JEWISH STUDIES
犹太研究
第23辑

# Is There Evidence of a Synagogue from the Time of Jesus at Capernaum?

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**Abstract**: Luke 7: 1-5 refers to a synagogue built by a centurion at Capernaum. Today the site is dominated by a monumental ancient synagogue constructed of white limestone. Although archaeologists disagree about its exact date, there is no doubt that the white limestone synagogue is later than the time of Jesus. In this paper, I consider the literary and archeological evidence for claims that the synagogue of the centurion lies underneath the white limestone synagogue. I conclude that there are no definite archaeological remains of a synagogue from the time of Jesus, nor is it possible to establish that such a synagogue even existed.

**Key Words**: Capernaum, Synagogue, Centurion, Archaeology, Jesus

Every day, hundreds of Christian pilgrims visit Capernaum, the base of Jesus' Galilean ministry, where they are shown the supposed remains of the synagogue of the centurion mentioned in Luke 7: 1-5. In this article, I consider the literary and archaeological evidence, and conclude that there are no remains at Capernaum that can conclusively be identified as a synagogue from the time of Jesus, nor is there definite evidence that any such structure even existed. I begin with a review of pre-70 CE synagogues in Palestine.

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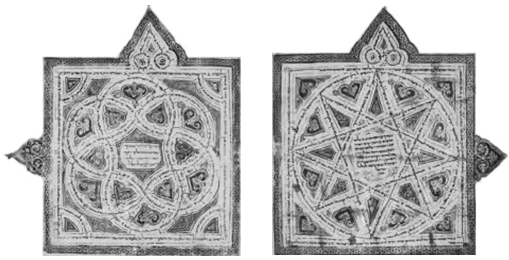

## Ⅰ. Pre-70 CE Synagogues in Palestine

Synagogues (referred to by various terms including Greek *synagoge* and *proseuche*; Hebrew *beth knesset*) are Jewish assembly halls. Like the term "church," synagogue can denote both the congregation itself as well as a building to accommodate the congregation.[①] 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.[②] 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.[③] 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 of Palestine, the remains of over a dozen late antique synagogue buildings have been discovered around the Mediterranean and Near East, and

① Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C.-A.D. 135)* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979), 423-430, 439-440.

② Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People*, 447-463; Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue, The First Thousand Years* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 530-592.

③ Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 177; the Bornblum Eretz Israel Synagogues Website at https://synagogues.kinneret.ac.il/ (accessed 08/27/2023). Chaim Ben-David, "On the Number of Synagogues and Their Location in the Holy Land," in *The Synagogue in Ancient Palestine: Current Issues and Emerging Trends*, eds. Rick Bonnie, Raimo Hakola, and Ulla Tervahauta (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2021), 175-193, counts 128 synagogues.

inscriptions hint at the existence of many more.[①]

Whereas most of the known synagogue buildings date to the fourth to sixth centuries (late antiquity)[②], this article focuses on pre-70 CE Palestinian synagogues, specifically, the evidence for a synagogue at Capernaum dating to the time of Jesus. What did Palestinian synagogues look like at this time? To answer this question, we must first consider the origins of the synagogue.[③] 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, Lee I. Levine proposes that city gates were a prototype for early synagogues, as both were settings for a variety of communal and religious activities.[④]

(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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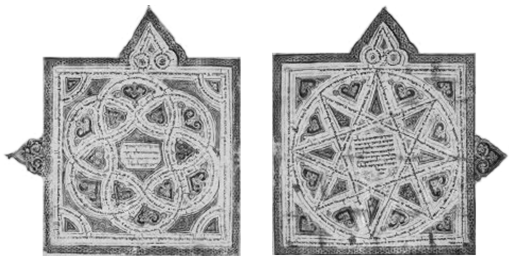
① See A. Thomas Kraabel, "The Diaspora Synagogue: Archaeological and Epigraphic Evidence since Sukenik," in *Ancient Synagogues, Historical Analysis and Archaeological Discovery*, Vol. 1, eds. Dan Urman and Paul V. M. Flesher (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 95-126; Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 252. For Andriake and Limyra in Asia Minor, see Martin Seyer and Helmut Lotz, "A Synagogue in Limyra? Preliminary Report on a Byzantine Building with Jewish Elements," *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 4 (2013): 133-148; Nevzat Çevik, Özgü Çömezoğlu, Hüseyin Sami Öztürk, and İnci Türkoğlu, "A Unique Discovery in Lycia: The Ancient Synagogue at Andriake, Port of Myra," *Adalya* 13 (2010): 335-366. For an evaluation of the remains from Limyra, see Jodi Magness, "Purity Observance among Diaspora Jews in the Roman World," *Archaeology and Text: A Journal for the Integration of Material Culture with Written Documents in the Ancient Mediterranean and Near East* 1 (2017): 39-65, here 41. For Samaritan synagogues, see Itzhak Magen, "Samaritan Synagogues," in *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, Vol. 4, ed. Ephraim Stern (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1993), 1424-1427; Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 187-192.

② Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 176-177; Lee. I. Levine, "Synagogues," in *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, ed. Ephraim Stern (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 1421-1424, here 1422.

③ See Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 21-44.

④ Ibid., 30-38.



(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.[①] 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.[②]

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① John S. Kloppenborg, "The Theodotos Synagogue Inscription and the Problem of First-Century Synagogue Buildings," in *Jesus and Archaeology*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 236-282, here 238, 241-222. For different ancient terms used to denote synagogues, see Donald Binder, *Into the Temple Courts, The Place of the Synagogues in the Second Temple Period* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 91-154.

② L. Michael White, *Building God's House, Architectural Adaptation among Pagans, Jews, and Christians* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 1990), 102-126.

Therefore, any attempt to pinpoint the origins of the synagogue must distinguish between assemblies or congregations—that is, 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.

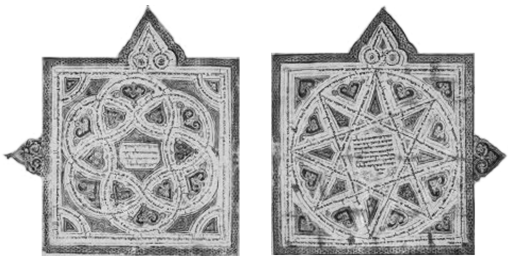
A third problem with pinpointing the origins of the synagogue is the modern understanding of the institution as primarily religious in nature. By religious I am referring to scholarly assumptions that early synagogues—like their modern counterparts—were the setting for communal prayer and worship. In contrast, Levine concludes that, "Prayer appears to have played little or no role in the typical [pre-70] Judaean synagogue."① 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.② 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

① Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 169.

② See Hershel Shanks ed., *The City of David, Revisiting Early Excavations, English Translation of Reports by Raymond Weill and L.H. Vincent, Notes and Comments by Ronny Reich* (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 2004), 84-93; Rachel Hachlili, *Ancient Synagogues—Archaeology and Art: New Discoveries and Current Research* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 523-526; Hannah M. Cotton et al., *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaea/Palaestinae*, Vol. 1, *Jerusalem, Part 1: 1-704* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 54-55; Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 57-59; Binder, *Into the Temple Courts*, 104-109.



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.[①]

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 (equivalent to the Hebrew Yehonatan [John] or Netanel [Nathaniel]), Vettenos appears to be Latin, suggesting this was an immigrant family.[②] *Archisynagogos*—Greek for "head of a synagogue"—is the most common leadership title associated with ancient synagogues.[③] 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 Vettenos family would have been descended from

① From Cotton et al., *CIIP*, 54 no. 9.

② Charles Clermont-Ganneau, "Découverte a Jérusalem d'une synagogue de l'epoque hérodienne," *Syria* 1 (1920): 190-197, here 193; Cotton et al., *CIIP*, 54-55.

③ Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 415.

Jews taken into captivity when Pompey annexed the Hasmonean kingdom in 63 BCE.[①] However, John Kloppenborg refutes this suggestion, noting that if Theodotos was a freedman or the son of a freedman, he should be named Theodotos Vettenos (or, technically, Caius Vettennius Theodotos), not Theodotos *son of* Vettenos.[②] And the widespread assumption that Vettenos 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 Vettenos of Rome), which might be expected if they were immigrants, leaves open the possibility that they were natives of Judea.

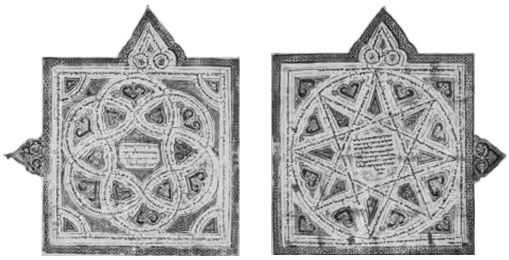
Archaeological remains of pre-70 synagogue buildings in Palestine accord well with the picture presented so far. These include the synagogues at Masada, Herodium, Gamla (or Gamala), and—more recently—Migdal/Magdala. At Masada and Herodium, synagogues were installed in pre-existing Herodian rooms by Jewish rebels at the time of the First Revolt against Rome.[③] 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.[④] 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

① Clermont-Ganneau, "Découverte a Jérusalem," 193, 195-197; Jonathan R. Trotter, *The Jerusalem Temple in Diaspora Jewish Practice and Thought during the Second Temple Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 98.

② Kloppenborg, "The Theodotos Synagogue Inscription," 263-265.

③ For Herodium, see Gideon Foerster, "The Synagogues at Masada and Herodium," in *Ancient Synagogues Revealed*, ed. Lee I. Levine (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1981), 24-29.

④ Yigael Yadin, "The Synagogue at Masada," *Ancient Synagogues Revealed*, ed. Lee I. Levine (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1981), 19-23; Ehud Netzer, *Masada Ⅲ, The Yigael Yadin Excavations 1963-1965, Final Reports: The Buildings, Stratigraphy and Architecture* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1991), 402-413; Jodi Magness, *Masada: From Jewish Revolt to Modern Myth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 171-172.



assembly—that is, a synagogue. Had this same structure been 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. The Gamla synagogue differs from the Masada and Herodium examples in being purpose-built.[①] 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 synagogue. A coin of 43 CE reportedly found under the mosaic floor provides a *terminus*

① See Shmaryahu Gutman, "The Synagogue at Gamla," in *Ancient Synagogues Revealed*, ed. Lee I. Levine (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1981), 30-34; Zvi Uri Ma'oz, "The Synagogue of Gamla and the Typology of Second-Temple Synagogues," *Ancient Synagogues Revealed*, ed. Lee I. Levine (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1981), 35-41.

*post quem* for the synagogue building.①

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.

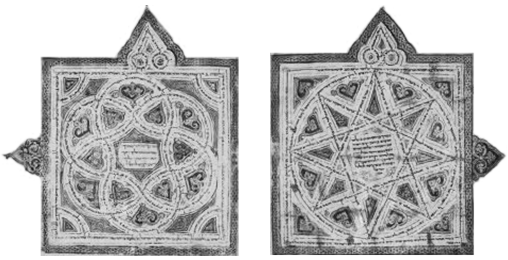
## Ⅱ. The Cobblestone Pavement at Capernaum: The First Century Synagogue of the Centurion?

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)

Today the site of Capernaum is dominated by a monumental synagogue built of white limestone, which contrasts with the black basalt that was used for the construction of all the other structures at Capernaum (see Fig. 1). The

① Dina Avshalom-Gorni and Arfan Najar, "Migdal," *Hadashot Arkheologiyot* 125 (2013) at https://www.hadashot-esi.org.il/report_detail_eng.aspx?id=2304&mag_id=120 (accessed 08/27/2023). 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/ (accessed 08/27/2023).



white limestone synagogue was excavated in 1905-1907 by Helmut Kohl, Ernst Hiller, and Carl Watzinger under the auspices of the Deutsche Orient Gesellschaft.[①] Based on stylistic comparisons, mostly to Syrian buildings of the late Roman period, Kohl and Watzinger dated the synagogue to the late second to early third century. P. Gaudenzio Orfali, who conducted excavations at Capernaum in 1921-1926, identified the white limestone synagogue as the first century synagogue of the centurion mentioned in the Gospel of Luke.[②] Whereas Orfali's idenfication never gained widespread acceptance, many Israeli archaeologists still follow Kohl and Watzinger in dating the white limestone synagogue to the second to third century. However, since 1968 Italian archaeologists have discovered over 25000 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.[③] The latest of these finds published so far date to the first half of the sixth century CE, indicating that the white limestone synagogue was built centuries later than previously thought.[④]

Fig. 1 The White Limestone Synagogue at Capernaum (photo by the author)

① Helmut Kohl and Carl Watzinger, *Antike Synagogen in Galilaea* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1916).

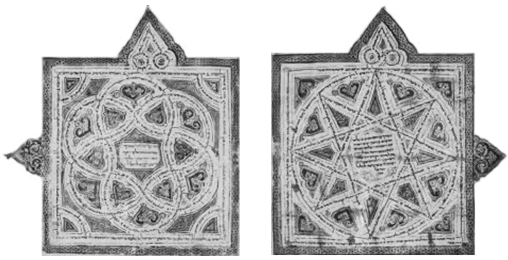
② P. Gaudenzio Orfali, *Capharnaüm et ses ruines d'après les fouilles accomplies a Tell-Houm par la Custodie Franciscaine de Terre Sainte (1905-1921)* (Paris: Auguste Picard, 1922), 84-85.

③ Stanislao Loffreda, "Coins from the Synagogue of Capharnaum," *Liber Annuus* 47 (1997): 223-244, here 223; also see Tine Rassalle, *Ancient Synagogue Coins, A Digital Dissertation Project (2021)*, at www.ancientsynagoguecoins.com/synagogue/capernaum (accessed 08/27/2023).

④ See Jodi Magness, *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine: A Reevaluation Nearly a Century After Sukenik's Schweich Lectures* (London: The British Academy; forthcoming).

No matter which date one prefers—second to third century or later—the white limestone synagogue postdates the time of Jesus. But the multitudes of Christian pilgrims who pour into Capernaum every day come to see the synagogue of the centurion mentioned by Luke, not the 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 century. 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 later, after a hiatus of hundreds of years. Nevertheless, visitors to Capernaum will notice a sign pointing to the synagogue of the time of Jesus by the steps leading up to the white limestone synagogue (see Fig. 2). What is the basis for this claim?


Fig. 2 Sign Pointing to the Synagogue of Jesus under the White Limestone Synagogue at Capernaum (photo by the author)



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 CE.[①] Virgilio Corbo identified three strata in and under the white limestone synagogue, which are as follows from latest to earliest:[②]

Stratum A: the white limestone synagogue

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 (massiciata 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 (massiciata A). Corbo identifies MB not as the foundation of the white limestone synagogue but as an earlier synagogue structure because their walls are not precisely aligned. 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 pottete essere? la sinagoga costruita dal Centurione romano (Lc. 7,5)?"[③]

Stanislao Loffreda has reevaluated the evidence for a first century

① Stanislao Loffreda, "Ceramica ellenistico-romana nel sottosuolo della sinagoga di Cafarnao," in *Studia Hierosolymitana* Ⅲ, ed. Giovanni C. Bottini (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1982), 273-312, here 290, 311-312; Matthew J. Grey, "Simon Peter in Capernaum, An Archaeological Survey of the First-Century Village," in *The Ministry of Peter, the Chief Apostle*, eds. Frank F. Judd Jr., Eric D. Huntsman, and Shon D. Hopkin (Provo: BYU Religious Studies Center, 2014), 28-66, here 47-48.

② Loffreda, "Ceramica ellenistico-romana," 314.

③ Virgilio C. Corbo, "Resti della sinagoga del primo secolo a Cafarnao," in *Studia Hierosolymitana* Ⅲ, ed. Giovanni C. Bottini (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1982), 313-357; here 337, 339.

synagogue. He defines as follows the three strata in and under the white limestone synagogue:[①]

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 massiciata A) below the white limestone synagogue: "D'altra parte mi sembra impossibile associare 'il muro di basalto' MB a quei pavimenti e datrlo di conseguenza nel primo secolo."[②]

Loffreda rejects Corbo's association of the cobblestone pavement (massiciata A) with MB because MB sits atop the pavement, which continues underneath it.[③] 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 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.[④]

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).[⑤] 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

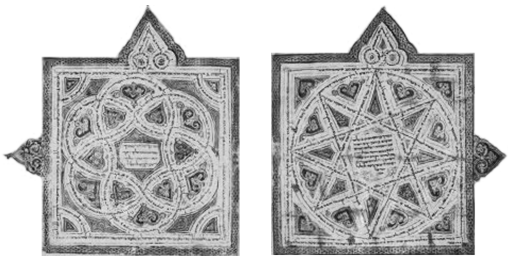
① Stanislao Loffreda, *Cafarnao V*, *Documentazione fotografica degli scavi* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 2005), 15.

② Loffreda, *Cafarnao V*, 15.

③ See, e.g., Stanislao Loffreda, *Recovering Capharnaum* (Jerusalem: Edizioni Custodia Terra Santa, 1985), 46; Loffreda, *Cafarnao V*, 167 DF 264; 168 DF 265; 172 DF 282.

④ Loffreda, *Recovering Capharnaum*, 45-47.

⑤ See Loffreda, *Cafarnao V*, 172-173, DF 282-286.



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 Zvi Uri 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.①

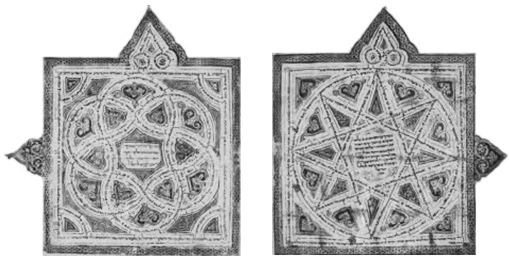
The floor of the Migdal synagogue was covered with cobblestones, which apparently were the foundation for mosaics (which were preserved in the corridor but not in the center of the main hall).② Therefore, one could argue that the cobblestone pavement at Capernaum was the foundation for a mosaic or other 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 the eastern part of the synagogue nave (L825) 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.③ 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

① Ma'oz, "The Synagogue of Gamla," 38.

② See Avshalom-Gorni and Najar, "Migdal."

③ For the pottery, see Loffreda, "Ceramica ellenistico-romana," 278 Fig. 3: 37-52 (Group G); the first century types mentioned by Loffreda on p. 290 are nos. 52 and 48-49.



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'."[①] 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.[②] 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.

## Ⅲ.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."[③]

① Kloppenborg, "The Theodotos Synagogue Inscription," 240.

② Ibid., 242.

③ Loffreda, *Recovering Capharnaum*, 18-19 (note that here he dates the white limestone synagogue to the late fourth century); also see Loffreda, *Cafarnao V*, 16: "il muro di basalto appartiene ad un edificio (sinagogale) anteriore alla sinagoga in pietra."

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 ashlars 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."①

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."② 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.③ 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."④ 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.⑤ 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

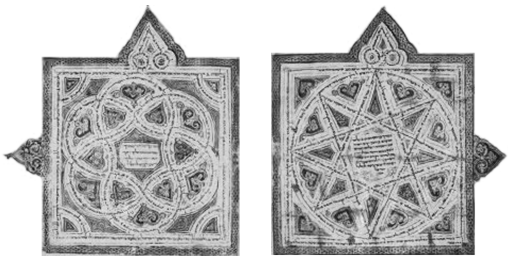
① Loffreda, *Recovering Capharnaum*, 18-19; Loffreda, *Cafarnao V*, 16.

② Stanislao Loffreda, "Coins from the Synagogue," 239.

③ See Corbo, "Resti della sinagoga," 344-345, Tav. 2.

④ Loffreda, *Recovering Capharnaum*, 19.

⑤ Loffreda, "Coins from the Synagogue," 225; Loffreda, *Recovering Capharnaum*, 19. See, e.g., Loffreda, *Cafarnao V*, 126 DF 174, 175; 128 DF 178.



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.①

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).② 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."③ Furthermore, as Matthew Grey observes, despite its height, MB has no openings for doors, while the supposed stylobates are too tall and would have obstructed movement.④

These factors, as well as the size and layout of MB, indicate that it was

① See Loffreda, *Cafarnao V*, 169, DF 271; 171, DF 274, 276, 277; 173 DF 283; but 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?

② Loffreda, *Cafarnao V*, 16, 168-169 DF 271; Loffreda, "Coins from the Synagogue," 225: "In Trench 21, for instance, the walls of stratum A almost reach the height of the mortar of stratum C." Also see Loffreda, *Cafarnao V*, 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.

③ Loffreda, "Coins from the Synagogue," 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."

④ Grey, "Simon Peter in Capernaum," 47.

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.[①] 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 (massiciata A) in L825, below the eastern part of the synagogue nave.[②] The latest types in this deposit (Loffreda's Group G) are Kefar Hananya (KH) Ware Form 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).[③] The same ceramic types were found on top of massiciata A elsewhere under the synagogue.[④] 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.[⑤]

The coins from Stratum A include fourth century issues found with the pottery on top of massiciata A in L825.[⑥] 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 the north aisle (L802), and a coin of Arcadius

① See Loffreda, *Recovering Capharnaum*, 49.

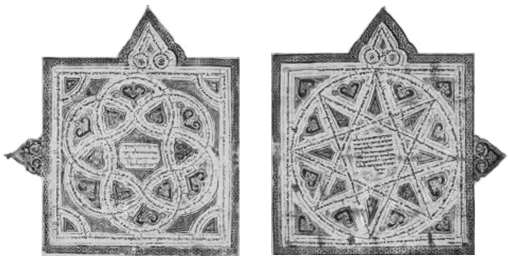
② Loffreda, "Coins from the Synagogue," 225-226, notes that the cobblestone pavement in L802, L824, and L825 was well preserved.

③ Loffreda, "Ceramica ellenistico-romana," 283 Group G (from Trench 25), 278 Fig. 3: 37-52 (nos. 40-66 are KH 1e); Stanislao Loffreda, *Cafarnao VI*, *Tipologie e contesti stratigrafici della ceramica* (*1968-2003*) (Jerusalem: Edizioni Terra Santa, 2008), 365, Reg. No. 6474 (PIAT 66), from 825.3; 249-250. For the dating of Kefar Hananya Ware, see David Adan-Bayewitz, *Common Pottery in Roman Galilee*, *A Study in Local Trade* (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 1993); Jodi Magness and Daniel Schindler, "Pottery and Jewish Settlement in Late Roman Galilee," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 374 (2015): 191-207.

④ See Loffreda, *Cafarnao VI*, 360-365.

⑤ See Loffreda, "Coins from the Synagogue," 240-241; the pottery from L825 Group G includes an almost complete profile of KH 1e Fig. 3:45 (Reg. no. 6425).

⑥ Loffreda, "Ceramica ellenistico-romana," 290; however, no coins from Stratum A in L825 are listed in Loffreda, "Coins from the Synagogue," 230.



(383-388 CE) from the south end of the east aisle(L817).[①] In addition, coins of Honorius (395-401 CE) and Theodosius (383-388 CE) were found in Stratum A under the balcony on the south side of the synagogue (L818).[②] 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.[③]

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.[④] 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.[⑤] The discovery of these coins under the stylobate contradicts the claim made by some archaeologists 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.[⑥] Another three coins described by Loffreda as "late Roman"

① Loffreda, "Coins from the Synagogue," 230, who notes that a third century CE coin was found under the threshold of a Stratum A dwelling in L817.

② Loffreda, "Coins from the Synagogue," 230, 233.

③ Benjamin Y. Arubas and Rina Talgam, "Jews, Christians and '*Minim*': Who Really Built and Used the Synagogue at Capernaum—A Stirring Appraisal," in *Knowledge and Wisdom*, *Archaeological and Historical Essays in Honour of Leah Di Segni*, eds. Giovanni C. Bottini, L. Daniel Chrupcała, and Joseph Patrich (Jerusalem: Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, 2014), 237-274; here 261-262, 268. See Loffreda, "Ceramica ellenistico-romana," 290, 311-312; Loffreda, "Coins from the Synagogue," 237, 239.

④ Loffreda, "Coins from the Synagogue," 229, who says that "more than one hundred late Roman coins were found in the foundation of the stylobate"; Bruno Callegher, *Cafarnao IX*, *Monete dall'area urbana di Cafarnao (1968-2003)* (Jerusalem: Studium Biblicum Franciscanum, 2007), 18. Also see Jodi Magness, "The Question of the Synagogue: The Problem of Typology," in *Judaism in Late Antiquity*, *Part Three*, *Where We Stand: Issues and Debates in Ancient Judaism*, Volume Four: *The Special Problem of the Synagogue*, eds. Alan J. Avery-Peck and Jacob Neusner (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 1-48, 79-91; here 20; Rassalle, *Ancient Synagogue Coins*, at https://ancientsynagougecoins.com/synagogue/Capernaum [Fifth Deposit]) (accessed 08/29/2023).

⑤ Loffreda, "Coins from the Synagogue," 229-230.

⑥ See Magness, "The Question of the Synagogue," 20.

were found in Stratum B in L825, on the east side of the synagogue nave.[①] 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).[②]

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 bilanceolate 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.[③] The white limestone synagogue was erected on top of MB approximately a century later.

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.[④] 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.[⑤] 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

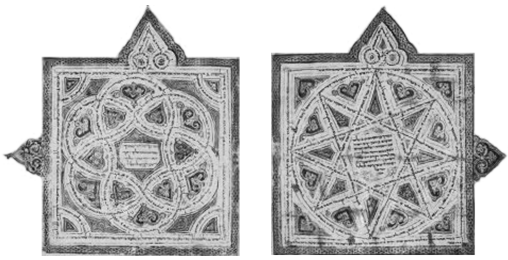
① Loffreda, "Coins from the Synagogue," 230.

② Stanislao Loffreda, "The Synagogue of Capharnaum. Archaeological Evidence for Its Late Chronology," *Liber Annuus* 22 (1972): 5-29; here 14.

③ For the pottery from these deposits, see Loffreda, *Cafarnao Ⅵ*, 359-365. For bilanceolate oil lamps (Loffreda's LUC Type 5), see Loffreda, *Cafarnao Ⅵ*, 50-51; Stanislao Loffreda, *Cafarnao Ⅶ*, *Documentazione grafica della ceramica (1968-2003)* (Jerusalem: Edizioni Terra Santa, 2008), 17-18.

④ William B. Dinsmoor, *The Architecture of Ancient Greece, An Account of Its Historic Development* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1975), 280-281.

⑤ Dinsmoor, *The Architecture of Ancient Greece*, 229.



but languished for years after funding ran out, and was only completed in 2022.[①] 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.[②]

## Conclusion

This review indicates that neither the basalt walls (MB) under the white limestone synagogue at Capernaum nor the cobblestone pavement below MB belongs to a synagogue from the time of Jesus. In this case, however, the absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence since pre-70 C.E. synagogues typically were modest structures that do not always leave identifiable traces in the archaeological record. Nevertheless, at present there are no definite archaeological remains of a synagogue from the time of Jesus at Capernaum, nor, indeed, is it possible to establish that such a synagogue even existed.

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① See https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/national-campus-for-the-archaeology-of-israel-set-to-be-completed-by-end-2022/ (accessed on 30 July 2023).

② See 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 (accessed on 30 July 2023).

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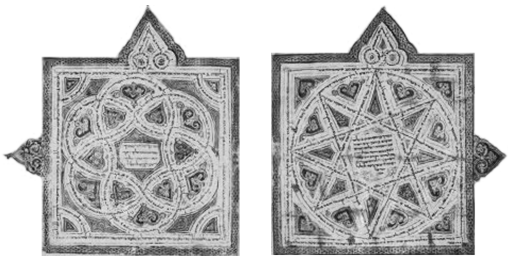

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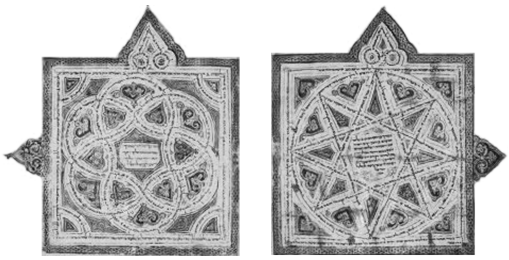

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