibner and Arubas, indicate 'that the structure collapsed and went out of use at this time' (2018: 73; Leibner 2018: 219). Farther to the east, fifteen bilanceolate oil lamp fragments, a 'Jebel Jofeh' oil lamp, Late Roman glass vessels, and four coins – the latest an issue of Theodosius I (cat. 202; dated 383-395; Bijovsky 2018: 547) – were found on the surface of the alley (Leibner and Arubas 2018: 73). This corpus of material suggests fifth century occupation rather than a mid-to-late fourth century abandonment. First, the coin of Theodosius I provides a *terminus post quem* at the end of the fourth century, while coins of the first half of the fourth century remained in circulation through the fifth century and later (see Bijovsky 2012: 167-9). Second, the pottery types have ranges at least through the fifth century, including bilanceolate oil lamps, KH 1e (Leibner 2018: 387, Pl. 9.22:1, 10), and Byzantine cooking pots (CP C3a; C4a; C4b; all dated from the mid-fourth century through the Byzantine period and even into the early Islamic period; Leibner 2018: 387, Pl. 9.22: 2-4, 8, 11; see 315-6).

Based on the absence of coins and pottery that postdate the mid-fourth century, Leibner attributes the destruction and abandonment of Unit B11 to the earthquake of 363 CE (2018: 219-21): ‘It should be emphasized that no late fourth-century *minima* coins or late fourth-early fifth century vessels were found here, which appeared in abundance in Units B5, B6, B7 and B10, and none of the finds here post-date *ca.* the mid-fourth century CE’ (Leibner 2018: 219). This statement overlooks the fact that coins of the first half of the fourth century are much more common than later issues (see Bijovsky 2012: 167-9), while the ceramic types represented in Unit B11 have ranges through the fifth century and beyond. In contrast, Leibner describes the collapse and accumulation above the presumed floor level of an olive press in Unit B6 as

containing the latest stratified evidence for activity at the entire site. These include five Late Roman-Byzantine glass vessels; the latest types of KH ware, such as KH 4e cooking pots and KH 1e bowls; fourth-century storage jars; and Byzantine local ware such as Form C3a casseroles and Form C4b cooking pots; of special importance are Late Roman Red Ware vessels of Forms CRS 1 and PRS 1, which are common in assemblages from the mid-fourth to the mid-fifth centuries CE. Also of chronological significance are the plentiful minima coins found here, the latest of which are a coin of Arcadius (383-408 CE), a coin of Magnus Maximus (387-388 CE), four SALVS REIPUBLICAE coins (383-395 CE) and a coin of Honorius (393-423 CE). Taken together, these finds attest to activity in the oil press up to the final years of the fourth, or the early years of the fifth century CE (2018: 206-7).

However, these finds come from topsoil and collapse above the olive press, not from sealed loci or an occupation level: ‘Beneath a layer of dark topsoil (L.1.B001, L.1.B003) was a massive collapse of large building stones (L.1B004, L.1B006, L.1B009, L.1B011)’ (Leibner 2018: 206; only a small patch of plaster floor was found in the olive press). Therefore, they could have washed in from the slope above (see the photo in Leibner 2018: 206, Fig. 6.16). Whereas Leibner uses this material to date the latest use of the olive press, he repeatedly dismisses as ‘intrusive’ finds from apparently sealed and undisturbed contexts in other areas below the synagogue.

Three fragments of Late Roman Red Ware (two examples of LRC 1 [one perhaps a local imitation] and one of ARS 61) are illustrated from accumulation and collapse above the olive press (Leibner 2018: 383, Pl. 9.20:6-8; from L.1B005 [accumulation inside the weight channel of the press], L.1B008 [collapse], and L.1B011 [collapse]; see Sabar et al. 2018: 650). All the other examples cited by Leibner as ‘attesting to activity in the oil press’ come from topsoil (see 2018: 207, referring to Pls. 9.1:3, 6-7, 12, 18, 24, 26 from L.1.B001, L.1B003, and L.1B999; also Pl. 9.20: 5, which comes from L.1B009; Leibner includes Pl. 9.1:27, from Unit B5, L.3B007, which is also topsoil; he erroneously includes Pl. 9.1:2, which comes from Area C). Similarly, of the seven coins listed by Leibner (2018: 207), four come from topsoil (cat. nos. 331, 337, 340, and 347, from L.1B001 and L.1B009; Bijovsky 2018: 556-7), and three come from collapse (cat. nos. 332, 345, and 346, from L.1B011

and L.1B016; Bijovsky 2018: 556-7). This is significant because Leibner attributes the destruction and abandonment of Unit B11 to the earthquake of 363 based on a comparison with Units B5-6, which he says yielded ‘abundant’ late fourth to early fifth century coins and pottery. As we have seen, however, this material does not come from sealed contexts or occupation levels. Furthermore, once the Late Roman Red Wares are removed from consideration, the latest ceramic types from Units B11 and B5-6 are largely the same, including KH 1e and CP C3a, C4a, and C4b. This evidence contradicts Leibner’s conclusion that, ‘The domestic structure in Unit B11 collapsed and went out of use around the mid-fourth century, apparently in the 363 CE earthquake. As opposed to finds in the synagogue and in the adjacent units to the north that testify to continued activity till the end of the fourth century, no such finds were revealed in Unit B11. It was apparently buried and left untouched beneath the massive collapse’ (2018: 221).

The same picture is obtained from Units B7 and B10. According to Leibner, the collapse in Unit B7 yielded pottery that ‘resembles that found in the oil press in Unit B6 and includes mainly fourth-century pottery’ (2018: 216; 384, Pl. 9.21:1-7). The latest types illustrated consist of one fragment each of CRS 1 (Pl. 9.21:3), KH 1e (Pl. 9.21:1), and two fragments of CP C4b (Pl. 9.21:5-6). The CRS and KH 1e come from collapse below topsoil in Unit B7 (L.1B012 and L.2B008, respectively). The two examples of CP C4b – dated from the latter half of the fourth century through the Byzantine period (see Leibner 2018: 316) – come from L.1B0022, an intentional fill in this room that is assigned to Stratum 3(!). According to Leibner, ‘The finds in the fill comprised mainly Stratum 3 pottery, including two restorable KH4b/c cooking pots’ (2018: 216). Although L.1B022 is not designated a critical locus and no signs of a floor were found, Leibner does not describe the CP C4b fragments as intrusive. Therefore, they suggest a *terminus post quem* in the latter half of the fourth century to the Byzantine period for the Stratum 3 fill of Unit B7 and the collapse above.

Excavations in Unit B10, although limited, revealed evidence of an upper and lower structure. The upper structure, which did not preserve signs of a floor, was filled with collapse containing pottery described as dating to the fourth to early fifth centuries, a balanceolate oil lamp, and a modern coin (Leibner 2018: 218). The presence of the coin confirms that the collapse in these buildings was not sealed. The pottery from the collapse includes CRS 1 (Pl. 9.21:17, from L.2B007), KH 1e (Pl. 9.21:16 [from L.2B007], 24 [from L.2B029], 25 [from L.2B029]), and CP C4b (Pl. 9.21:20 [from L.2B007]) (see Leibner 2018: 384). L.2B007 is the collapse in the upper structure. However, two pieces of KH 1e come from L.2B029, which is a Stratum 3 fill under the collapse, down to the foundation level of Unit B10 (see Leibner 2018: 218; Sabar et al. 2018: 652). Although L.2B029 is not designated as a critical locus and no floor was found, Leibner does not refer to the KH 1e fragments as intrusive. Therefore, as in Unit B7, this material suggests a fourth century or later date for the fills assigned to Stratum 3.

The room of a domestic unit (A10) adjoined on the east by a courtyard with a tabun was buried under the center of the alley, extending below Room B11 to the north and the synagogue to the south (Leibner and Arubas 2018: 73; Leibner 2018: 218-9). According to Leibner and Arubas, the surface of the courtyard and contents of the tabun ‘yielded a rich assemblage similar to those found in other early second-century destruction layers at the site’ (2018: 73). A beaten earth floor in the room was much earlier than the floor of the courtyard, and it appears that the later floor in this room did not survive (Leibner and Arubas 2018: 76). Leibner and Arubas state that, ‘the loci above the floor in the western room (L.4A203, L.4A206, L.5A208) yielded a rich assemblage of homogeneous Early Roman pottery, including a restorable vessel, none of which must postdate the mid-first century CE, and two Hasmonean coins’ (2018: 76). They dismiss as ‘apparently intrusive’ a mid-fourth century coin (cat. no. 360; Bijovsky 2018: 558) and a ‘fourth century’ Beit Natif oil lamp fragment (not illustrated) (Leibner and Arubas 2018: 76). Although Judit Gärtner and Leibner date the Beit Natif oil lamps at Wadi Hamam to the late third to late fourth centuries, this type has a range from the third to fifth centuries (see Magness 2008: 130, with references). Furthermore, the coin and oil lamp are part of an assemblage found on top of the earlier floor in this room (L.4A206), a critical locus assigned to Stratum 3 (Sabar et al. 2018: 645). There is no evidence of disturbance to this assemblage, which was buried in fill and sealed by the alley above. Therefore, these finds provide a mid-fourth century *terminus post quem* for the occupation of Unit A10 as well as for the alley, Unit B11, and the synagogue above. This date is consistent with the finds from Units B7 and B10.

The evidence reviewed here indicates a *terminus post quem* in the second half of the fourth century for the Stratum 3 occupation levels and fills north of the synagogue, and, by way of extension, for the synagogue itself, which overlies Unit A10. Furthermore, a comparison with the ceramic assemblages from the other units in Area B contradicts Leibner’s claim that Unit B11 was destroyed in the earthquake of 363 and subsequently abandoned.

Stratigraphic Analysis: The West Side of the Synagogue

The synagogue’s west wall cut through and sealed an earlier structure (Rooms A5S, A5N, and A8) (Leibner and Arubas 2018: 61). Leibner and Arubas date this structure to the early Roman period (pre-mid-first century CE) based on finds from the floor foundations in Rooms A5S and A5N (2018: 64-5). The floor consisted of beaten earth and its foundations overlaid bedrock (Leibner and Arubas 2018: 64). Although many of the finds were early Roman (and earlier), they included an early second century coin (cat. no. 149; Bijovsky 2018: 543), a Broneer Type XXV discus lamp fragment (not illustrated; dated from the second third of the first century CE to the third century – see Rosenthal and Sivan 1978: 36), and a KH 1b

bowl (late first or early second to mid-fourth century) (Leibner and Arubas 2018: 64-5; neither the oil lamp nor the KH 1b bowl is illustrated). Leibner and Arubas dismiss the coin, lamp, and bowl as coming from the upper two loci of the floor foundation, despite the fact that these are critical loci attributed to Stratum 3 which overlaid bedrock (the coin is from L.5A015; see Sabar et al. 2018: 645; the locus attributions of the oil lamp and bowl are not provided). Instead, these finds indicate that the floor cannot antedate the early second century, and the KH 1b bowl provides a *terminus post quem* as late as the mid-fourth century – a date that accords with the evidence discussed above from the area of Room B11 to the north of the synagogue.

Room A8, to the north of Room A6, was blocked with an intentional fill. The latest finds from the fill, which included a Beit Natif oil lamp and three KH 1b bowls, provide an approximate date for the sealing of the room and the construction of the synagogue's west wall (Leibner and Arubas 2018: 66). However, these types indicate a fourth century *terminus post quem* for the fill, not 'a date in the third century' as Leibner and Arubas conclude (2018: 66).

Room A6 lies to the north of Room A8. When the synagogue's west wall was built, it cut through the eastern part of this room and its plaster floor to reach bedrock, and a new floor was laid about a half a meter above the original plaster floor. The fill between the floors included a KH 1b/d bowl, a type that apparently appeared around the mid-third century (see above; Leibner and Arubas 2018: 68-9; Leibner 2018: 371, Pl. 9.14:6, from L.4A003, a critical locus of Stratum 2; Sabar et al. 2018: 642), contradicting Leibner's dating of Synagogue I to ca. 200.

Stratigraphic Analysis: The South Side of the Synagogue (Area F)

An alley ascending from east to west runs along the south side of the synagogue. The finds on the alley's surface included a balanceolate oil lamp; a glass lamp bowl, most of the parallels for which date to the fifth to seventh centuries (Jackson-Tal 2018: 494, Pl. 13.9:79; 471); and five coins, the latest of which dates to the mid-fourth century (cat. no. 364; Bijovsky 2018: 558 [not late fourth century as in Leibner and Arubas 2018: 90]). These finds suggest a fifth century date for the use of this alley rather than a late fourth to early fifth century date as Leibner and Arubas state (2018: 90).

About a meter below the alley, the surface of an earlier alley was found, on which were two Beit Natif oil lamps (Gärtner and Leibner 2018: 438, Pl. 11.4:11) and five coins, the latest of which dates to the fourth to fifth centuries (cat. no. 368; Bijovsky 2018: 558). Although Leibner and Arubas dismiss the coin as 'most likely intrusive,' it is contemporary with the Beit Natif oil lamps, and no other evidence of disturbance is mentioned (2018: 91). Therefore, the occupation of this alley

should be dated to the fourth to fifth centuries. This is also the *terminus post quem* for the synagogue, as a massive retaining wall abutting the synagogue's south wall, which apparently served as the base for a staircase to the synagogue's main entrance, was erected on the lower alley (see Leibner and Arubas 2018: 91).

An insula with an olive press arranged around a courtyard lies to the south of the alley (Units F2-F8; Leibner 2018: 221-2). It includes a rectangular structure (Unit F3) with a beaten earth floor that is nearly 2 m lower than the surface of the alley to the north, and a 1 m deep shaft leading to a bell-shaped chamber in the center (Unit F3; Leibner 2018: 223, 225). Unit F3 was buried in a massive collapse (L.4F007), which contained a mixture of pottery that Leibner says may have washed in from the slope above. He describes the latest pottery, which included four bilanceolate oil lamps, as 'typical of fourth century assemblages' (Leibner 2018: 223; Pls. 9.23:1-3; 11.5:5), despite noting elsewhere in the volume that 'bilanceolate oil lamps are perhaps the most popular local lamps in northeastern Palestine during the fourth-fifth centuries' (Gärtner and Leibner 2018: 425).

According to Leibner, the latest finds from the accumulation above the floor (L.4F010) contained 'Middle to Late Roman pottery in addition to a few Early Roman intrusions' (2018: 223; Pl. 9.23:4-12). The floor foundation yielded one Middle Roman and one Middle-to-Late Roman storage jar, while the shaft of the underground chamber included Middle and Late Roman types (Leibner 2018: 223-5; Pl. 9.23:13-9). Based on the 'meager' finds from the floor foundation and inside the chamber (two MR storage jars) Leibner assigns Unit F3 to Stratum 3 although it remained in use in Stratum 2. However, he dates Middle-to-Late Roman storage jars like the one from the floor foundation (Pl. 9.23:14) no earlier than the late second-early third century (Leibner 2018: 313). This means that either Unit F3 does not belong to Stratum 3, or Stratum 3 is later than ca. 100 BCE-135 CE.

Leibner concludes that, 'not a single vessel of the local Byzantine forms, which began to appear around the mid-fourth century, was found in Unit F3 – from the top of the debris to the bottom of the underground chamber – let alone forms of the late fourth century, as were recovered in Areas A and B. It can be deduced, therefore, that this structure collapsed and went out of use in the fourth century, most likely a few decades *before* the 363 earthquake' (Leibner 2018: 227). However, the same local types – KH 1e and KH 4d – are present in the collapse (which also includes KH 5b and bilanceolate oil lamps) and in the accumulation above the floor (Pl. 9.23:1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 10; Pl. 11.5:5). Furthermore, the same types are represented in the fourth to fifth century assemblages from other areas (the post-mid-fourth century types mentioned by Leibner apparently refer to Late Roman Red Wares and CP 4b).

To the east of Unit F3 is an olive press (Unit 4) that showed little evidence of use (Leibner 2018: 227). The lower loci of the collapse which covered the press (L.5F003; L.5F010) 'yielded abundant Late Roman pottery' (none illustrated) including a Beit Natif oil lamp and nine coins, the latest of which date to 337-341

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and 330-341 CE (Leibner 2018: 228; cat. nos. 282, 294; Bijovsky 2018: 553-4). According to Leibner, the finds from accumulations over parts of the press

included over 150 identifiable pottery vessels (some restorable), such as KH 1e bowls, KH 3b casseroles, KH 4c and 4d cooking pots, and Late Roman cooking pots, and Late Roman and 'diamond-rim' storage jars, all typical of fourth-century assemblages (Pl. 9.24:1-7, 9-24). As in Unit F3, not a single vessel of the local Byzantine forms that began to appear in the mid-fourth century, or late fourth-century forms such as those in Areas A and B, were found. Together with the numismatic finds [a coin of Herod Antipas and one third-century coin], this points to an abandonment in the first half of the fourth century (2018: 229).

These loci also yielded three northern stamped oil lamps (see Gärtner and Leibner 2018: 424; Pl. 11.4:18), a type that dates to the fourth to fifth century (see Hadad 2002: 26, whose Type 16 includes both northern stamped oil lamps and bilanceolate oil lamps; Gärtner and Leibner date northern stamped oil lamps to the late third-fourth centuries).

The finds from the lower collapse and accumulations covering the olive press are consistent with the fourth to fifth century assemblages from other areas. Furthermore, the large quantity of pottery including restorable vessels found in the components of the press (e.g., the weight trench and vats) suggests that this material was dumped here after the installation went out of use. Therefore, these finds point to a fourth to fifth century *terminus post quem* for its abandonment rather than a date in the first half of the fourth century.

Conclusion: The Date of the Wadi Hamam Synagogue(s)

This analysis indicates a range from the second half of the fourth century through the fifth century for the Stratum 3 and 2 remains, including Synagogues I and II. This means that the Wadi Hamam synagogue(s) is roughly contemporary with the nearby synagogue at Huqoq, which is decorated with very similar mosaic panels. Both Wadi Hamam and Huqoq belong to a sub-group or variant of Galilean type synagogues paved with mosaics instead of flagstones (see Magness et al. 2018; Magness 2021). Other evidence supports the chronology proposed here for Wadi Hamam. For example, Rivka Elitzur-Leiman notes that whereas an amulet from Wadi Hamam comes from a context dated by Leibner to the first half of the fourth century, comparable amulets date to the fifth to seventh centuries (2018: 617). Similarly, Ruth Jackson-Tal cites parallels of the fifth to seventh century for suspended glass lamp bowls, examples of which were found at Wadi Hamam in contexts dated by the excavator to no later than ca. 400 (2018: 471). And, as noted above, bilanceolate oil lamps, the most common type represented in Stratum 2 contexts, date to the fourth to fifth century (Gärtner and Leibner 2018: 424-5).

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Leibner's dating is based on the predominance of earlier ceramic types in an assemblage, with later material being dismissed as 'intrusive' or attributed to later activity or disturbances, even when these are not evident in the documentation (see also Leibner 2020: 53-4). However, it is the latest datable artifact(s) – not the bulk of datable artifacts – which provides a *terminus post quem* for the associated contexts. The same principle applies to coins, which often remained in circulation for decades or even centuries before they were lost or deposited. Furthermore, despite Leibner's claim to the contrary, LRRW are rare in Galilean villages before the fifth century (see Magness and Schindler 2015; Schindler 2017: 268-73). In fact, a similar picture obtains for the late Hellenistic and early Roman periods, when imported pottery is common at other sites in the region but 'is almost totally absent' at Wadi Hamam (Leibner 2018: 307-8, who, nevertheless, does not conclude that the site was unoccupied during these periods). Clearly, the ceramic corpus at Wadi Hamam is dominated by local types, and, therefore, the rarity or absence of imported wares is not evidence of a lack of occupation.

Even if the earliest synagogue (Synagogue I) at Wadi Hamam cannot be cited as a third century example of the Galilean type, controversies continue to swirl around Capernaum. Chapter 4 begins by considering the archaeological and literary evidence for a recent claim that the Capernaum synagogue was built in the third century to serve a community of *minim* (Jewish-Christians). This is followed by a fine-grained analysis of the published reports on the Capernaum synagogue and the nearby *domus ecclesia* and octagonal church.

Capernaum

A Community of *Minim* at Capernaum?

In a 2014 article, Arubas and Rina Talgam claim that the white limestone synagogue at Capernaum – which they say was constructed in the third century and rebuilt after the earthquake of 363 CE – served a community of Jews who are called *minim* in rabbinic literature due to their contacts with Christian pilgrims to the site. They identify the elevated basalt platform on which the limestone synagogue sits as the remains of a third century CE synagogue, which was constructed over a first century CE basalt synagogue ‘of the type recently discovered at nearby Magdala’ and state that ‘Jesus apparently taught and preached in this kind of building, as mentioned in the New Testament’, implying that the supposed first century building at Capernaum is the synagogue of the centurion mentioned in Luke 7:1-5 (Arubas and Talgam 2014: 268; also see 241). Although, according to Arubas and Talgam, the remains of the first century synagogue were removed or buried under the white limestone synagogue, they believe that Capernaum’s importance in Christian tradition, including the Gospel reference to Jesus preaching in its synagogue, led Christian emperors to finance the building’s reconstruction after the earthquake of 363 (2014: 268). This ‘eliminated the opposition to the transformation of the House of St. Peter into a focus for Christian pilgrimage and reduced the tension between Jews and Christians who began to visit the place’ (Arubas and Talgam 2014: 269). Arubas and Talgam consider the addition of an apse to the octagonal building above the traditional site of the House of St. Peter as evidence that, in the fifth century, it served not as a church but as a ‘memorial octagon’. Therefore, by the sixth century Christianity became dominant at Capernaum, when, they suggest, there may have been ‘a gradual process of Christianization of the inhabitants of Capernaum’ (Arubas and Talgam 2014: 269). The following discussion considers the various strands of evidence cited by Arubas and Talgam in support of their argument. This is followed by a fine-grained analysis of the archaeological evidence for the dating of the synagogue, the *domus ecclesia*, and the octagonal church.

Before proceeding, it is important to note that Arubas and Talgam's association of the white limestone synagogue at Capernaum with *minim* is predicated on dating the building to the third to fourth centuries. Their argument collapses if the white limestone synagogue dates to the sixth century, as the archaeological evidence indicates. Similarly, the octagonal church appears to have been built no earlier than ca. 600 CE, not in the fifth century (see below). Furthermore, the size and decoration of the Huqoq synagogue, which is dated to ca. 400 by C14 as well as pottery and coins, contradict Arubas and Talgam's characterization of the Capernaum synagogue as 'clashing' with the 'relative modesty' of other Galilean type synagogues (see Magness et al. 2018). This is crucial because their proposal is motivated by a desire to explain 'why an extremely wealthy and extravagant synagogue [was] erected in Capernaum rather than in any other village of Jewish Galilee?' (Arubas and Talgam 2014: 240). Because such a monumental synagogue does not accord with Arubas and Talgam's view of Galilean Judaism in late antiquity, they associate it with non-normative Jews (*minim*). Martin Goodman has made a similar suggestion about the Sardis synagogue (Goodman 1994; see Magness 2005b). However, it is not that the Capernaum and Sardis synagogues are exceptional and therefore were associated with non-normative Jews; rather, these buildings do not conform with modern scholarly notions about late antique Jews and Judaism.¹⁰

In support of their argument connecting the white limestone synagogue to a community of *minim* at Capernaum in the fourth century, Arubas and Talgam cite the story of Joseph the Comes in Epiphanius' *Panarion*, Egeria's description of her visit to Capernaum, and *Qohelet Rabbah*, a midrashic text. We now consider each of these sources in turn.

The *Panarion* was composed between 374-377 CE by Epiphanius, a native of Eleutheropolis (Beit Guvrin) in Judea who became the bishop of Salamis on Cyprus (Williams 2009: xiii-xiv, xx; Rubin 1983: 105). In it, he tells the story of Joseph the Comes, a Jew from Tiberias who converted to Christianity and attempted to spread Christianity in Lower Galilee by building Catholic churches (*Panarion* 30, 4, 1-12, 10; Goranson 1999: 338, notes that Epiphanius did not consider non-Catholics Christians):

This Josephus was awarded the rank of count by the Emperor himself, and was authorized to build a church for Christ in Tiberias itself, and in Diocaesarea, Capernaum and the other towns (*Panarion* 30, 4, 1 [from Williams 2009: 134]; see Arubas and Talgam 2014: 241-3).

¹⁰ Zeev Safrai identifies the House of Leontis at Beth Shean as a Judeo-Christian house of prayer, citing, among other reasons, the 'pagan figures and scenes [in the mosaics], along with nude depictions, that have no parallels in the rabbinic literature and Jewish archaeology' (2003: 246). However, the discovery of similar motifs in the mosaics of the Huqoq synagogue – specifically, a ship and sirens in the Jonah panel – contradicts Safrai's claim (see Britt and Boustán in Magness et al. 2018: 111-5). Safrai also cites a fourth to fifth century date for the House of Leontis, whereas the excavator dated the mosaic floor to the mid-fifth to sixth century (see Zori 1966).

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Josephus asked nothing of the emperor but this very great favor – permission by imperial rescript to build Christ’s churches in the Jewish towns and villages where no one had ever been able to found churches, since there are no Greeks, Samaritans or Christians among the population. This <rule> of having no gentiles among them is observed especially at Tiberias, Diocaesarea, Sepphoris, Nazareth and Capernaum (*Panarion* 30, 11, 9-10 [from Williams 2009: 140]).

Arubas and Talgam acknowledge that many scholars question the historical accuracy of Epiphanius’ account but attempt to show that his report of the construction of churches at these sites is reliable (2014: 242; for a literary analysis of the *Panarion*, see Reiner 2004). They identify a church in Tiberias that was excavated in 2007 by Moshe Hartal and Edna Amos as the one Joseph is said to have built in place of the Hadrianeum (Arubas and Talgam 2014: 241, 243):

After receiving the letter and the authorization along with his title, Josephus came to Tiberias . . . And so he began to build in Tiberias. There was a very large temple in the town already, I think they may have called it the Adrianeum. The citizens may have been trying to restore this Adrianeum, which was standing unfinished, for a public bath. When Josephus found this he took the opportunity from it; and as he found that there were already four walls raised to some height, made of stones four feet long, he began the erection of a church at that point . . . Though they harmed the man on many occasions, he [Joseph] eventually restored part of the temple at Tiberias and finished a small church. He left then and came to Scythopolis and made it his home. However, he completed buildings in Diocaesarea and certain other towns (*Panarion* 30, 11, 9-10, 12, 1-3, 9 [from Williams 2009: 140-1]).

Although no excavation report on the Tiberias church has been published, Arubas and Talgam identify it as the one built by Joseph: ‘The dating [of the church] to the second half of the 4th century is supported by epigraphic evidence that has been analyzed by L. Di Segni’ (2014: 270 n. 28). However, the lack of publication combined with the absence of any evidence that this was the site of the Hadrianeum make it impossible to prove that this church dates to the time when Joseph supposedly lived, let alone establish its association with any such figure. Furthermore, although on the Israel Antiquities Authority website the church is said to date to the ‘fourth-fifth centuries CE’, a 2015 article states that its ‘earliest phase has been dated to the fifth century according to the fine mosaics’ (http://www.antiquities.org.il/Article_eng.aspx?sec_id=25&subj_id=240&id=1273&hist=1 [accessed 4 August 2023]; Cytryn-Silverman 2015: 199). And whereas Epiphanius describes Joseph’s church in Tiberias as ‘small’, the excavated church is a large, three-aisled basilica measuring 30 × 30 m (Cytryn-Silverman 2015: 199). Therefore, the available evidence contradicts the association of this church with Joseph, even if we assume that this part of Epiphanius’ account is historically reliable (Rubin 1983: 113, notes it is unlikely that Epiphanius would have described the church as small had Joseph succeeded in his mission).

There is even less evidence at the other sites. At Sepphoris, Arubas and Talgam point to a large church near a major intersection while acknowledging that the

excavator, Zeev Weiss, dates it to the late fifth to sixth century – long after Joseph’s time. Although there could be earlier remains or phases below (as they propose), the absence of any such evidence means that there is no basis for associating this church with Joseph. In fact, Arubas and Talgam qualify that ‘while Epiphanius clearly states that the churches planned in Tiberias and Sepphoris were indeed constructed, he does not indicate whether those intended for Nazareth and Capernaum were ever built by Joseph’ (2014: 243). Indeed, the only church Joseph is said to have built is the small one in Tiberias, although Epiphanius mentions that ‘he completed buildings in Diocaesarea and certain other towns’ (*Panarion* 30, 9 [from Williams 2009: 141]). This suggests that whether or not the story is fictional, Lower Galilee in the mid-fourth century remained overwhelmingly Jewish (Rubin 1983: 105).

For Capernaum, Arubas and Talgam rely on the testimony of Egeria, a Christian pilgrim who visited the Holy Land ca. 381-384 CE (2014: 243-4; Wilkinson 1981: 3): ‘There is also the synagogue where the Lord cured a man possessed by the devil. The way in is up many stairs, and it is made of dressed stone’ (Peter the Deacon’s *Book on the Holy Places*, V2 [from Wilkinson 1981: 196]). They identify the white limestone synagogue as the one Egeria saw, and – despite a lack of archaeological evidence – reconstruct the staircase she describes as extending along the entire south façade. They claim that the original staircase was replaced by the current narrow porch in the fifth century, when (they say), the eastern courtyard was added to the synagogue hall (Arubas and Talgam 2014: 244-5). Of course, it is impossible to determine if the synagogue and steps mentioned by Egeria were indeed a synagogue. Arubas and Talgam’s interpretation relies on a hypothetical staircase associated with a building (the white limestone synagogue) which archaeological evidence indicates did not exist in Egeria’s time.

Around 570 CE, the Piacenza Pilgrim mentioned a church on the site of the house of St. Peter but did not refer to the synagogue: ‘Also we came to Capernaum, and went into the house of Blessed Peter, which is now a basilica’ (v 163.7 [from Wilkinson 1977: 81]). Arubas and Talgam speculate that the Piacenza Pilgrim ignored the synagogue because he regarded ‘the synagogue and the church as a single Christian complex’, indicating that the supposed community of ‘*minim*’ had converted to Christianity by then (2014: 243, 266). They suggest that since early Christians used the term ‘basilica’ to denote churches in general, and not specifically buildings with an elongated rectangular layout (as is the case today), the pilgrim’s reference could be to the octagonal church alone (Arubas and Talgam 2014: 266). For example, the foundation inscription of S. Vitale in Ravenna describes the church, which has an octagonal plan, as a basilica, while Egeria refers to the circular structure enshrining the tomb of Christ in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher as the ‘basilica Anastasis’ (see Ward-Perkins 1994: 456; Wilkinson 1981: 125, v. 24.7; also see Ousterhout 1990: 51). It is also possible that the Piacenza Pilgrim’s omission of the synagogue at Capernaum simply stems from a lack of interest or

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is an example of a reference to a site that he never visited but copied later from other guidebooks (see Wilkinson 1977: 7). The latter possibility seems likely in light of the passage's dryness and brevity, which contrast with the same author's detailed and lively description of Nazareth:

We traveled on to the city of Nazareth, where many miracles take place. In the synagogue there is kept the book in which the Lord wrote his ABC, and in this synagogue there is the bench on which he sat with the other children. Christians can lift the bench and move it about, but the Jews are completely unable to move it, and cannot drag it outside. The house of Saint Mary is now a basilica, and her clothes are the cause of frequent miracles. The Jewesses of that city are better-looking than any other Jewesses in the whole country. They declare that this is Saint Mary's gift to them, for they also say that she was a relation of theirs. Though there is no love lost between Jews and Christians these women are full of kindness (vv 161-162.5 [from Wilkinson 1977: 79-81]).

No less problematic is Arubas and Talgam's use of Egeria's account, which survives in only one incomplete manuscript (Wilkinson 1981: 7; Mayerson 1996: 61). Nazareth and Capernaum are mentioned in a part of the account that is preserved only in a twelfth century work by Peter the Deacon, a monk and librarian of Monte Cassino (Arubas and Talgam 2014: 244; Wilkinson 1981: 8, 179). John Wilkinson indicates that the reference to Nazareth embedded in Egeria's account seems to come from the twelfth century source: "*Inside the city [Nazareth] the synagogue where the Lord read the book of Isaiah is now a church, but the spring from which Holy Mary used to take water is outside the village*" (Peter the Deacon's Book on the Holy Places T [from Wilkinson, 1981: 193-4; see p. 180 for the use of italics to indicate passages from the twelfth century]). Although Wilkinson's use of Roman letters indicates that the passage about Capernaum 'may come from Egeria', he qualifies that 'Peter, however, has a practice of slipping short passages of one source into longer passages from another, and it is by no means possible to guarantee that all the passages here shown in roman are from Egeria in all their details' (Wilkinson 1981: 180). Indeed, Philip Mayerson has demonstrated that Peter the Deacon's description of Clysma 'is in no way an accurate historical description of the site during the fourth or the fifth century' (1996: 61). This is important because Wilkinson says that the section of Peter's work that includes Clysma preserves many traces of Egeria's style (Wilkinson 1981: 179 including n. 4, referring to section Y; on p. 205 n. 3, he says, 'At this point Egeria's journey to Sinai begins, in the course of which her own manuscript becomes available'). In contrast, Mayerson concludes that most of Peter the Deacon's account of Clysma likely derives not from Egeria but from a sixth century or later traveler (1996: 64). Thus, it is impossible to determine whether the descriptions of Nazareth and Capernaum in Peter the Deacon's work derive from Egeria, and, even if they do, whether they are exact reproductions of the original lost text or additions from later unidentified sources.

Much of Arubas and Talgam's argument hinges on two passages in *Qohelet* (or *Ecclesiastes*) *Rabbah* that refer to the inhabitants of Capernaum as *minim* and sinners. The first passage (1.8) tells the story of Rabbi Joshua's nephew Hanina, who transgressed the Sabbath by riding an ass after being put under a spell by *minim* at Capernaum:

הַנִּינְא בֶן אַחֵי רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ אָזַל לְהֵדָה כֶּפֶר נַחֻם, וְעֶבְדוֹן לִיָּה מִינְאֵי מַלְאָה וְעֵלוֹן יְתִיב רַכִּיב חֲמָרָא בְּשַׁבְּתָא, אָזַל לְגַבְיָהּ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ חֲבִיבִיָּהּ וַיְהִי עָלָיו מִשַׁח וַאֲמִיתָסִי. אָמַר לִיָּה כִּינֹן דְּאִיתְעַר בֶּן חֲמָרָא דִּיהוּא רְשִׁיעָא לִית אַתָּה יְכִיל שְׂרִי בְּאַרְעָא דִּישְׂרָאֵל, נַחַת לִיָּה מִן תַּפְּוֹן לְבָבָל וְדַמּוֹן תַּפְּוֹן בְּשַׁלְמִיָּהּ.

Hanina the son of Rabbi Yehoshua's brother went toward Kefar Nahum [Capernaum], and the heretics [*minim*] cast a spell on him, and they lifted him and placed him on a donkey on Shabbat. He went to [Rabbi] Yehoshua his uncle, and he placed oil on him, and he was cured. He said to him: 'Since the donkey of that wicked one rose against you, you cannot dwell in the Land of Israel' (translation from https://www.sefaria.org/Kohelet_Rabbah.1.8.4?lang=bi; accessed 11/09/2022; see Hirschman 2016: 76-9 [lines 361-4]; Taylor 1993: 25).

In the second passage (7.26), Rabbi Issi of Qisrin, a fourth century sage, provides an exegesis on Eccl 7:26 by citing examples of righteous men and sinners (*minim*). One of these is Hanina, the nephew of Rabbi Joshua, who he contrasts with the sinful people of Capernaum, who are labeled as *minim*:

רַבִּי אִיסִי דְקִיסְרִין פִּתְרַן קְרָיָהּ בְּמִינּוֹת, טוֹב, זֶה רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר וְחוּטָא, זֶה יַעֲקֹב אִישׁ כֶּפֶר נְבוּרְיָא. דְּבַר אַחַה טוֹב, זֶה אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן דְּמוֹ. וְחוּטָא, זֶה יַעֲקֹב אִישׁ כֶּפֶר סָאמָא. דְּבַר אַחַה טוֹב, זֶה חַנְיָא בֶן אַחֵי רַבִּי יְהוֹשֻׁעַ. וְחוּטָא, אֵלּוּ בְנֵי כֶּפֶר נַחֻם. דְּבַר אַחַה טוֹב, זֶה יְהוּדָה בֶּן נְקוּסָא. וְחוּטָא, אֵלּוּ הַמִּינִים..

Rabbi Isi of Caesarea interpreted the verse regarding heresy. 'Good' – this is Rabbi Elazar, 'but a sinner' – this is Yaakov of the village of Nevurya. Alternatively, 'good' – this is Elazar ben Dama, 'but a sinner' – this is Yaakov of the village of Sama. Alternatively, 'good' – this is Hananya, son of Rabbi Yehoshua's brother, 'but a sinner' – these are the residents of the village of Nahum. Alternatively, 'good' – this is Yehuda ben Nekosa, 'but a sinner' – these are the heretics [*minim*] (translation from https://www.sefaria.org/Kohelet_Rabbah.7.26.3?lang=bi [accessed 11/09/2022]. See Kiperwasser 2021: 122-5 [lines 901-5], with a different version of the text; he says that only the first sentence of this passage can be attributed to Rabbi Isi, while the rest was added by the editor).

Arubas and Talgam conclude, 'The parallelism between these two verses suggests that Capernaum was a village of *Minnim*' by the second to fourth centuries, based on the names of the sages mentioned in them (2014: 246). At the same time, they note the contradiction posed by Epiphanius's statement that no pagans, Samaritans, or Christians lived in Capernaum (*Panarion* XXX, 11. 10). They also cannot account for the discovery in the fifth century synagogue at Hammath Gader of an Aramaic inscription dedicated by a Jew from Capernaum named Yose ben Dostai (Arubas and Talgam 2014: 246; see Naveh 1978: 57-60, no. 33).

Citing *Qohelet Rabbah* as a source for *minim* at Capernaum in the fourth century is problematic because it is impossible to prove the association of these traditions with figures who are assumed to have lived in the second and fourth centuries. For example, regarding the first passage (1:8), Arubas and Talgam acknowledge that ‘Judging by the protagonists’ names, this story took place in the 2nd century, *although it may serve to demonstrate the mindset of a later period*’ (2014: 246; my emphasis). In fact, *Qohelet Rabbah* dates to the seventh or eighth century (Arubas and Talgam 2014: 245, date it to the seventh century; Gottlieb and Williams 2021: 43, date it to the eighth century). Reuven Kiperwasser describes the work as ‘an edited composition made up of heterogeneous elements’ mixed with authentic *amoraic* material, ‘making it difficult to disentangle these various strands of the text’ (2021: 276-7). Therefore, it is impossible to determine if the references to *minim* at Capernaum have any basis in an earlier historical reality. This is important because Arubas and Talgam’s argument about *minim* at Capernaum in the fourth century, which they connect to the white limestone synagogue, hinges on the two passages in *Qohelet Rabbah*.

Arubas and Talgam are not the first to argue for the presence of *minim* at Capernaum in the fourth century based on a conflation of these sources. For example, Stephen Goranson notes that ‘three of the four places mentioned by Epiphanius as Joseph’s church-building goals [Sepphoris, Tiberias, and Capernaum] – all had Jewish Christian *minim*, according to the rabbis’ (Goranson 1999: 339; notice that he identifies the *minim* as ‘Jewish-Christian’). However, neither Epiphanius nor Egeria refers to Jewish-Christians at Capernaum. To the contrary, their testimony indicates only Jewish presence (as Arubas and Talgam 2014: 246, note):

Josephus asked nothing of the emperor but this very great favor – permission by imperial rescript to build Christ’s churches in the Jewish towns and villages where no one had ever been able to found churches, since there are no Greeks, Samaritans or Christians among the population. This <rule> of having no gentiles among them is observed especially at Tiberias, Diocaesarea, Sepphoris, Nazareth and Capernaum (*Panarion* 30, 11, 9-10; from Williams 2009: 140).

The assumption that Jewish-Christian *minim* lived at Capernaum in the fourth century is based on the correspondence of references noted by Goranson. Joseph’s choice of Capernaum, Tiberias, and Sepphoris as suitable places for the establishment of churches has suggested to scholars that these communities included ‘Jewish Christians’, who are then identified with the *minim* at Capernaum and Sepphoris mentioned in rabbinic literature (Taylor 1993: 25, notes that rabbinic sources mention *minim* at four places in Galilee: Sepphoris, Kefar Shikhin/Samma, Kefar Naburaya, and Capernaum). Visits by Egeria and the Piacenza Pilgrim to synagogues at Capernaum and Nazareth attest to robust interaction between Jews and Christians and are thought to provide a setting for groups described as ‘Jewish-Christians’ or *minim* due to their deviant beliefs or practices (Arubas and Talgam 2014: 244-5; Taylor 1993: 293).

Arubas and Talgam's claim is a modified version of what Joan Taylor has dubbed 'the Bagatti-Testa hypothesis' because it was developed by the Franciscan scholars Bellarmino Bagatti and Emmanuele Testa. As Taylor explains, Bagatti and Testa 'argue that many Christian holy places are genuine because Jewish-Christians identified and preserved sites which were meaningful in the life of Jesus, from the time of his ministry without interruption until the fourth century. These sites were then appropriated by the mainstream 'Gentile' Church when the emperor Constantine began establishing Christian shrines in Palestine' (1993: 1). In support, advocates of the Bagatti-Testa hypothesis cite references to *minim* in rabbinic literature and to heretical groups such as Ebionites and Nazoraeans in patristic literature (Taylor 1993: 2). Much of the focus has been on the remains of a '*domus ecclesia*' under the octagonal church at Capernaum, which the excavators claim was venerated by Jewish-Christians from the first century CE on as the house of St. Peter, citing graffiti scratched on the walls (see below; Taylor 1993: 276, 284, notes the contradiction that the Jewish-Christians are assumed to be pilgrims, not local residents). This identification is based on the reference in *Qohelet Rabbah* 1.8 to *minim* at Capernaum, who the excavators assume are Jewish-Christians (see Taylor 1993: 276). Taylor, however, demonstrates that the graffiti do not appear to be Jewish-Christian, and argues that the archaeological evidence indicates a fourth century date for this structure, which she proposes is the church constructed by Joseph (1993: 288). She concludes that before the fourth century, Capernaum was an entirely Jewish town: 'If Jewish-Christians continued to dwell at Capernaum past the first century, they have left no traces' (Taylor 1993: 294). As we shall see, archaeological evidence indicates that the *domus ecclesia* dates to the fifth century or later.

As noted above, the literary sources – Epiphanius' *Panarion*, the testimony of Egeria and the Piacenza Pilgrim, and *Qohelet Rabbah* – do not support the assumption that there was a community of *minim* or Jewish-Christians at Capernaum in the fourth century. As the only two urban centers in Roman-Byzantine Galilee, Tiberias and Sepphoris are named in these sources because they had mixed populations (Taylor 1993: 30-1; Miller 1993: 401). Capernaum and Nazareth are singled out because they were Jewish towns that attracted large numbers of Christian pilgrims due to their connections to Jesus. We cannot assume that the references to *minim* in *Qohelet Rabbah* tell us anything more than what the rabbinic editors/redactors of the seventh to eighth century thought. No less important is the lack of consensus among scholars about the definition of *minim* – a term that apparently had different meanings in different contexts and at different times (for a discussion, see, e.g., Goodman 2007: 163-73; Boyarin 2006: 177, notes that "the '*minim*' frequently seem to have understood themselves as perfectly orthodox rabbinic Jews, even as they are represented in rabbinic literature itself"). As Stuart Miller demonstrates, the *minim* mentioned in the two passages in *Qohelet Rabbah* could easily be identified as pagans, not Jewish-Christians (Miller 1993: 383-5

n. 30). Taylor reminds us that, ‘References to *minim* in rabbinic literature are impossible to fit into one neat category . . . *Minut* was anything which deviated from the community norms laid down by the rabbis’ (1993: 28, 30; also see Miller 1993: 401). And, as Shaye Cohen observes,

The rabbis lumped together all those who questioned Rabbinic Judaism. It made no difference to the rabbis whether their opponents were Gentile Christians, Jewish Christians, Gnostics of any variety, pagans, or dissident Jews; all of them, to the exasperation of later scholars, were called *minim*. From the rabbinic perspective they are all the same’ (Cohen 2010: 537; although Boyarin 2006: 222, argues that from the fourth century on, *minut* denoted Christianity rather than a Jewish heresy).

Because the term *minim* does not necessarily denote Jews who adopted Christian beliefs or practices, there is no basis for identifying the *minim* at Capernaum mentioned in literary sources as Jewish-Christians, nor is it possible to determine why the rabbis disapproved of them (Taylor 1993: 25, 276).

The White Limestone Synagogue at Capernaum

The white limestone synagogue at Capernaum was excavated in 1905 by Kohl and Watzinger, who dated it to the late second to early third century based on its architectural style instead of archaeological evidence (e.g., associated pottery and coins) (Fig. 21). P. Gaudenzio Orfali, who conducted excavations at the site in 1921-1926, identified it as the first century synagogue of the centurion mentioned in the Gospel of Luke (Orfali 1922: 84-5). Nevertheless, Kohl and Watzinger’s second to third century date has been widely accepted, and since then other Galilean type synagogues have been dated to the same period based on comparisons with Capernaum. However, since 1968 Italian archaeologists have discovered over 25,000 small bronze coins and large quantities of pottery dating to the fourth and fifth centuries under the paving stones of the synagogue’s hall and adjacent courtyard (Loffreda 1997: 223; also see www.ancientsynagoguecoins.com/synagogue/capernaum). The latest of these finds published so far date to the first half of the sixth century CE, indicating that the synagogue was built centuries later than previously thought.

The discoveries at Capernaum have created an ongoing controversy in the field of ancient synagogue studies. Advocates of the traditional typology associate the construction of Galilean type synagogues including Capernaum with the floruit of the Jewish settlements after the Bar Kokhba Revolt and the period of the Palestinian *tannaim* and early *amoraim*. They argue that Jews could not have constructed such monumental buildings under oppressive Byzantine Christian rule, at a time when later Roman legislation prohibited the construction of new synagogues. However, archaeological evidence compels us to re-evaluate these assumptions.

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Figure 21. The white limestone synagogue at Capernaum

Arubas and Talgam's article represents an attempt to reconcile the archaeological evidence for the dating of the white limestone synagogue at Capernaum – and, by way of extension, other Galilean type synagogues – with historical considerations and art historical (stylistic) criteria. This underlies their long section on 'Stylistic Analysis of the Architectural Decorations', including a separate discussion of the capitals (Arubas and Talgam 2014: 246-61). Citing a study by Roni Amir (2012), Arubas and Talgam identify three stylistic groups in the architectural decoration of the white limestone synagogue (2014: 359-65). However, unlike Amir, they associate these groups not with different craftsmen or workshops but with different chronological stages in the synagogue's construction: 1) a third century building represented by the black basalt 'walls' or foundations; 2) a fourth century renovation after the earthquake of 363; and 3) repairs to the courtyard after the beginning of the fifth century (Arubas and Talgam 2014: 261-2).¹¹ Nevertheless, Arubas and Talgam agree with Amir that the architectural decoration of the white limestone synagogue dates to the third and

¹¹ Arubas and Talgam 2014: 253-9, argue for an early date for the white limestone synagogue at Capernaum based also on stylistic parallels to the synagogue at Chorazin, which, they claim, was destroyed by the earthquake of 306 CE, and rebuilt in the late fourth to early fifth century (also see Tarkhanova 2021: 200). However, Magness 2007 demonstrates that the original phase of construction likely dates no earlier than the third quarter of the fifth century. Rassalle's analysis of the coins supports a late fifth century terminus post quem: see Rassalle 2021: <https://www.ancientsynagoguecoins.com/synagogue/korazin/>

fourth centuries. Despite their claims, dating based on stylistic considerations is not an exact science. For example, Amir mentions ‘a classicist renaissance of sorts’ in the sculpted decoration of sixth century synagogues that revives earlier styles (Amir 2012: 355; I thank Karen Britt for this observation). Furthermore, it often took centuries rather than decades for observable changes to affect styles of art and architecture (as well as pottery), especially in rural areas like the towns and villages of Galilee and the Golan, which tended to be conservative. And, not least important, the distinctions between stylistic differences – and hence, their dating – are subjective. For example, *pace* Amir, Svetlana Tarkhanova dates the friezes of the white limestone synagogue to the late fifth or sixth century, with ‘stylistically earlier’ architectural details representing spolia (Tarkhanova 2021: 213).

The Cobblestone Pavement at Capernaum: the First Century Synagogue of the Centurion?

The author of the Gospel of Luke refers to a synagogue built by a centurion at Capernaum:

After Jesus had finished all his sayings in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum. A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death. When he heard about Jesus, he sent some Jewish elders to him, asking him to come and heal his slave. When they came to Jesus, they appealed to him earnestly, saying, ‘He is worthy of having you do this for him, for he loves our people, and it is he who built our synagogue for us’. (Luke 7:1-5; NRSV)

The multitudes of Christian pilgrims who pour into Capernaum every day come to see the synagogue of the centurion mentioned by Luke, not the later white limestone synagogue. For this reason, the Italian excavators, who are members of the Franciscan Order of the Custody of the Holy Land, have sought to uncover the remains of the synagogue of the centurion. Assuming that Luke’s account is historically accurate, and a synagogue built by a centurion existed at Capernaum in the time of Jesus, what did it look like, and where was it located? The logical place to look would be under the later synagogue, based on a phenomenon known to archaeologists as continuity of cult, in which sites tend to remain sacred over time even if the religious traditions change, as illustrated by Jerusalem’s Temple Mount (Jebusite to Israelite to Jewish to Roman to Muslim) and Caesarea’s Temple Platform (Herodian/Roman to Byzantine Christian to Muslim to Crusader). The phenomenon of continuity of cult might apply to Capernaum if the white limestone synagogue indeed dates to the second to third centuries. In this case, the white limestone synagogue would have immediately followed its predecessor. However, this principle does not work if the white limestone synagogue was built in the sixth century, after a hiatus of hundreds of years. Nevertheless, visitors to Capernaum



Figure 22. Sign pointing to the synagogue of Jesus under the white limestone synagogue at Capernaum

will notice a sign pointing to the synagogue of the time of Jesus by the steps leading up to the white limestone synagogue (Fig. 22). What is the basis for this claim?

The white limestone synagogue sits on an elevated black basalt foundation that is built over earlier houses in the midst of the ancient village. Most of the houses were constructed in the Hellenistic and early Roman periods and were occupied at least until the third to fourth centuries (see below; Loffreda 1982: 290, 311-2; Grey 2014: 47-8). Virgilio Corbo identified three strata in and under the white limestone synagogue, which are as follows from latest to earliest (1982: 314):

Stratum A: the white limestone synagogue (Fig. 23).

Stratum B: the remains of a public building of the first century CE under the walls of the white limestone synagogue, represented by basalt walls (*muro di basalto* = MB) and a related cobblestone pavement (*massciata* A).

Stratum C: private (domestic) houses constructed in the Hellenistic period and demolished by the construction of MB.

MB denotes black basalt walls under the synagogue, at the base of which lies a rough basalt cobblestone pavement of the first century CE (*massciata* A). Corbo identifies MB not as the foundation of the white limestone synagogue but as an

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earlier synagogue structure because their walls are not precisely aligned (Fig. 24). In addition, the foundation of the synagogue's courtyard is constructed differently from and is not bonded with MB. Corbo assigns MB to the early Roman period (first century CE) because it overlies Hellenistic houses but (according to him) predates the synagogue. Because of its size, he concludes that MB and the cobblestone pavement must belong to an earlier public building – apparently a synagogue: ‘Se il MB appartiene ad un edificio più antico, quale edificio potette essere? la sinagoga costruita dal Centurione romano (Lc. 7,5)?’ (1982: 337, 339).

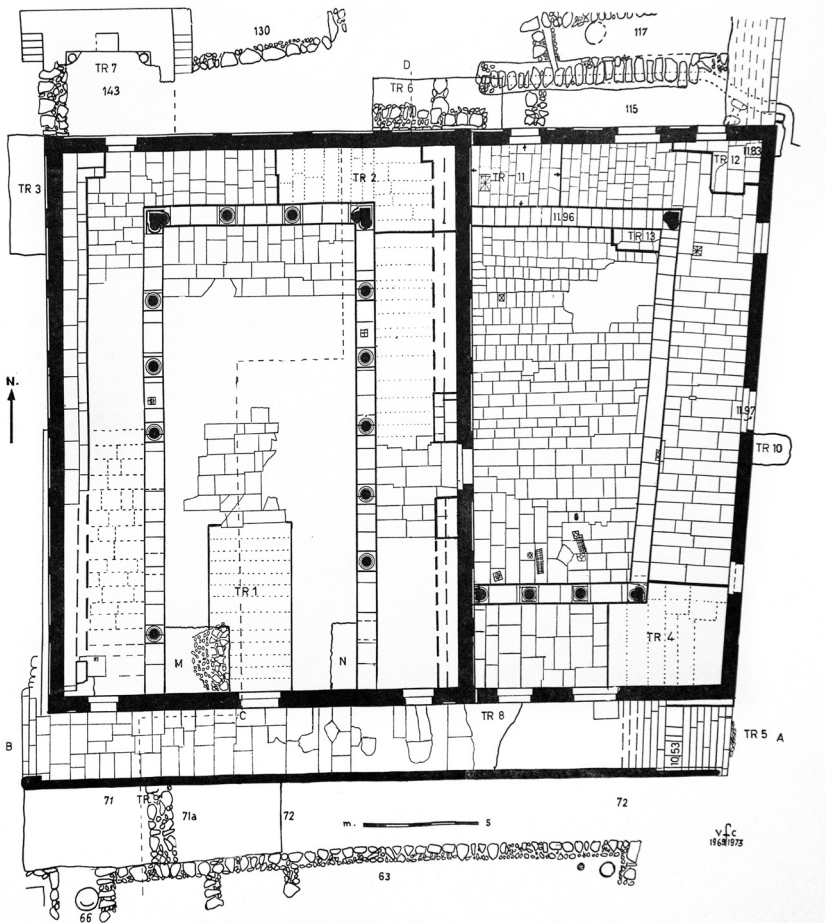


Figure 23. Plan of the Capernaum synagogue (from Corbo 1975: Tav. XI) (reproduced with permission of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum Photographic Archive)



Figure 24. The west wall of the white limestone synagogue at Capernaum sitting on MB, showing the lack of alignment

Stanislao Loffreda has re-evaluated the evidence for a first century synagogue. He defines as follows the three strata in and under the white limestone synagogue (2005: 15):

- Stratum A: layers of mortar that formed the bedding for the stone pavement
- Stratum B: the fill of the synagogue podium
- Stratum C: structures that antedate the white limestone synagogue

Loffreda concludes that MB cannot be associated definitely with the first century floors and pavements (including massciata A) below the white limestone synagogue: 'D'altra parte mi sembra impossibile associare 'il muro di basalto' MB a quei pavimenti e darlo di conseguenza nel primo secolo' (2005: 15).

Loffreda rejects Corbo's association of the cobblestone pavement (massciata A) with MB because MB sits atop the pavement, which continues underneath it (see, e.g., Loffreda 1985: 46; Loffreda 2005: 167 DF 264; 168 DF 265; 172 DF 282). Nevertheless, Loffreda agrees with Corbo that the cobblestone pavement belongs to a first century CE synagogue, noting that although a cobblestone pavement is present below other parts of the synagogue, only in the nave were no walls or other features found associated with it. Since the area of the nave is too

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large to be the room of a private house, Loffreda concludes that it must belong to a public building – that is, a synagogue. According to Loffreda, this explains why the later synagogue was built on this spot (1985: 45-7).

However, it is not clear that the cobblestone pavement was free of overlying walls or other features or installations throughout the entire nave, as the pavement is shown in published photos in only two adjacent loci in the central-eastern part (L824 and L825) (see Loffreda 2005: 172-3 DF 282-6). Furthermore, cobblestones were commonly used at Capernaum to pave the ground floor rooms of houses, which were used for various activities including food preparation, storage, and the stabling of animals. The pavements were a durable, utilitarian, and relatively inexpensive way to protect the floors of these rooms. The inhabitants slept and sometimes dined upstairs on the roof and/or at the second story level (if there was one), away from the dirt and noise on the ground floor. That roofs were commonly accessed is illustrated by Mark's story of Jesus healing a paralytic at Capernaum:

When he [Jesus] returned to Capernaum after some days, it was reported that he was at home. So many gathered around that there was no longer room for them, not even in front of the door; and he was speaking the word to them. Then some people came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. And when they could not bring him to Jesus because of the crowd, they removed the roof above him; and after having dug through it, they let down the mat on which the paralytic lay. (Mk 2:1-4; NRSV)

Similarly, the New Testament says that Jesus' Last Supper took place in the 'upper room' (Mk 14:15; Lk 22.12; Acts 1:13).

Most other first century synagogue buildings were not paved with stones or cobblestones. As Ma'oz observes about the Gamla synagogue:

At first glance it seems strange that the center of the hall lacked paving, thus presenting a shabby appearance in comparison with the surrounding paved and ashlar-built porticoes. However, was this really the case? What, in fact, was the function of stone pavements in that period? If we examine the stone floors in the Herodian buildings at Masada, Jericho, and other sites, and especially the public and private houses in Jerusalem, we find that the most important rooms of the buildings had not stone, but earthen floors. Stone pavements are restricted to the streets and courts of the houses, while in the rooms, mats or elaborately worked woven rugs, none of which, of course, has been preserved, were laid on the dirt floor (for this reason we find mosaic pavements – waterproof stone carpets – in the bathrooms). Open areas called for sturdy floors which could withstand rain and the wear and tear of pedestrian traffic. Moreover, even rough household chores, such as drawing water and washing clothes, were carried out in the courts. Use of stone pavements in this period was therefore dictated by their practicality and strength, and was not a sign of importance or the desire for ornamentation. This also appears to have been the case in the synagogue at Gamla . . . The center of the hall, in contrast, could have been adorned with colorful woven rugs, which lent an air of splendor and beauty to this area (1981: 38).

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The floor of the Migdal synagogue was covered with cobblestones, which apparently were the foundation for mosaics (which were preserved in the corridor but not in the center of the main hall) (see Avshalom-Gorni and Najar 2013). Therefore, one could argue that the cobblestone pavement at Capernaum was the foundation for a mosaic or other floor that is not preserved or was never laid. Even so, the identification of the cobblestone pavement at Capernaum as the floor of a public building is contradicted by the lack of evidence of interior supports. The limited size of wooden beams available for roofing means that a large interior space would need to have been subdivided by posts or columns (as in other first century CE synagogues) or a window wall (a common device at Capernaum). In addition, the pottery found on the pavement in L825 (the eastern part of the synagogue nave) includes first century types that were embedded in the cracks between the cobblestones, indicating, according to Loffreda, that occupation began no later than the first century CE. The pottery points to a domestic context, in contrast to the interiors of public buildings, which generally were kept clean and do not have deposits of cooking pots and other household vessels (for the pottery, see Loffreda 1982: 278 Fig. 3:37-52 [Group G]; the first century types mentioned by Loffreda on p. 290 are nos. 52 and 48-9). Thus, there is no archaeological support for the claim that the cobblestone pavement under the nave of the white limestone synagogue was a large interior space belonging to a public building. This does not rule out the possibility that one of the first century houses under the white limestone was used for gatherings; only that there is no positive evidence to support this claim.

The Gospel evidence for a first century CE synagogue at Capernaum is no less problematic than the archaeology. Because the parallel version of the story in Matthew (8:5-10, 13) lacks any reference to a synagogue at Capernaum built by the centurion, John Kloppenborg argues that it is 'likely that Luke added these verses (7:4-5) to underscore the centurion's piety and humility and to enhance the parallels with the Cornelius story [in Acts 10:22]. But this means that Lk 7:5 ceases to be compelling early evidence of *synagōgē* meaning 'building' (2006: 240). Kloppenborg concludes that Luke's references to synagogue buildings (4:15-30; 7:5) may well reflect his assumptions about synagogues in his time (the late first century or later) rather than any reality in the time of Jesus (2006: 242). Thus, not only is there no evidence that the first century cobblestone pavement under the nave of the white limestone synagogue was the interior of a public building, but there is no reason to assume the historicity of Luke's reference to a synagogue of the centurion dating to the time of Jesus.

MB: A White Elephant Under the White Limestone Synagogue?

As we have seen, Corbo and Loffreda associate the cobblestone pavement with a first century synagogue under the nave of the white limestone synagogue. However, whereas Corbo associates the cobblestone pavement with MB (and therefore reconstructs the first century synagogue along the lines of the white limestone synagogue), Loffreda argues that the cobblestone pavement – and, by way of extension, the first century synagogue – were restricted to the area of the white limestone synagogue’s nave. He identifies MB as the remains of a synagogue that postdates the (supposed) first century synagogue represented by the cobblestone pavement but antedates the white limestone synagogue: ‘Both Fr. Corbo and the writer agree on one important point: the ‘basalt stone wall’ [MB] predates the white synagogue and is better understood as belonging to an earlier synagogue. . . . the ‘basalt stone wall’ constitutes an intermediate stage between the first century synagogue and the white synagogue of the late fourth century A.D.’ (Loffreda 1985: 18-9 [note that here he dates the white limestone synagogue to the late fourth century]; also see Loffreda 2005: 16: ‘il muro di basalto appartiene ad un edificio (sinagogale) anteriore alla sinagoga in pietra’). Arubas and Talgam cite Loffreda in support of their identification of MB as the remains of a third century synagogue, which, they claim, was destroyed in the earthquake of 363 and rebuilt as the white limestone synagogue (Arubas and Talgam, 2014: 261-2; for a response to this claim, which has been made by others, see Loffreda 1997: 231-42).

According to Loffreda, MB was not originally built to serve as the foundation for the white limestone synagogue but instead represents the remains of an earlier synagogue building. He notes that the foundation of the white limestone synagogue’s courtyard (on the east) was built separately of ashlar that abut MB, which is inferior in construction. This indicates that the white limestone synagogue reused as its foundation the walls of a pre-existing building (represented by MB), while the foundation of the courtyard was built *de novo* ‘much later’ (Loffreda 1985: 18-9; Loffreda 2005: 16).

Not only does MB represent the remains of a synagogue that predates the white limestone synagogue, but its construction was never completed, as Loffreda correctly concludes: ‘The ‘basalt wall’ was probably built in view of a synagogue which was never completed’ (Loffreda 1997: 239). However, unlike Loffreda, I identify MB as the incomplete foundation of a synagogue building rather than its superstructure. This is indicated by the fact that although the walls and stylobate of the white limestone synagogue were established on top of MB, MB’s eastern and western stylobates are incomplete, with no evidence that the missing portions were robbed out (see Corbo 1982: 344-5, Tav. 2). As Loffreda states, ‘the ‘basalt stone wall’ is conspicuously discontinuous beneath the stylobate of the prayer hall.

What is worse, the N stylobate of the prayer hall rests upon a shaky fill and in that area the ‘basalt stone wall’ is completely missing’ (1985: 19). Although MB is preserved to the same level throughout, the top of the wall slopes down slightly from north to south following the natural ground level. Therefore, the lowest course of the white limestone synagogue had to be tapered accordingly, using small stones to fill the gap (Loffreda 1997: 225; Loffreda 1985: 19; see, e.g., Loffreda 2005: 126 DF 174, 175; 128 DF 178). Had the construction of MB been completed, and the building destroyed (for example, by an earthquake), dismantled, and/or robbed out, the walls would not be preserved throughout to the same height/level, and there would be signs of a stylobate in the missing portions. Furthermore, even if one attributes the absence of MB under the north stylobate to a later decision by the builders to add a stylobate to this side of the building, MB’s east and west stylobates should be complete. Instead, as Loffreda notes, portions of MB’s east and west stylobates are missing as well. As a result, the entire north stylobate and parts of the east and west stylobates of the white limestone synagogue are founded on the Stratum B fill instead of on MB (see Loffreda 2005: 169, DF 271; 171, DF 274, 276, 277; 173 DF 283).¹²

Identifying MB as the incomplete foundation for a superstructure that was never built explains why there are no traces of a floor; it is because no floor was ever laid. Although MB is over one meter high, any associated floor should have been at the top of it – that is, at the level of the base of the stylobate of the white limestone synagogue. This is indicated by the fact that Wall 104, which antedates MB, is directly overlaid by the west stylobate of the white limestone synagogue, north of the point where the MB stylobate ends (L821). The top of Wall 104 (elevation 11.39) is only half a meter below the level of the pavement of the white limestone synagogue (elevation 11.91) (Loffreda 2005: 16; 168-9 DF 271; Loffreda 1997: 225: ‘In Trench 21, for instance, the walls of stratum A almost reach the height of the mortar of stratum C’. Also see Loffreda 2005: 181 DF 310, L806, which shows the outer northeast corner of the synagogue sitting on one course of MB, which is built directly on top of the walls of earlier houses). As Loffreda notes: ‘If it is in vain to look for the pavement of this intermediate synagogue at the level of the foundation of the ‘basalt wall’ (as Virgilio Corbo suggests), it is just as vain to look for it at the preserved summit of that same ‘basalt wall’ because the pavement never existed. If it had existed at that height, we would have found some trace and above all we would not have so easily found late Roman coins in the whole depth of the podium of the white synagogue’ (1997: 239; also see p. 226: ‘No traces of floor were found between the upper part of level [stratum] B and the mortar of level [stratum] C’). Furthermore, as Matthew Grey (2014: 47) observes, despite its

¹² Loffreda 2005: 172 DF 279 shows the fill of Stratum B under MB in L817 (that is, under the doorway into the east aisle), which makes no sense as MB antedates Stratum B. So, perhaps this is not part of the Stratum B fill?

height, MB has no openings for doors, while the supposed stylobates are too tall and would have obstructed movement.

These factors, as well as the size and layout of MB, indicate that it was intended to be the foundation for a synagogue that was never built – not the white limestone synagogue, as Loffreda correctly notes, but an earlier structure. The foundation (MB) of the intended building was abandoned and left incomplete until a later date, when the white limestone synagogue was constructed on top of it. This accounts for the lack of alignment between MB and the white limestone synagogue (see Loffreda 1985: 49). In other words, MB appears to be a white elephant. MB's date can be established based on the associated pottery and coins. One ceramic assemblage comes from an occupation level on top of the cobblestone pavement (massciata A) in L825, below the eastern part of the synagogue nave (Loffreda 1997: 225-6, notes that the cobblestone pavement in L802, L824, and L825 was well preserved). The latest types in this deposit (Loffreda's Group G) are KH 1e (=Loffreda's TEG 18), of the mid-third to fifth century, and a type of basin dated by Loffreda to 350-550 CE (PIAT 66) (Loffreda 1982: 283 Group G [from Trench 25], 278 Fig. 3: 37-52 [nos. 40-6 are KH 1e]; Loffreda 2008a: 365, Reg. No. 6474 [PIAT 66], from 825.3; 249-50). The same ceramic types were found on top of massciata A elsewhere under the synagogue (see Loffreda 2008a: 360-5). This pottery cannot be dismissed as intrusive (as some scholars have argued for the coins) and is consistent in date with the latest coins from the same contexts (see Loffreda 1997: 240-1; the pottery from L825 Group G includes an almost complete profile of KH 1e – Fig. 3:45 [Reg. no. 6425]).

The coins from Stratum A include fourth century issues found with the pottery on top of massciata A in L825 (Loffreda 1982: 290; however, no coins from Stratum A in L825 are listed in Loffreda 1997: 230). Other late Roman coins from Stratum A contexts under the synagogue include one specimen of 341-346 CE from the upper pavement of a dwelling in L802 (the north aisle), and a coin of Arcadius (383-388 CE) from L817 (the south end of the east aisle) (Loffreda 1997: 230, who notes that a third century CE coin was found under the threshold of a Stratum A dwelling in L817). In addition, coins of Honorius (395-401 CE) and Theodosius (383-388 CE) were found in Stratum A in L818 (under the balcony on the south side of the synagogue) (Loffreda 1997: 230, 233). Thus, the ceramic and numismatic evidence provides a late fourth century *terminus post quem* for the construction of MB and rules out the possibility that it represents a third century or early fourth century synagogue that was destroyed in the earthquake of 363 (*pace* Arubas and Talgam 2014: 261-2, 268. See Loffreda 1982: 290, 311-2; Loffreda 1997: 237, 239).

The coins from Stratum B provide a *terminus ante quem* for MB. A deposit of 236 coins, the latest of which published so far date to 491 CE, was found in the Stratum B fill in L814, which is on the south side of the west aisle, including in the foundation of the west stylobate (Loffreda 1997: 229, says that 'more than one hundred late Roman coins were found in the foundation of the stylobate'; Callegher

2007: 18; also see Magness 2001: 20; Rassalle 2021: <https://ancientsynagoguecoins.com/synagogue/Capernaum> [Fifth Deposit]). Two late fourth to early fifth century coins were found in the foundation of the west stylobate in L821, just north of L814, and another fourth century coin comes from the foundation of the same stylobate in L822 in the nave (Loffreda 1997: 229-30). The discovery of these coins under the stylobate contradicts the claim that the white limestone synagogue was renovated or rebuilt after the earthquake of 363, as the removal of the stylobate would have required dismantling the entire superstructure (see Magness 2001: 20). Another three coins described by Loffreda as ‘late Roman’ were found in Stratum B in L825, on the east side of the synagogue nave (1997: 230). Two coins dating to 341-346 and 352-360 were found in Stratum B in L804 (the courtyard), at a depth of 1.25 m below the white limestone synagogue pavement, and a coin of 383-395 was found 1 m below the synagogue pavement in L818 (the porch) (Loffreda 1972: 14).

The coins from Stratum B in L814 and L825 provide a late fifth century *terminus ante quem* for MB. Therefore, MB must date between ca. 400-500 CE. The absence of imported Late Roman Red Wares and balanceolate oil lamps from the deposits on top of massiciata A suggests that the houses below the synagogue went out of use, and MB was constructed, around or shortly after 400 CE (for the pottery from these deposits, see Loffreda 2008a: 359-65. For balanceolate oil lamps [=Loffreda’s LUC Type 5], see Loffreda 2008a: 50-1; 2008b: 17-8). The white limestone synagogue was erected on top of MB approximately a century later (see below).

According to Arubas and Talgam (2014: 245, 261), the construction of the foundation of the east courtyard in ashlar that abut MB indicates it is a later addition to the white limestone synagogue. However, although the courtyard is later than MB, it is contemporary with the white limestone synagogue, as indicated by the continuous course of ashlar extending from the synagogue to the courtyard immediately above the foundation level (that is, above the seam between MB and the foundation of the courtyard) (see, e.g., Corbo 1972: 213 Fig. 7A; 218-9; Loffreda 2005: 175 DF 290 [the south wall]). Arubas and Talgam (2014: 161) say that the addition of the eastern courtyard concealed or eliminated some of the pilasters from the synagogue’s east wall, but the plans show pilasters along the entire east wall of the synagogue (facing the courtyard) as well as running along the entire length of the north wall of the synagogue and courtyard. As Loffreda observes,

the synagogue not only is a project which was a single unit from the beginning, but was also effectively ‘inaugurated’ after all its component parts were already completed: prayer room, eastern courtyard, side-room on the north, entrance balcony on the south. In other words it is inconceivable that there was a prayer room already functioning before the construction of the eastern courtyard and – obviously – before the construction of the entrance balcony (1997: 232)

The porch was constructed most probably after the main walls of the prayer hall and of the courtyard; for example the southeastern stairway postulates the existence

[sic!] of the courtyard. . . . The doorways leading to the prayer hall from the courtyard and from the porch clearly mean that both the courtyard and the porch belong to the original plan . . . (1972: 26-7).

Although the foundations of the synagogue and courtyard were constructed independently, the coins found under their pavements indicate they are contemporary (Loffreda 2005: 16).

It is not clear why the construction of MB stopped, although the absence of cracks and sinking in MB suggests it was not due to an earthquake. One possibility is that funding ran out – a well-known phenomenon in antiquity. For example, the construction of the temple of Olympian Zeus in Athens was begun by the Peisistratids in the sixth century BCE and continued by Antiochus IV Epiphanes in the second century BCE but was only completed in the second century CE by Hadrian (Dinsmoor 1975: 280-1). Another example is the temple of Apollo at Didyma – one of the great white elephants of classical antiquity – on which work continued intermittently over the course of four centuries and ultimately was left unfinished (Dinsmoor 1975: 229). Of course, white elephants are not limited to antiquity, as illustrated by the new headquarters of the Israel Antiquities Authority in Jerusalem ('The Jay and Jeanie Schottenstein National Campus for the Archaeology of Israel'), much of which was constructed between 2010-2014 but languished for years after funding ran out, and was only completed in 2022 (see https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/national-campus-for-the-archaeology-of-israel-set-to-be-completed-by-end-2022/; accessed 30 July 2023). Another example is Tel Aviv's 'new' central bus station, on which work commenced in 1967 but which was not opened until 1993. In the meantime, the building housing the bus station has deteriorated and much of it is abandoned, while plans to move it to another part of the city have been stymied (https://www.abandonedspaces.com/public/tel-aviv-bus-station.html?D6c=1&D_4_6cALL=1&D_4_6_10cALL=1&A5c=1; <https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-regev-ditches-tel-aviv-central-bus-station-relocation-plan-1001447841>; both accessed 30 July 2023).

The Date of the White Limestone Synagogue

In addition to the coins from the Stratum B fill, 23,461 coins were found in and under the mortar bedding for the limestone pavement (Stratum C) (Loffreda 1997: 228). Stratum C consists of a ca. 0.30 m thick layer of whitish mortar, which was laid atop a thin layer of white building chips that overlay and leveled the basalt stone block fill of Stratum B. The chips indicate that the stones used to construct the white limestone synagogue were cut and trimmed on the spot (Loffreda 1997: 225, 228; Loffreda 1972: 11-2). L818 (the balcony) was covered by a two-meter thick layer of limestone chips instead of mortar bedding (Loffreda 1997: 223, 225).

In places where the pavement was missing, the mortar bedding was still intact and preserved the impressions of the flagstones (Loffreda 1997: 226). In L812 (the northeast corner of the courtyard), there were two layers of mortar, one above the other, with coins spread on top of the upper layer (below the flagstones) and between the two layers. Approximately 1400 coins were found in the latter context, between the two mortar layers (Loffreda 1997: 227). 2922 coins were found in Stratum C in L814, in addition to the 236 coins from Stratum B in the same locus (Callegher 2007: 1; Loffreda 1997: 226). The largest concentration of coins comes from Stratum C in L812, where 20,323 specimens were found (Loffreda 1997: 227).

Although only a fraction of the coins from the synagogue has been identified, the latest specimens published so far date to the latter part of the fifth century and the first half of the sixth century. From Stratum C contexts, these include issues of Leo I (462-474) and Marcian (450-457) from L814 (western aisle of main hall), L818 (balcony) and L812 (courtyard); coins dating to Zeno's second reign (476-491) from L812 and L814; and coins of Honorius (395-401 CE) and Theodosius (383-388 CE) from Stratum A in L818 (Loffreda 1997: 230, 233, who also mentions coins of Leo and Marcian from the mortar bedding of the side benches and of the stone pavement in the 'prayer room'; Arslan 1997: 253 Tab. III; 261 Tab. VI; 320-2, nos. 1680-1912/1913. For L814 and L818, see also Rassalle's Fifth and Sixth Deposits [2021]). The coins from L812 include imitation and proto-Vandelic nummi: a nummus of Gunthamund (484-496), one probably of Masuna (ca. 508-512), and small bronze coins now dated to the reign of Justinian (Callegher 2016: 166, who disregards the Justinianic coins and dates the deposit's closure to ca. 508-512 CE, instead of citing this as a *terminus post quem*. Also see Rassalle 2021: n. 858). A number of imitation Axumite coins were also found in L812, which, according to Ermanno Arslan, were in circulation from the third quarter of the fifth century to the third quarter of the sixth century (Arslan 1996: 313-4; Magness 2001: 18-23; Rassalle's Seventh Deposit [2021]).

Loffreda notes that although the coins found under the pavement of the main hall and courtyard include late fifth century issues, the pottery from the fills under the courtyard includes types of mid-fifth century or later date that are not represented in the main hall (2005: 16; Loffreda 1997: 241). The latest types from Stratum C contexts in the main hall are from L814: CRS 1 (ca. 370/380 to the third quarter of the fifth century) and balanceolate oil lamps (Loffreda 2008a: 362, Reg. Nos. 2718, 2722 [CRS 1], 2725-2727 [LUC 5]; there is also an LRC base from this context [Reg. No. 2719]). The Stratum B fill in L818 (the balcony) yielded ARS 61A (ca. 325-400/420) and a balanceolate oil lamp (Loffreda 2008a: 364, Reg. Nos. 5839 [illustrated in Loffreda 1982: 308 Fig. 21:6], 5842).

The largest quantity of imported fine wares was found with other pottery fragments in L823 (the north central part of the courtyard), above and below discontinuous patches of mortar immediately under the stone pavement, which

appears to be where the mortar for the bedding was prepared. Among them are numerous examples of LRC 3, dated from the mid-fifth to mid-sixth century, and CRS 2, dated from the third quarter of the fifth century to the mid-sixth century (Loffreda: 1979; Loffreda 2008a: 362). In contrast, relatively few coins were found in L823 (Loffreda 1997: 228). Could the large numbers of coins in L812 and L814, at opposite corners of the complex and just inside doorways, compared with the relatively few coins from the synagogue nave and the center of the courtyard (L823) indicate that these are apotropaic deposits to protect liminal parts of the building? LRC 3 and CRS 2 are also represented in Stratum C in L812 (L812.2; Loffreda 2008a: 365 Reg. Nos. 6597-8) and in Stratum B in L811 on the north side of the courtyard (L811.2; Loffreda 2008a: 361 Reg. No. 2195). The differences in the pottery types found in the main hall versus the courtyard suggest that these fragments were imported with fills from dumps in other parts of the village at the time of the synagogue's construction.

The latest coins and pottery published so far date the construction of the white limestone synagogue (including the courtyard) to the first half of the sixth century. In fact, over twenty-five years ago Loffreda concluded similarly that the construction of the white limestone synagogue was completed in the last quarter of the fifth century (1997: 232-3, 241). That said, other finds leave open the possibility of an even later date. These include pottery from L804.2 + 804.3, which are Stratum B fills in the southeast corner of the courtyard: ARS 58 and 59, CRS 1, and CRS 9B (ca. 580/600 to the end of the seventh century) (for the CRS 9, which is from L804.2, see Loffreda 2008a: 360 Reg. No. 1638, illustrated in Loffreda 1982: 308 Fig. 21: 12). Other possible evidence for a late date comes from the benches in the main hall, which the excavators note are contemporary with the synagogue's construction; although the inner walls of the synagogue were plastered before the benches were added, the stone pavement and its mortar bedding stop at the line of the foundation of the benches instead of continuing to the walls (Loffreda 1972: 26-7). Five gold coins were discovered on 'the top face of the foundations' of the benches on the east side of the main hall, near the doorway leading to the courtyard (Loffreda 1972: 16). Two are issues of Heraclius (one dating to 616-625 and the other to 629-631), and the other three are issues of Constantius II dating to 651-654, 661-663, and 641-668 (Callegher 1997: 330-1). The last piece of evidence is Corbo's reference to late pottery types found embedded in the stucco that decorated the synagogue, including dark-surfaced, white painted storage jars, deep casseroles with large horizontal handles, and a fragment of an oil lamp decorated in relief with a cross (Corbo 1972: 216). These finds leave open the possibility that the white limestone synagogue dates to the second half of the sixth century or later. If the CRS 9 fragment is dismissed as intrusive (despite coming from Stratum B), the gold coins under the benches and the pottery from the stucco would attest to the synagogue's continued use and possible refurbishment in the second half of the sixth and seventh centuries (*pace* Loffreda 1997: 235, who says the gold

coins were hidden after the synagogue was already abandoned. For other possible evidence of the continued use of the synagogue into the early Islamic period, see Magness 2001: 36).

*The Domus Ecclesia, Sacred Precinct (Insula Sacra),
and Octagonal Church*

The question of dating is central to understanding the relationship between the white limestone synagogue and the octagonal church, which are only about twenty-five meters apart (Fig. 25) (see Arubas and Talgam 2014: 263). The latter was excavated in 1921 by Orfali, who devoted only seven out of 112 pages of his



Figure 25. Aerial view of the Capernaum synagogue (right foreground) and octagonal church/insula sacra (rear left) (from Strange and Shanks 1982: 26-7) (photo by Garo Nabaldian; reproduced with permission of Hovsep Garo Nabaldian)

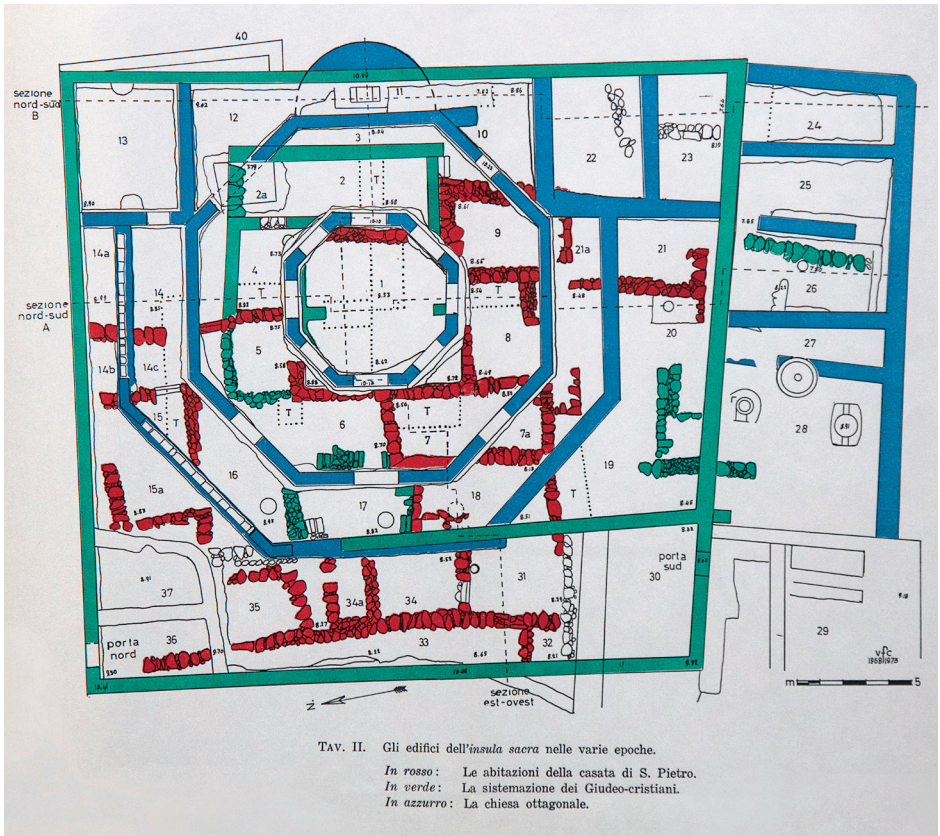


Plate 1. Plan of buildings in the insula sacra at Capernaum: the octagonal church (in blue); the domus ecclesiae (in green); and the house venerated as St. Peter's (in red) (from Corbo 1975: Tav. II) (reproduced with permission of the Studium Biblicum Franciscanum Photographic Archive)

publication to the church, whereas the rest of the volume focuses on the synagogue, reflecting his interest in the time of Jesus (the synagogue of the centurion) rather than the early Christian period (Orfali 1922: 103-9). The church consists of three concentric octagons, the walls of which were preserved only to the level immediately above the foundations, and spolia were incorporated throughout the structure. In excavations conducted in 1968, Corbo and Loffreda identified a late Roman structure below the floor level of the octagonal building as a Judeo-Christian *domus ecclesia* (house church), which was installed in a Hellenistic-early Roman house venerated as belonging to St. Peter (although Taylor 1993: 275, correctly observes that it is misleading to refer to this structure as a *domus ecclesia* in the absence of any liturgical furniture or installations, I use the term in this discussion). The house was part of a quarter dubbed the *insula sacra* (sacred quarter = Insula 1) by the excavators (Plate 1). According to the excavators, a series of beaten lime floors and graffiti incised on the plaster of the walls indicate that one room in the house (the *sala venerata* = Room 1) was venerated from the first century CE on (Corbo 1975: 106; for a rebuttal, see Taylor 1993: 278-84). In the fourth century, a central arch was constructed spanning the room, a new plaster floor painted with bright colors (the polychrome floor) was laid, and the walls were painted. An atrium was added to the east, and the entire house was enclosed within a perimeter wall (Corbo 1975: 26-74; Loffreda 1993: 295). The central octagon of the church was built over the walls of Room 1 (Loffreda 1993: 295). Because Corbo and Loffreda identify the octagonal building as the ‘basilica’ mentioned by the Piacenza Pilgrim, they assume it must have been built before ca. 570 but after the late fourth century, when, they believe, Egeria refers to the *domus ecclesia*: ‘The house of the prince of Apostles [Peter] was changed into a church; the wall however, (of that house) are still standing as they were (originally)’ (from Loffreda 1993: 29; Corbo 1975: 54, 71-2, 105). Based on pottery and coins found below the floor level of the octagonal church and in the foundations, Corbo and Loffreda date its construction to close to the mid-fifth century, although in more recent publications they cite a date in the second half of the fifth century (Corbo 1975: 55-6; Loffreda 1993: 295). The associated pottery suggests that the baptistery was added not long after the church was constructed (Corbo 1975: 56).

Corbo and Loffreda date the *domus ecclesia* to close to the mid-fourth century based on the pottery and coins associated with its construction. This structure was in use until the octagonal church was built over it (Corbo 1975: 73-4, 98). However, the associated ceramic assemblages indicate a later date for both the *domus ecclesia* and the octagonal church. These include finds sealed by the polychrome plaster floor (Corbo 1975: 96-7; this context is classified as L1.4 in Loffreda 2008a: 375 and Loffreda 2008b: 255-6): a coin of Constans II (341-343) and a nearly complete ARS 61B bowl, dated to 400-450 (see Hayes 1972: 100-7). There is also a nearly complete balanceolate oil lamp (Corbo 1975: 73; Loffreda 1974: 114-6 and Fig. 38:14-25; the ARS 61 is Fig. 38:14 and the oil lamp is Fig. 38:25). The same plate

is reproduced in Loffreda 2008b: 256, DG 282, with another ARS 61 [Type A] bowl [36-w4792], where the assemblage is dated to the late fourth century). In addition, the assemblage includes dark-surfaced, white painted storage jars, a type that did not appear before the fifth century (see Avissar 1996: 147-9, Type 4. For the jars, see Corbo 1975: 73; Loffreda 1974: 116; the jars are Loffreda's Class B, which he dates from the mid-fourth century on [Loffreda 1974: 43-4, 144-5]).

A second ceramic assemblage cited by Corbo comes from the atrium of the *domus ecclesia* (L2), where the bedding for the latest beaten lime floor, which is contemporary with the polychrome floor, yielded a stamped ARS fragment (Corbo 1975: 73; Loffreda 1974: 80 Fig. 25:10 [no. 5121]).¹³ Corbo and Loffreda also cite an assemblage from floor C in the *domus ecclesia*, which was laid against the enclosure wall (L10). Therefore, the pottery found under the floor is roughly contemporary with the wall's construction (Corbo 1975: 73; Loffreda 1974: 118 and 119 Fig. 40:1-9). It includes ARS 67 (Loffreda 1974: Fig. 40:1), dated to 360-470 and CRS 1, dated from 370/380 to the third quarter of fifth century. According to the excavators, floor C presupposes the existence of the wall of the *insula sacra*, the construction of which they date with a high degree of probability to the first half of the fourth century, and no later than 330 CE (Corbo 1975: 74). The pottery from this context is also illustrated in Loffreda 2008b: 260 DG 291, where it is labeled 'Area 1.L10.4. Below the plaster floor. Central date in the early Byzantine period'. DG 291 appears to come from L10.4, and therefore does not include the ARS 67 (w3796), which in Loffreda 2008a: 372, is labeled as coming from L10.5, together with CRS 1 (w3797). However, other examples of CRS 1 are illustrated in Loffreda 2008b: 260, DG 291 (nos. 19-w3801, 20-w3835). More importantly, there is also CRS 9A from L10.4, which dates to ca. 550-600 (DG 291-w3806; also listed in Loffreda 2008a: 372).

Pottery from the destruction level of the *domus ecclesia* (L3.2) is illustrated in Loffreda 1974: 119 Fig. 40:10-3, and is described on p. 120, where the only type of 'Terra Sigillata' (TS in Loffreda's terminology = LRRW) represented is said to be TS 5 (CRS 1) (Fig. 40:13; also see Corbo 1975: 101-2). Elsewhere, however, Loffreda lists CRS 9 from L3.2 (w851) (2008a: 369). In L31, on the south side of the *domus ecclesia*, the occupation level on top of the latest in a series of floors (massciata A) yielded a coin of Theodosius II (402-408) (L31.3), and an oil lamp of fifth to early sixth century date (Loffreda 2008a: 373 no. w4446, illustrated in Loffreda 2008b: 25, DG 14 no. 11 [LUC 7.4]). This type is similar to Hadad 2002: 56-61 [Types 22-23]). According to Loffreda 1974: 111, the latest Late Roman Red Ware types from this context are TS 2 (LRC 1) and TS 5 (CRS 1). Elsewhere,

¹³ In Loffreda 2008a: 375, the ARS fragment is said to come from L2.3. The same locus (L2.3) yielded CRS 9 (Loffreda 2008a: 369, Reg. No. w1084, illustrated in Loffreda 2008b: 345, DG 424 no. 52, which is labeled 'fill under the mosaics of the octagonal church').

however, Loffreda lists CRS 9 from L31.3 (w4438) (2008a: 373). In L4 on the east side of the *domus ecclesia*, a floor (massciata A) with a tabun was sealed by a beaten lime floor (L4.2), which yielded a coin of Constans II (351-361) (Loffreda 1974: 112-3). The pottery from this context includes ARS 91C, dated ca. 530-600+, and a north Syrian mortarium with a squared, slightly angled rim that indicates a late fifth to sixth century date (for the ARS 91C, see Loffreda 2008a: 368 Reg. Nos. w367 and w368; Loffreda 2008b: 44, DG 37 Reg. Nos. 1, 3; 345, DG 424 Reg. No. 44 [w368]; DG 424 is labeled 'fill under the mosaics of the octagonal church'. For the north Syrian mortarium, see Loffreda 2008b: 344, DG 424 Reg. No. 31 [w417]. For the dating of this type, see Mills and Reynolds 2014: 134; 141 Fig. 7; Gendelman 2021: 9; 8 Fig. 3:10 [Stratum III]; 17-8; 16 Fig. 6:7-8).

The latest level associated with the *domus ecclesia* was covered by fills overlaid by the mosaic floor of the octagonal church. Pottery from the fills sealed by the mosaic floor in the central octagon (L1.2 + L1.3) included dark-surfaced, white painted storage jars (Class B), LRC 1, CRS 1, ARS 67, and CRS 9A (Loffreda 1974: 113, 115 Fig. 38: 1-13; Loffreda 2008b: 255 DG 281 [labeled 'not later than 500 CE']; Loffreda 2008a: 367 nos. w1, w2, w5, w6, w8, w10, w11, w66; 369 nos. w902, w903, w904, w912). In L3.2, fills under the mosaic floor yielded ARS 58, CRS 1, and CRS 9A (Loffreda 1974: 120, 119 Fig. 40: 10-7; Loffreda 2008a: 369 Reg. Nos. w851, w852; 373 Reg. No. w4166). Loffreda illustrates pottery from various loci under the mosaics of the octagonal church in Area 1 (with a few possible later intrusions) (2008b: 344-5, DG 424). The corpus includes pieces from L14.2, in the outer west octagon of the church, among which are ARS 91C, LRC 2, LRC 3, and CRS 2 (Loffreda 2008b: 344-5 DG 424, Reg. Nos. w125, w126, w127, w134; also see Loffreda 2008a: 367, w131 [LRC 3], w132, [LRC 1], w135 [ARS 50], w140 [ARS 58], w181 [LRC 1], w195 [CRS 1]). In L17.2, on the south side of the octagonal church, the pottery from fills under the mosaic floor included CRS 7 and CRS 9 (Loffreda 2008b: 345 DG 424, 50-w656 [CRS 7], 51-w658 [CRS 9]; Loffreda 2008a: 368, Reg. Nos. w652 [ARS 58], w653 [CRS 1], w656 [CRS 7], w658 [CRS 9], w676 [ARS 59], w677 [CRS 1]).

The evidence reviewed here indicates that the *domus ecclesia* dates to the fifth century or later (depending on whether the examples of CRS 9 are intrusive) and was in use through the sixth century. The latest ceramic types from the final occupation/destruction level of the *domus ecclesia* as well as the pottery from fills sealed by the mosaic floor indicate a *terminus post quem* of ca. 600 for the construction of the octagonal church. This means that either the octagonal church was constructed 50-75 years after the white limestone synagogue (if the synagogue dates to the first half of the sixth century), or both structures are roughly contemporary (if the synagogue dates to the second half of the sixth century or later). The relatively large number of CRS 9 and other late types such as ARS 91 found under the octagonal church compared to the synagogue make it likely that the synagogue predates the church. The *domus ecclesia* might be roughly contemporary with MB

(ca. 400-500 CE) but could not have been built by Joseph of Tiberias and did not exist at the time of Egeria's visit.

Similarly, the evidence reviewed here rules out the possibility that the octagonal church is the 'basilica' mentioned by the Piacenza Pilgrim: 'Also we came to Capernaum, and went into the house of Blessed Peter, which is now a basilica' (v 163.7; from Wilkinson 1977: 81). As noted above, early Christians used the term 'basilica' to denote church buildings with different types of plans, in which case the pilgrim could be referring to the *domus ecclesia*, or perhaps the pilgrim never visited Capernaum but copied this reference from another source. Clearly, the dating and interpretation of the remains has been influenced by problematic understandings of these literary sources as well as by a misuse of the archaeological evidence. For example, Arubas and Talgam cite the discovery of LRRW with stamped crosses throughout Capernaum as evidence of the supposed Christianization of the inhabitants by the sixth century (2014: 269). However, LRRW stamped with crosses are common finds at other late antique Jewish sites. At Ein Gedi, for example, imported bowls stamped with crosses and oil lamps with crosses on the nozzle were discovered around the village, including from a deposit inside the synagogue's Torah ark, showing that these vessels were used by Jews and therefore cannot be taken as an indicator of Christian presence (see de Vincenz 2007: 325; Porath 2021: 148 Fig. 10.7:4; 149 Figs. 10.7:10, 10.8:1; 150 Fig. 10.9).

To summarize: around or shortly after 400 CE, the inhabitants of Capernaum built MB, apparently as the foundation for a synagogue, the construction of which was left uncompleted. Around the same time or perhaps later in the fifth century, the *domus ecclesia* and perimeter wall were constructed to enshrine the traditional house of St. Peter. In the first half of the sixth century, the white limestone synagogue was built on top of MB, with the addition of a courtyard to the east and access provided by way of a porch to the south. Around or after 600 CE, the octagonal church was erected over the *domus ecclesia*, putting it out of use. It is impossible to ascertain how long the white limestone synagogue and octagonal church remained in use, although there is evidence of continued activity in the synagogue through the seventh century and perhaps later.

Conclusion

At first glance, the lack of consensus among archaeologists concerning the dating of ancient synagogue buildings appears to be an arcane academic debate. After all, why should it matter whether Galilean type synagogues date to the second and third centuries or the fourth to sixth centuries? But a number of larger issues are at stake. On the one hand, the dating of Galilean type synagogues to the second to third centuries supports the view that Jewish settlement in Galilee flourished in the wake of the Bar Kokhba Revolt, while the construction of these buildings

corresponds to the period of the Mishnah and Palestinian Talmud. Because, according to this view, Christian rule was oppressive to Jews, synagogues of the fourth to sixth centuries were more modest structures that downplayed or concealed their purpose, or were constructed as monumental buildings by Jewish communities as an expression of ‘group identity’ (for the latter view, see Leibner 2009a: 403-4). Dating Galilean type synagogues to the second and third centuries would also mean that Jews, not Christians, first adopted and adapted Roman basilicas for use as religious buildings for congregational prayer and worship. As this review indicates, the ideological underpinnings of this view are rooted in the early Zionist movement, constructing an historical narrative that presents flourishing Jewish settlement in Galilee during the period of the Mishnah and Palestinian *amoraim* followed by a decline under supposedly oppressive later Roman and Byzantine Christian rule. This historical picture – which originally was generated by dating Galilean type synagogues to the second and third centuries – is now used as an argument against the dating of these buildings to the fourth to sixth centuries. In other words, the argument is entirely circular: it began with the assumption that these buildings date to the second and third centuries based on stylistic considerations, and this dating is then cited as evidence that Jewish settlement flourished in Galilee in the wake of the Bar Kokhba Revolt. Epigraphic and archaeological evidence indicating that Galilean type synagogues date to the fourth to sixth centuries is rejected as inconsistent with this historical picture and stylistic considerations.

Although Israeli archaeologists are no more monolithic in their opinions than any other group of scholars, Sukenik’s influence continues to dominate, despite modifications to the traditional view. These modifications include raising the chronology of Galilean type synagogues from the original late second to early third century date to a third to early fourth century date (see, e.g., Hachlili 2013: 607). In addition, whereas previous generations of Israeli archaeologists assigned all Galilean type synagogues to the second and third (or early fourth) centuries, some now acknowledge that many of these buildings date to the fourth to sixth centuries, even if they claim that earlier examples exist (see, e.g., Levine 2005: 319-22).

In my opinion, the ongoing attempts by some Israeli archaeologists to discover Galilean type synagogues and other synagogue buildings of the second to third centuries are motivated at least in part by nationalistic and religious concerns that are an outgrowth of the original Zionist agenda. This is apparent in claims that architectural remains beneath fourth to sixth century synagogues are earlier synagogues (even if there is no corroborating evidence), and that spolia incorporated in Galilean type synagogues originated in earlier synagogue buildings. Admittedly, the assumption that remains under a later synagogue must represent an earlier synagogue is not characteristic only of Israeli or Jewish archaeologists, nor is it limited to buildings in ancient Palestine, as illustrated by the work of the Harvard-Cornell Sardis Expedition (for an evaluation of the Sardis synagogue with references, see Magness 2005b). In Israel, however, the focus is on finding material

evidence that Jewish communities flourished in the wake of the Bar Kokhba Revolt – corresponding to the period of the Mishnah and the Palestinian *amoraim* – but suffered and declined from the fourth century on under (supposedly) oppressive Christian rule. This focus is evident in a recent article describing the excavation of an ancient synagogue and village at Majduliyya in the Golan: ‘The evidence for the site’s chronology is consistent with settlement history in the Golan as suggested by Ben David, in that there was a continuation of Jewish settlement in the Golan following the First Jewish Revolt. The synagogue at Majduliyya, which was built sometime around the first century CE (and possibly earlier) and continued in use until the late third century CE, is the first clear evidence in rural Golan for a public structure in the second–third centuries’ (Osband and Arubas 2020: 209). In other words, not only do the excavators claim that Majduliyya was inhabited continuously from the first through third centuries, but the discovery of a synagogue building confirms the village was Jewish.

Dating Galilean type synagogues to the fourth to sixth centuries does not mean that Jewish settlement did not flourish in the second and third centuries. Instead, this conclusion suggests that synagogues of this period were relatively modest structures that are difficult to identify in the archaeological record, similar to pre-70 CE synagogues. But the dating of these buildings to the fourth to sixth centuries has other important ramifications. First, it raises the possibility that Christians, not Jews, were the first to adopt and adapt Roman basilicas as religious buildings for the purposes of congregational prayer and worship – or, that both groups adopted and adapted basilicas at roughly the same time. Second, and more important, dating Galilean type synagogues to the fourth to sixth centuries contradicts the narrative that Jews suffered under supposedly oppressive Christian rule and felt compelled to conceal their religious gatherings in modest buildings that were undecorated on the exterior. Indeed, the Galilean type synagogue at Huqoq, which was constructed ca. 400, attests to a high level of prosperity in this village and demonstrates that Jews could and did build monumental, richly decorated congregational halls of prayer and worship while living under Christian rule. Although the mosaic program at Huqoq is complex and undoubtedly reflects multiple themes, many of the panels point to an anticipation of God’s salvation and the overthrow of the current world order by illustrating biblical precedent. These panels include scenes of Samson’s exploits; Pharaoh’s soldiers being swallowed by giant fish in the Red Sea; the depiction of Deborah and Barak, and Yael driving a stake through Sisera’s head; Isaiah’s vision of the peaceable kingdom (Isa 11:6); the three youths (Hanania, Mishael, and Azaria) of Daniel’s vision (Dan 3); and the four beasts of Daniel 7 (see Magness et al. 2018; Britt and Boustan 2021). Although the Huqoq synagogue is not evidence that all Galilean type synagogues date to the fourth to sixth centuries, it does indicate that Galilean type synagogues cannot be assumed to date to the second and third centuries based solely on stylistic considerations.

CAPERNAUM

To conclude: Leibner, and Corbo and Loffreda deserve tremendous credit for publishing the final reports on their excavations at Khirbet Wadi Hamam and Capernaum, respectively, in a full and timely manner, thereby making the data accessible to others. The analysis of these reports presented here demonstrates that archaeological fieldwork does not yield absolute, objective results but instead is an interpretive process incorporating assumptions and decisions made by the excavator(s). And, finally, the publication of a final excavation report should not mark the end of the interpretive process but instead provides a basis for continued scholarly analysis and dialogue.

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