



# Turkey's Unexcavated Synagogues

Could the world's earliest known synagogue  
be buried amid rubble?

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**BAR SPECIALIZES IN ARTICLES ABOUT SITES** that have been excavated, featuring the often dramatic finds archaeologists uncover. But what about finds from sites that have *not* been excavated (and should be)?

We know a lot about the Jews of Cilicia from the New Testament and other ancient sources. Before becoming a follower of Jesus, Paul was a devout Jew from Tarsus, the capital of the Roman province of Cilicia in southeast Anatolia (modern Turkey). Despite the presence of Jews in Cilicia, however, relatively little is known about their synagogues. Indeed not a single ancient synagogue has been excavated in Cilicia.

I think I may have found two of them—at Korykos and at Çatiören.

The presence of Jews in Cilicia during the Hellenistic and Roman periods is well established in both ancient literature and epigraphical remains. Paraphrasing (or creating) a speech by the first-century A.D. Judean king Agrippa I to the Roman emperor Gaius Caligula (37–41 A.D.), the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria records a statement that the city of Jerusalem was responsible for founding numerous colonies throughout the Mediterranean world, including cities in the Anatolian regions of Cilicia, as well as Pamphylia, Asia, Bithynia and Pontus.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of whether or not Philo accurately reproduced the substance of Agrippa's speech, Philo could not have included such a statement if Jewish settlements had not been well established in those regions prior to his own time. Later in the first century, the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus referred to Alexander (the son of Tigranes, a Jewish king of Armenia) who was appointed king of Ketis in Cilicia by the Roman emperor Vespasian.<sup>2</sup> The appointment of a Jew to this position is very probably an indication of a large Jewish presence in the region.

The Acts of the Apostles makes frequent reference to synagogues in Anatolia and specifically mentions Jewish residents in Cilicia. Acts 6:9 records the presence of a synagogue of freedmen in Jerusalem comprised of Jews from Cilicia (as well as from Cyrene, Alexandria and Asia). During his second journey (with Silas), Paul, through evangelism in synagogues, strengthened the churches that had been established in Syria and Cilicia, according to Acts 15:41. Other references to Cilicia can be





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**PREVIOUS PAGES AND LEFT: UNMISTAKABLE MARKER.**

Along the inner fortification wall surrounding the mainland castle at Korykos, the lintel and doorposts of an earlier building peek out above the rubble (left). At the left side of the lintel, a menorah with squared branches and a three-pronged base is clearly inscribed (see detail below left). Although ancient literary and epigraphic sources (including the New Testament) attest to a significant Jewish population in Cilicia, no ancient synagogue has ever been discovered in the region—but that might well change if the building buried here were excavated.

Tarsus) contains at least 12 epitaphs of Jews buried there.<sup>4</sup> An early-first-century inscription refers to Ioudas and Alexas, the sons of Nisaaios, a Jew.<sup>5</sup> Another, from the third century, refers to a Jew named Alexander who was buried with his wife.<sup>6</sup> An early Byzantine period inscription describes the deceased Eusambatios as a Jew, an elder and seller of perfumes.<sup>7</sup> Surveying the Jewish inscriptions from Cilicia, New Testament scholars Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schwemer conclude that “the Jewish population of Tarsus and other Cilician cities must have been considerable.”<sup>8</sup>

In my own explorations I have found menorahs on door lintels at two different sites, one at Korykos and the other at Çatiören. I suspect they belong to synagogues. If so, they are the first synagogues to be discovered in Cilicia. Both of these buildings are largely buried in rubble. Neither has been excavated.

During the Roman period, Korykos was an important harbor. Today the harbor is one of the most picturesque sites on the Mediterranean coast. Two castles, rebuilt in the 13th century, crown a small peninsula that once extended into the sea. One of these castles, originally connected to the mainland, is now located about 650 feet offshore; the land bridge disappeared underwater over the years, giving the impression that the castle is floating in the sea.

The other castle on the mainland is surrounded by two fortification walls. The largest structures within are two Byzantine churches and a later Armenian church. Within the composite walls from several periods are sections of earlier Roman buildings. A monumental arch facing the sea on the southwest was probably built by the Romans to welcome visitors from the harbor into what was likely the forum or agora.

found in Acts 9:30 and Galatians 1:21.

The fourth-century Church Father Epiphanius of Salamis tells of a Jewish official named Joseph who was commissioned to collect taxes from the Jews living in Cilicia and who, after experiencing opposition, was flogged in the synagogue.<sup>3</sup>

Ancient inscriptions likewise bear witness to a strong Jewish presence in Cilicia. More specifically, a necropolis at Korykos (modern Kizkalesi, a small coastal village about 45 miles southwest of

Near the southeastern wall of the fortress, a menorah can be seen inscribed on the lintel of a building that is largely buried in the rubble. The lintel is positioned atop two doorposts. The branches of the menorah are squared rather than curved, and the menorah stands on a three-pronged base. The lintel was incorporated into a structure that was constructed later and attached to the fortification wall surrounding the castle. This structure was built over the debris of an earlier building (still buried in the rubble), which could have been a Jewish synagogue from the Roman or Byzantine period. This earlier building had three entrances constructed in a similar fashion, although just one of them bore an inscribed menorah. Only portions of the lintels and top of the doorposts are currently visible amid the debris.

**MENORAHS IN MEMORIAM.** An ancient necropolis at Korykos contains at least 12 epitaphs of Jews buried there. Two sarcophagi (and possibly more) nearby bear large menorahs to identify the people entombed within as Jews. The sarcophagus lid pictured below displays two menorahs—one on the far left and one on the right.



East of the castle, the broken-down old city walls stretch for more than half a mile along the coast. From there the wall turns north up the hill and then disappears. About 330 feet east of the castle was a temple, and beyond that were baths. The ruins of what appears to be a colonnaded street, or stoa, are north of the baths. North across the Silifke-Mersin road, there are numerous rock-cut







**“IMPENETRABLE BRUSHWOOD, FOREST AND ROCKS.”**

**These words, used more than 120 years ago by Oxford-trained archaeologist J. Theodore Bent during his survey of Çatiören, still provide an apt description of the site, which is located 4 miles from the Mediterranean coast. Until the site is excavated, much will remain hidden about the ancient remains at Çatiören.**

tombs and sarcophagi with relief carvings and inscriptions. At least two sarcophagi feature large menorahs—further evidence of a Jewish presence. An ancient Roman road winds along the hill where three Byzantine churches can be found.

My second proposed synagogue in Cilicia is at Çatiören, which is the modern Turkish name for a city that occupied the site during the Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine periods (the ancient name is unknown). The city is located 4.3 miles from the coast, north and a bit east of Korykos. It may be the ancient city of Doron mentioned by Pliny the Elder.<sup>9</sup>

The ruins at Çatiören were surveyed more than 120 years ago by J. Theodore Bent, an Oxford-trained archaeologist who described the area as “given up to almost impenetrable brushwood, forest, and rocks.”<sup>10</sup>

Not much has changed today; the brush is so thick that it is difficult to navigate the site. Perhaps this is why Bent failed to discover the synagogue menorah, which he never mentioned in his writings.

The ruins of Çatiören are spread across three parallel ridges with ravines between them. Most of the buildings on the central ridge date from the Hellenistic period. Others on the outside ridges date to the Roman and Byzantine periods. A Byzantine church also lies among the ruins.

At the crest of the middle ridge, several structures, including a temple to Hermes, can be seen. All of the buildings on the central ridge are constructed with polygonal (rather than rectangular) masonry, typical of the Hellenistic period. Also, lower on the central ridge there is a building filled with rubble not only from its own walls but also from buildings higher up on the ridge. On the north side of this building a lintel displays a menorah and a *lulav* (palm branch) associated with the Jewish festival of Sukkoth and often depicted in ancient synagogues. The simple menorah, crudely inscribed on the lintel, has no base. Both the menorah and

the *lulav* have been significantly degraded by years of exposure to the elements, and the lintel is moderately pitted. The pitting of the lintel is consistent with the pitting of the rest of the structure, suggesting that it is not in secondary use from another building but is originally from the structure of which it now forms a part.

Inside the structure, on the southern wall (facing Jerusalem) is a niche approximately 1 foot square.

**HOLY TO HERMES.** Built of polygonal rather than strictly rectangular masonry, the temple of Hermes (below) exemplifies the Hellenistic construction typical of the buildings along the central ridge at Çatiören. Above the lintel leading to the sanctuary are two reliefs of the caduceus (Hermes' winged staff entwined by two serpents), and a 1.5-foot-high niche inside probably held a small statue of Hermes. The Greek god Hermes was the patron deity of weights and measures as well as commerce, and an inscription to the right of the doorway explains the customary payment to the temple treasury for those whose trading here prospered. Çatiören appears to have been the cult center for the important commercial port at nearby Korykos; Coins minted at Korykos during the second and first centuries B.C. invariably bear the image of Hermes and the caduceus.

If the structure was a synagogue, this was likely the Torah niche, where the Scriptures were kept. Outside the eastern wall of the building was what appears to be a large stone water basin, which may have been used to wash feet or hands before entering the synagogue. A similar installation was found at the ancient synagogue at Ein Gedi in Israel.<sup>11</sup> A few feet south of the water basin is a staircase carved into the rock. The staircase ascends and turns to the right, entering one floor above the synagogue in the southeast corner of the building. This was an outside staircase that apparently led to an upper story of the synagogue, perhaps reserved for women or Gentiles who wished to participate in synagogue worship.

While surveying this site and others, Bent made squeezes of several Greek inscriptions found at Çatiören and elsewhere in Cilicia. E.L. Hicks transcribed these squeezes for the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, but little has been made of them since then.<sup>12</sup> Two of these inscriptions from Çatiören are particularly important. The first is a 26-line inscription that refers to members of a religious guild (ἐταῖροις), Sabbath keepers (Σαββατιστής), God's







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**TURNING BACK THE CLOCK.** Nearly hidden behind fallen building stones on Çatiören's central ridge, a lintel rests over a doorway to a structure built of the same Hellenistic masonry (viewed from inside the structure in the photo at left) as the surrounding buildings. The weathered lintel (above) bears a crudely drawn menorah and a *lulav* (palm branch) on the right side. Because the pitting of the drawings and lintel are consistent with the overall degradation of the building, it appears the entire structure, including the menorah and *lulav*, dates to the Hellenistic period. If so, this may well be the earliest synagogue ever found.

Sabbath keepers (Σαββατιστής Θεοῦ), the Sabbath God (τὸν Θεὸν Σαββατιστήν), those gathered into a synagogue (συνηγμένοις) and a synagogue official (συναγωγέα). For full text, see box above right.

It is apparently a resolution drawn up by the Jewish community in Çatiören after discussions about who could attend the synagogue. It is tempting to interpret the "religious members" (ἐταίροις) as Gentiles or Godfearers, not quite Jews, and the decree as a statement of inclusion for them.\* Curse tablets were common in the Mediterranean world

\*See Angelos Chaniotis, "Godfearers in the City of Love," *BAR*, May/June 2010.

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## “Sabbath Keepers” Inscription at Çatiören


“It is resolved by the religious members and God’s Sabbath keepers, by [the authority?] of the Sabbath keepers with regard to those in the synagogue [or “those who have gathered together”] to create an inscribed record excluding no one. But for those who do so, let them make a religious purification. If anyone wishes to deposit a curse against someone, may the one who wishes to do so be accursed. Protos says ‘Crown Dis Ibelion, the synagogue official.’ Of those who are cursed in the sanctuaries and of those inscribed upon the steles, let no one be accursed, nor excised from the record, nor dismissed, nor removed. And if anyone in this regard should deviate or sin against the Sabbath God, let them also make payment to the Sabbath God of one hundred drachmas, and to the Sabbath keepers one hundred drachmas, and to the city one hundred drachmas, and to the ruler (dynast) one hundred drachmas.”

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**A STEP ABOVE.** Outside the eastern wall of Çatiören’s proposed synagogue, a carved stone staircase winds upward toward the former second story. If the identification as a synagogue is correct, this upper story may have been reserved for women or Gentiles who wished to participate in worship while the Jewish men gathered on the main floor. On the ground next to the staircase, a stone basin sits beneath the drilled holes that likely flowed with water for washing hands and feet before entering the synagogue.

of similar polygonal construction in all of the structures on the central ridge suggests that all of these buildings date to the Hellenistic period. Moreover, the dating of the inscriptions to the Hellenistic period points to the same conclusion: The Çatiören building is a synagogue from the Hellenistic period.

These lintels bearing menorahs at Korykos and Çatiören deserve further study. That is possible only with an excavation. 

<sup>1</sup> Philo, *Legatio ad Gaium* 281–282.

<sup>2</sup> Josephus, *Antiquities* 18. 140–141.

<sup>3</sup> Epiphanius, *Against Heresies* 30.11.

<sup>4</sup> Margaret H. Williams, “The Jewish Community of Corycus—Two More Inscriptions,” *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 92 (1992), pp. 248–252.

and were usually deposited in temples (the ναοίς). This decree rescinded those curses and penalized anyone who tried to impose new ones. Since the curses played a significant role in this inscription, they likely pertained to Jewish relations with the indigenous people. Were the Jews being cursed or were the non-Jewish people being cursed, or were both groups slinging curses at one another?

Due to the presence of archaic terms and archaic forms in the inscription, Hicks suggested that the inscription dated to the Hellenistic period (300–50 B.C.), and certainly not later than the Augustan period (27 B.C.–14 A.D.). This inscription was found on a rock near the Byzantine church, not far from the building with the menorah. Next to it, on another rock was a second inscription more weathered than the other. Hicks was unable to transcribe much from the squeeze other than the words τῶν Σαββατιστῶν (a variant form of Σαββατιστής “Sabbath keepers”).

These inscriptions in proximity to the building with the menorah and *lulav* strongly suggest that Çatiören’s heavy brush and remote location have been hiding an early synagogue, indeed, perhaps the earliest synagogue ever found.<sup>13</sup> The presence

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<sup>5</sup> Keil, Josef and Adolf Wilhelm, *Monumenta Asiae Minoris Antiqua* (MAMA) III. Denkmäler aus dem rauhen Kilikien. (London: Manchester University Press, 1931), no. 440.

<sup>6</sup> Keil et al., *MAMA* III, no. 222.

<sup>7</sup> Keil et al., *MAMA* III, no. 344.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schwemer, *Paul Between Damascus and Antioch: The Unknown Years* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), p. 161.

<sup>9</sup> *Natural History* 5, 22.

<sup>10</sup> J. Theodore Bent, "Explorations in Cilicia Tracheia," *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society* 12.8 (1890), pp. 445–463. Bent's survey is described in more detail in J. Theodore Bent, "A Journey in Cilicia Tracheia," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 12 (1891), pp. 206–224.

<sup>11</sup> Hershel Shanks, *Judaism in Stone—The Archaeology of Ancient Synagogues* (New York: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 139.

<sup>12</sup> E.L. Hicks, "Inscriptions from Eastern Cilicia," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 11 (1890), pp. 236–254 and E.L. Hicks, "Inscriptions from Western Cilicia," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 12 (1891), pp. 225–273.

<sup>13</sup> The archaeological remains of synagogues are uncommon, leaving us with questions regarding the origin and time when these institutions first appeared within Judaism. As Runesson, Binder and Olsson state: "Nearly every region of the Mediterranean world has been proposed as the birthplace of this institution, as has every time period, from the age of the Patriarchs to the Late Roman period" in *The Ancient Synagogue from its Origins to 200 C.E.: A Source Book* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), p. 11. The earliest synagogue remains yet known are found in Israel and may date to the first century B.C.E.