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.\(^1\) 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 Ketas in Cilicia by the Roman emperor Vespasian.\(^2\) 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
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.3

Ancient inscriptions likewise bear witness to a strong Jewish presence in Cilicia. More specifically, a necropolis at Korykos (modern Kızkalesi, a small coastal village about 45 miles southwest of Tarsus) contains at least 12 epitaphs of Jews buried there.4 An early-first-century inscription refers to Ioudas and Alexas, the sons of Nisaio, a Jew.5 Another, from the third century, refers to a Jew named Alexander who was buried with his wife.6 An early Byzantine period inscription describes the deceased Eusambatios as a Jew, an elder and seller of perfumes.7 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.”8

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.
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
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.9

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.”10 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 at 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. 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. 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. Two of these inscriptions from Çatiören are particularly important. The first is a 26-line inscription that refers to members of a religious guild (ἑταίροις), Sabbath keepers (Σαββατιστής), God's
Sabbath keepers (Σαββατιστής Θεοῦ), the Sabbath God (τὸν Θεὸν Σαββατιστὴν), those gathered into a synagogue (συνηγμένοι) and a synagogue official (συναγωγέα). For full text, see box above right.

It is apparently a resolution drawn up by the Jewish community in Çatlıören after discussions about who could attend the synagogue. It is tempting to interpret the “religious members” (ἑταίροις) 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


TURNING BACK THE CLOCK. Nearly hidden behind fallen building stones on Çatlıören’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”
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.”

1 Philo, Legatio ad Gaium 281–282.
2 Josephus, Antiquities 18. 140–141.
3 Epiphanius, Against Heresies 30.11.

and were usually deposited in temples (the ναοί). 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 των Σαββατιστων (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. The presence 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.

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.

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5 Keil, Josef and Adolf Wilhelm, Monumenta 
Assia Minoris Antiqua (MAMA) III. Denkmäler 
aus dem rauen Kiklien. (London: Manchester 
University Press, 1931), no. 440.
6 Keil et al., MAMA III, no. 222.
7 Keil et al., MAMA III, no. 344.
8 Martin Hengel and Anna Maria Schwemer, 
Paul Between Damascus and Antioch: The 
Unknown Years (Louisville: Westminster John 
9 Natural History 5, 22.
10 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 
Society

Studies

POTPOURRI

What Burned?
Archeologists often talk about fierce 
fires, conflagrations, raging fires, etc. And 
yet these cities seem to be built almost 
entirely of stone, brick, and mud. How 
could such fierce fires be ignited in such 
an architecture? Are the beams and roofs 
sufficient to maintain such a blaze (and 
subsequent destruction is from the ele-
ments)? Or were there more combustibles 
I am not imagining?

An Englishman Called an Israeli; 
He’s Now Editor-in-Chief

FOR PUBLICATION THIS LETTER IS TO 
BE PRINTED IN FULL, OR NOT AT ALL.
Your report “Five Years and Counting—The 
Forgery Trial” (March/April 2012) contains 
three errors that I would like to correct.

You write “Matthew Kalman, an Israeli 
freelance journalist, attended almost every 
session of the trial, the only journalist to 
have done so. He has conveniently 
gathered the statistics for us.”

First, I am not “an Israeli”—I am a 
British journalist resident in Jerusalem.
Second, I am not a “freelance journalist”—I 
am the editor-in-chief of The Jerusalem 
Report, as you know, since you mailed me 
a copy of the magazine addressed to me 
in that capacity.

Third, I did not gather the statistics 
for BAR, as readers might infer from 
the phrasing of your report. I have never 
written for BAR, nor have I gathered any 
information for BAR on the forgery trial 
or anything else. The statistics you cite 
were taken from lectures on the ossu-
ary trial that I delivered in Jerusalem 
at the Albright Archaeological Institute 
and other institutions. I understand your 
reporter was sitting in the audience taking 
notes, but apparently not very accurately.

Sincerely,
Matthew Kalman 
Editor-in-Chief
The Jerusalem Report 
Jerusalem, Israel

A Welshman Called an Englishman; 
Garfinkel’s Claims “False and Stupid”

On the Web site Bible and Interpretation, 
Professor Philip Davies wrote a 
response to “The Birth and Death of 
Biblical Minimalism” by Yosef Garfinkel 
(BAR, March/April 2011). With Professor 
Davies’s permission, we reprinted on our 
Web site (www.bib-arch.org/scholars-
study/minimalist-response.asp) Professor 
Davies’s response that had appeared on the 
Bible and Interpretation Web site. We then received the following letter from 
Professor Davies regarding errors in the 
introduction we provided on our Web site 
to his response to Garfinkel.

Ammon Ben-Tor, Yigael Yadin Professor 
in the Archaeology of Erets Israel at the Hebrew 
University, responds:
I see absolutely no problem with the 
burning of sites in antiquity, even if some 
accounts of those responsible are a bit exag-
gerated. Even when it says that a site was 
destroyed by fire, it does not mean that each 
and every building went up in flames.

Buildings in the ancient Near East (and 
in many places in that region today) had 
roofs of branches as well as wooden beams. 
Window frames, shutters and doors were 
made of wood. Beds, chairs and tables 
inside were also of wood. And clothing, too, 
was easily combustible.

At Hazor, where I have long worked (and 
am still working), all major buildings were 
violently destroyed by fire. Take the ceremo-
nial palace in the heart of the acropolis: Our 
excavation revealed that, in addition to a 
great amount of timber placed in the walls, 
the façade, the floor and the roof were also 
made of wood.

In addition, we uncovered 20 huge pithoi 
(storage jars) nearby that originally con-
tained highly combustible olive oil. When 
the palace went up in flames, so did the oil 
in these vessels, as evidenced by the marks 
of burning liquid still discernible on the sur-
facing of the pithoi.

The combination of an enormous 
amount of wood with several hundred liters 
of oil resulted in an intense fire. Add to this 
the strong winds prevailing at Hazor and 
the result is extraordinary: The bricks of the 
walls were vitrified and clay vessels were 
melted, indicating a fire temperature of 
more than 1300 degrees Celsius (a normal 
fire burns at 700–800 degrees).*

This fire made such a great impression, 
that when the author of the book of Joshua 
describes the fall of Hazor, he states that no 
other site except Hazor was set on fire at the 
time (Joshua 11:10).

Even in relatively “modern times,” with 
much more stone and cement construction, 
there were great historic fires in cities such 
as London and San Francisco.

*Ammon Ben-Tor and Maria Teresa Rubiato, “Excavating 
Hazor, Part Two: Did the Israelites Destroy the Canaan-
ite City?” BAR, May/June 1999.