THE ANCIENT SYNAGOGUE OF SARDIS

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Fig. 1. *View of the Roman Synagogue at Sardis, looking west: Forecourt in foreground.*

Prefatory Note

The discovery at Sardis of the largest of all early synagogues preserved is a momentous event. The present situation of the work calls for enlisting additional interest and help. Professor David Gordon Mitten (Harvard University) has conducted since 1962 the excavation of the synagogue with great enthusiasm and skill. We hope that his brief report will convey something of the great potential of the new discovery and thus assist the effort of the special interdenominational Committee formed to insure the successful completion of the work and the preservation of the venerable find.

The author and the committee acknowledge gratefully the kindness of Professor Joseph Gutmann, Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, who read and improved the manuscript.

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FROM THE TIME of the Babylonian Captivity, on through the Roman Diaspora and after, numbers of Jewish families from Israel settled in the ports and capital cities of the Mediterranean world. There they flourished, their institutions and worship generally safeguarded by imperial decrees, and their initiative and industry contributing in no small measure to the prosperity of the urban centers in which they lived. Although retaining their loyalty to the temple at Jerusalem and in many cases sending annual payments for its upkeep until its destruction in 70 A.D. by the Romans, these independent Jewish communities increasingly turned to the synagogue, a relatively new institution that came into being in the

late Hellenistic period, as the focus of their cultural life as well as a house of worship and prayer. Josephus and other writers of this time tell us much about life in these communities and their involvement with Greco-Roman culture. Until recently, however, we had virtually no important example of a major synagogue of the early Roman empire outside of Palestine. Now we have two: the synagogue at Ostia, the port of Rome, and that of Sardis, a major inland trading center and administrative city of Roman Asia Minor.

The Jewish community at Sardis, located some sixty miles inland by highway from Izmir on the Old Royal Road, is thought by some scholars to have already been in existence during the time of the Persian Empire (*Sefarad* in Obadaiah 20). Under Julius Caesar and the emperor Augustus, Roman governors ordered the city officials of Sardis not to interfere with the Jewish right to worship according to the customs of their fathers. (Josephus, 14:235, 259-261). No one, however, could have foreseen the size and magnificence of the synagogue which this community possessed or the wealth of information which it would reveal about Jewish culture under the Roman empire.

The synagogue at Sardis, discovered by chance in 1962 during the annual summer excavations there by Harvard and Cornell Universities, has become the most informative source yet found

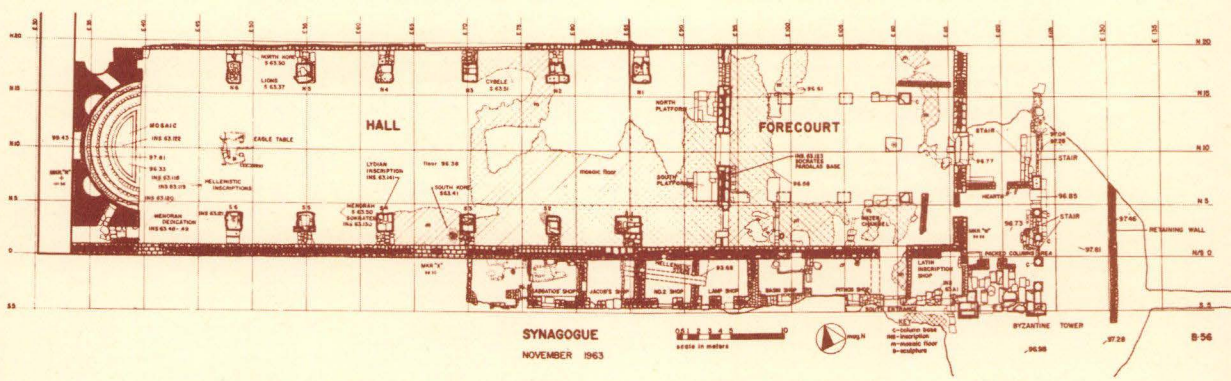


Fig. 2. *Plan of the synagogue at the end of the 1964 season.*

for the reconstruction of a Jewish community in a major Roman city. The building itself is immense; it was entered through an impressive pillared porch opening into a colonnaded forecourt, which preceded the vast main hall of assembly (Fig. 1). Measuring over three hundred feet in over-all length and sixty feet in width (Plan, Fig. 2), the synagogue was apparently planned as an integral part of the sprawling complex of the Roman city gymnasium, a hitherto unheard-of situation. The vast spaces of the main hall remind one of descriptions in rabbinic literature of the main synagogue at Alexandria, where flags had to be hoisted as signals for prayers. The roof, supported by six pairs of heavy masonry piers, was probably a truss roof similar to ones used in the earliest Christian basilicas. The floors are paved with ornate mosaics, spread like rainbow-hued carpets. The walls of these enormous rooms glowed with a covering of multi-colored sheet marble, into which were set panels of floral and animal designs, constructed like jigsaw puzzles from thousands of cut-out marble pieces. Fish, birds, animals and flowers are among the inlays preserved. According to an inscription, there were paintings on the walls or the ceiling, as in the famous painted synagogue of Dura-Europos. The forecourt, at least, was partially vaulted by glittering ceiling mosaics.

Heightening the resemblance to the classical basilican form, a

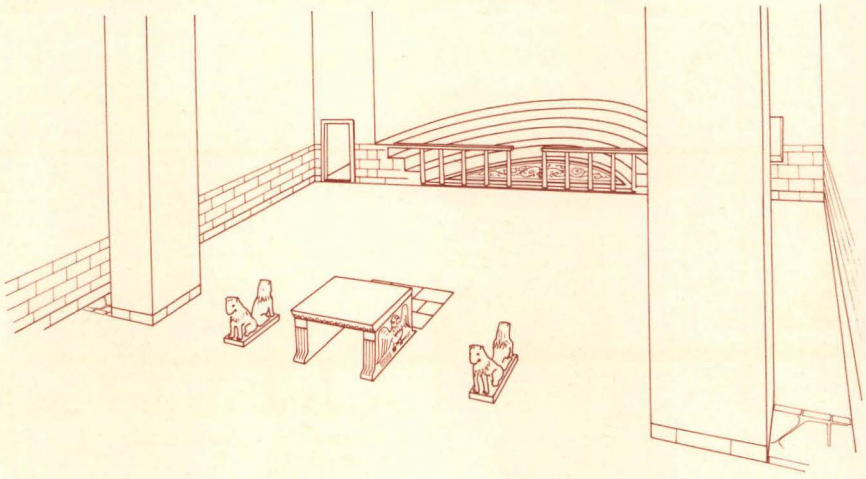


Fig. 3. *Tentative restoration of the western end of the synagogue.*

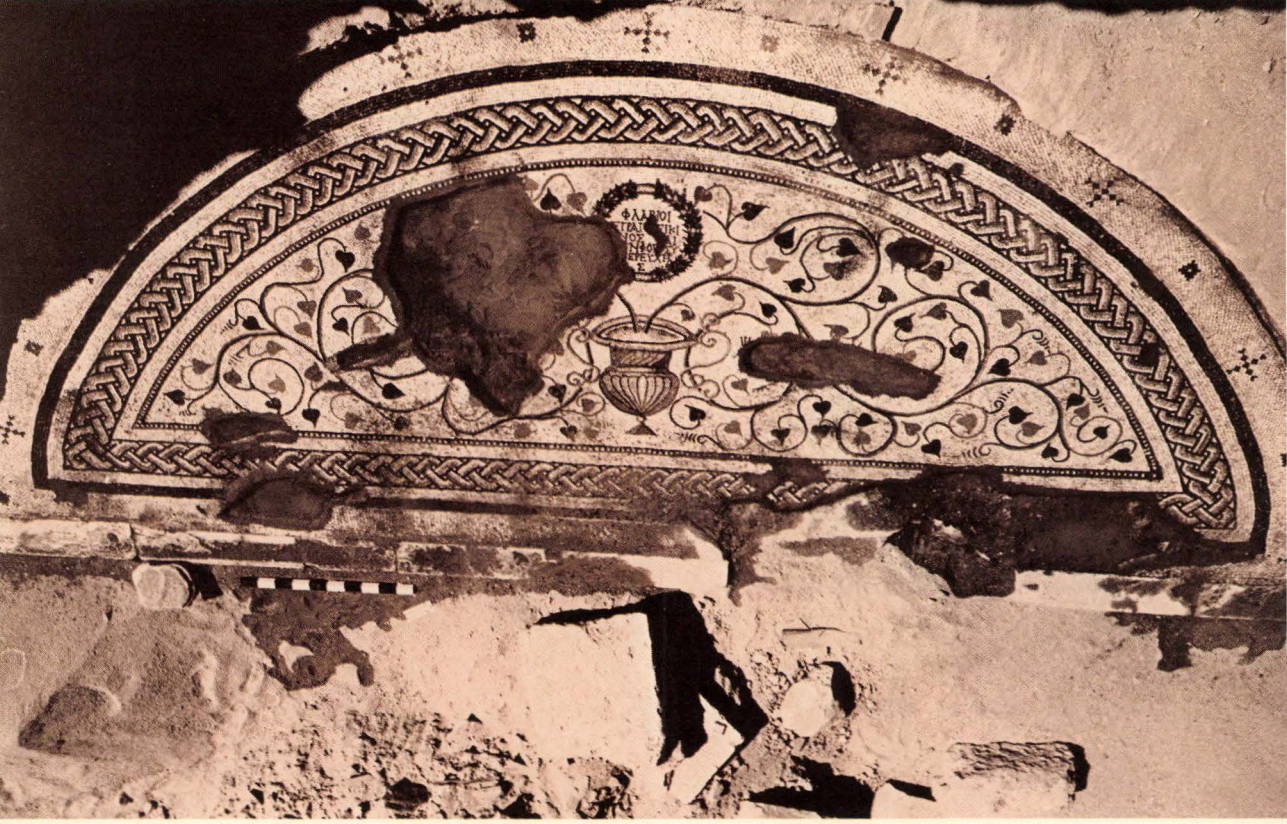


Fig. 4. *Semicircular mosaic in western apse, with names of dedicants, seen from above.*

Fig. 5. *Relief of eagle clutching thunderbolt; end support of marble table in the western part of the synagogue.*



spacious apse closes the west end of the main hall. It contains a curving row of three brick benches, which enclose a semicircular mosaic in a theater-like auditorium where the elders may have sat (Fig. 3). The mosaic was given by two brothers who record their benefaction in an inscription in the pavement. It depicted two vines growing out of a huge water-filled urn, in whose branches originally peacocks perched (Fig. 4). A marble basin, identical in shape to that shown in the mosaic, was found in the forecourt, where it probably served for the obligatory washing of hands (and perhaps also feet) prior to entering the synagogue for prayer.

A few yards to the east, in front of this central apse, stood a great marble table, its supports decorated with eagles clutching thunderbolts in their talons (Fig. 5). A marble pavement lay on the west side of this table facing the apse, where the weekly scripture lesson may have been read. Pairs of marble lions, seated back to back, which have been reconstructed from fragments found around the table, may have stood guard to either side (Fig. 6).

At the opposite, eastern, end of the main hall, between the triple gateways that open into the hall from the forecourt, are two stepped platforms (Fig. 7), which supported small temple-like structures, their pediments upheld by spirally-fluted columns. We believe that one may have contained the Ark, the other a large *menorah*. It was near the southern platform that the incised carving of a *menorah* flanked by *lulab* and *shofar* (Fig. 9), with fragments of inscriptions in Hebrew (Fig. 8), was found that first conclusively identified this building as a synagogue (Fig. 10). Part of an intricately carved marble *menorah* in the round, measuring over a yard in armspread, was also found (Fig. 11).

The synagogue has also been a treasure house of precious fragments of architecture, sculpture, and inscriptions re-used from temples and public buildings of Sardis going back as far as the time of Croesus in the sixth century B.C. The supports of the eagle table may have been appropriated from a Roman military sanctuary; the lions, carved in the fifth century B.C. or earlier, probably stood in a





Fig. 6. *Pair of marble lions, re-used in the synagogue (partly restored).*

Fig. 7. *Western Forecourt, with mosaic panels containing donors' inscriptions, triple gateways into main hall and platforms for shrines between the gates.*

g. 8. *Fragment of marble slab*
th inscription in Hebrew—trans-
ed "Shalom".

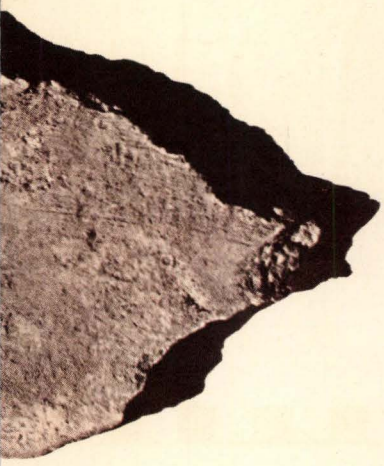




Fig. 9. *Marble slab with incised* menorah *flanked by* lulab *and* shofar.

Fig. 10. Menorah *slab, as found by the southern platform for a shrine.*





Fig. 11. *Marble* menorah *with the name of* Sokrates *on the crossbar (scale is 10 centimeters).*

Fig. 12. *Corinthian pilaster capital with rampant lion, from the main hall of the synagogue.*



shrine of Cybele before they were enlisted for the guardian lions of Judah. These and other animal motifs (Fig. 12) in the decoration of the Sardis synagogue are witnesses to the liberal interpretation adopted by these Hellenized Jews of the Biblical prohibition of "graven images."

Blocks from the porch of the temple of the Mother of the Gods were built into the piers. They bore lengthy inscriptions from the time of Antiochus the Great (213 B.C.), carved there as public documents. Much older are fragments of some of the oldest Ionic capitals known from Asia Minor, a long inscription in an unknown alphabetic script resembling Lydian (Fig. 14), and a miniature marble temple, covered with reliefs, probably dedicated to Cybele during the reign of Croesus (Fig. 13), ca. 550 B.C.

While on the north side, the complex seems to have been bounded by a colonnaded exercise ground for the gymnasium (palaestra), the south side of the synagogue was lined with a long row of small shops, which lay outside the wall. Some of the merchants had incised their names on pottery jars: "Jacob, the presbyter" (elder of the synagogue), "John", "Sabbatios." Was the synagogue area the center of the Jewish community's commercial interests as well as the heart of its religious life? The evidence now available points strongly to this conclusion.

Thanks to an abundance of dedicatory inscriptions carved on marble slabs and set into the walls of the principal rooms, we can catch a glimpse of some of the prominent personalities in the congregation, whose pious gifts contributed to the dignity and splendor of their house of worship. These inscriptions, written in Greek, are datable by the forms of the letters and the recurrence of names to the late second and early third centuries A.D., thus making our synagogue one of the earliest preserved, as well as the richest. A man whose name is missing, together with his wife Regina and their children, gave panels of design in marble inlay and wall paintings. Another, Aurelius Hermogenes, gave a *menorah*. The name of the donor or sculptor, Sokrates, is inscribed on the crossbar linking the

arms of the large marble *menorah* (Fig. 11). Yet another member of the congregation gave some kind of interior dividing walls (balustrades?) for the synagogue. Still others gave individual panels of the mosaic floor, in which are inset their names, and a laconic statement that they "fulfilled their pledge" (Fig. 15). Their names —Pegasios (Fig. 16), Euphrosynos, Polyhippos—are unquestionably Greek, but may in some cases be translations of Hebrew equivalents. One inscription refers to *phyle Leontion,* "a tribe of the Leontii"; according to Professor Louis Robert, this was an organizational unit of the synagogue, whose name may allude to the Lion of the tribe of Judah.

Often the names are proudly followed with the word "Sardianos": "citizen of Sardis." Several of these men had attained the office of city councilman. Among the trades represented as donors are jewelers and goldsmiths. We have an impression of a large, wealthy, civic-minded Jewish community, honored and respected by their city, who were allowed to build their sumptuous house of worship next to the gymnasium and on the main avenue, surely one of the most prominent locations in Roman Sardis.

During the past three seasons, the two major rooms of the synagogue, the forecourt and the main hall, were cleared of the fallen marble blocks and debris that filled them, and half of the row of shops outside the south wall was excavated. The building as it now stands has walls varying in height from less than a foot in places at the eastern end of the forecourt, to nearly fifteen feet at the western end of the main hall above the apse. The mosaic floors, severely damaged in places by the collapse of the building's superstructure, have been covered with a layer of earth to protect them against weather and depredations. During the 1964 season, most of the heavily damaged and extensively remodelled porch at the easternmost end of the synagogue was cleared. Already, however, precautions have had to be taken to safeguard the building over the winters: the heavy rainfall required the excavation and reinforcement of a wide diversionary ditch to carry runoff around and away



Fig. 13. *Relief of Cybele, on front of miniature marble temple, ca. 550* B.C.*; the piece was re-used in one of the piers.*

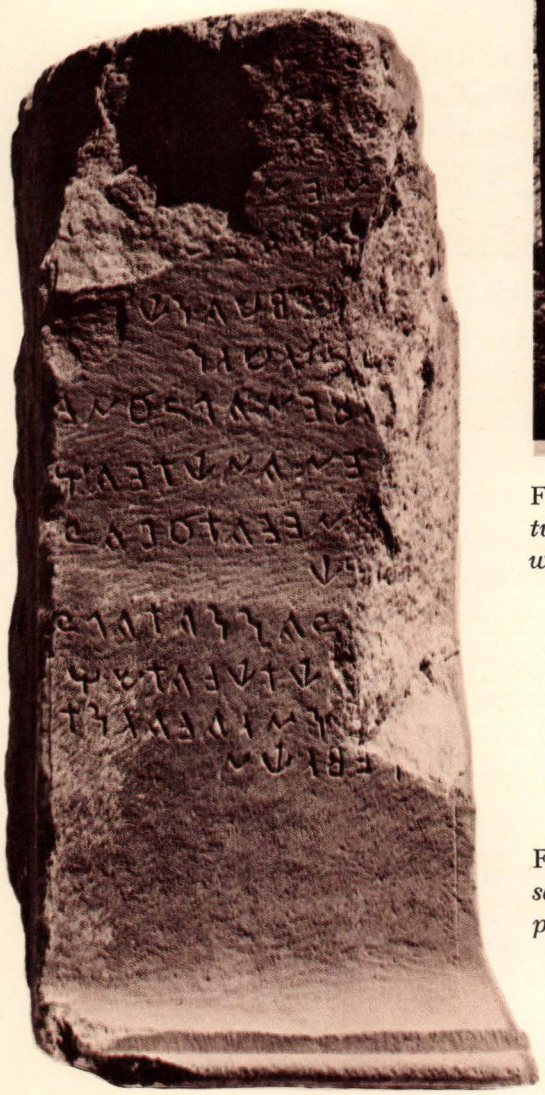


Fig. 14. *Inscription in unknown alphabetic script related to Lydian, built into one of the piers of the main hall.*



Fig. 15. *Inscription in mosaic floor; west side of the Forecourt, recording the gift of Aurelius Polyhippos.*

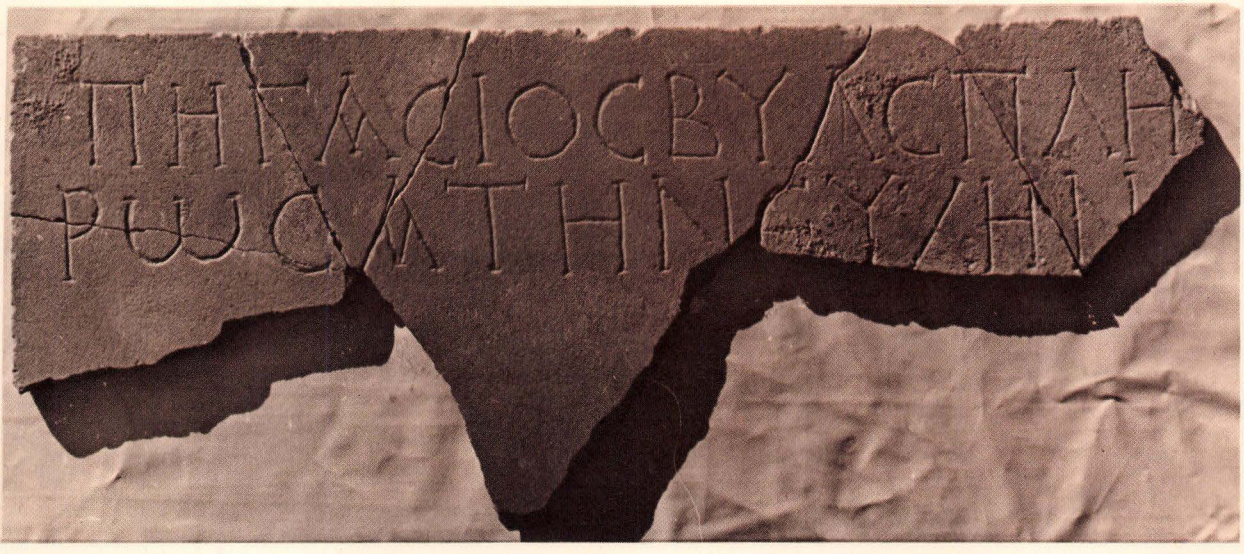
from the synagogue, and preliminary repairs and stabilization of the tops of the walls have been made in concrete.

If we already know this much, what remains to be done? The clearance of the principal rooms of the synagogue, with their precious contents, is only the first step in understanding the entire building complex and learning about the people who erected and used it. The entire neighborhood of the great halls, including rooms connecting them with the gymnasium, must be excavated to locate the many rooms used as hostels, schoolrooms, and kitchens which we may expect to find as integral parts of the synagogue district. Excavations must probe deep beneath the floors and foundations in search of an earlier synagogue on the same site: there are indications that such a synagogue may be found. Several hundred blocks,

as well as thousands of fragments of the ornate marble revetment, must be studied to recover as much as possible of the plan and decorative scheme of the interior. It should be possible to replace at least the lower part of the marble revetments and to recompose samples of the fascinating "pictures" of marble inlay. In this study, the participation of a specialist in Judaic history and ancient synagogues is essential. The walls of the building must be further stabilized, the mosaic pavements repaired, with missing portions supplied in concrete, and a representative portion of the piers reerected, as far as possible, to preserve the synagogue for posterity and make it intelligible for tourists and scholars alike.

Our task then is hardly more than well begun. Recent termination of government and foundation grants, under which the initial excavation was made possible, now threatens the necessary continuation of excavation, study, and restoration. To realize these goals, which include a thorough final publication of the synagogue and its contents, a minimum of three more major summer seasons of excavation work are needed (1966-1968). The thoroughgoing examination and restoration of this unique monument, which so vividly proclaims the vitality and creativity of Jewish communities under the Roman empire, is a responsibility which the Archaeological Exploration of Sardis must fulfill.

Fig. 16. *Dedicatory plaque of "Pegasios."*





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