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## JEWES AND CHRISTIANS AT ANCIENT CHERSONESUS: THE TRANSFORMATION OF JEWISH PUBLIC SPACE<sup>1</sup>

Diaspora communities played significant roles in the late antique period throughout most of the Roman and early Byzantine periods. Communities of Jews at cities such as Stobi, Apamea, Sardis, Aphrodisias, and Ostia created architectural and symbolic expressions that illustrated the multifaceted webs of power within which they prospered.<sup>2</sup> Epigraphic evidence illustrates important local associations with pagan neighbors as non-Jewish patrons built or helped sponsor activities associated with the Jewish community. The Aphrodisias inscription illustrates how close a connection such ties could become.<sup>3</sup> But Jews also had a religious or ethnic identity that as one moves into the fourth and fifth centuries of this era became focussed on the sacred law and at times the sacred language, Hebrew. These patterns are well documented for Asia Minor, Italy, and of course Israel. But only faint hints of Diaspora presence in the North Black Sea have surfaced.

Archaeological and archival work by members of the Black Sea Project has brought to light a new chapter of Diaspora presence in the North Black Sea, notably at the ancient site of Chersonesus located on the outskirts of present day Sebastopol. The following discusses the rediscovery of a Jewish presence there, including a Jewish public building, most likely a synagogue, which provides important evidence for understanding Diaspora Judaism in this region and its possible demise as the climate of tolerance changed in the sixth century CE. This article does not represent the first presentation of this material<sup>4</sup> nor is it intended as a final excavation report. The latter shall be published with my fellow directors of the Black Sea Project. Rather, this discussion offers my first written foray into situating the obvious presence of Jews at Chersonesus within the broader political and cultural climate of the late antique period.<sup>5</sup> Evidence for Jewish presence at Chersonesus is much more evident for late antiquity.

Several clues indicate the presence of a synagogue immediately under or in the vicinity of the sixth century CE basilica. A semi-circular structure, reexcavated by BSP in 1998, dates to the founding of the lower fifth century

CE basilica. Below noted that the semi-circular structure was covered by debris including marble shavings and fragments he associated with the building of the fifth century CE basilica. Similar marble shavings dating to the 4/5 th century CE were also found by the BSP. Parallels with the synagogue at Ostia suggest its possible use as a podium or location of the Torah shrine. Leonard Rutgers has persuasively argued that a key feature added only after the third century CE to some Diaspora synagogues was an apse or aedicula that probably housed the Torah.<sup>6</sup> Both the date and other finds lend further credence to this half circle serving as part of a Jewish complex, probably a synagogue.

In excavations of the south nave of the sixth century basilica a lower apsidal building dating to the fifth century was located. Abutting the complex (or less likely serving as a southern addition) was a complex that included a mosaic floor<sup>7</sup> and nearby associated wall plaster fragments with inscriptions in Greek and Hebrew<sup>8</sup>. Strzheletsky, who carried out additional study of the basilica before its restoration<sup>9</sup>, dated the lower mosaic is related to the lower Basilica and dates to 4th-5th cc., since two coins he found in the make-up under the middle edge of the mosaic date to that period<sup>10</sup> a date confirmed by recent re-examinations of the coins.<sup>11</sup>

Of particular interest is the plaster fragment with Hebrew inscribed on it. Professor Esti Eshel of Bar Ilan University (Israel) has analysed the Hebrew inscriptions on fragment No.269 and offers the following translation:<sup>12</sup>

1. ...] the One Who chose  
Jerusalem (i.e., God)

[ 2. ... will bless ] Hanania from the  
Bosporos [

3. ...] Amen, Amen Sela

Eshel assumes the phrase "He Who chose Jerusalem" derives from the Biblical text (Zacharia, 3:2): "...let you be forbidden by the Lord Who had chosen Jerusalem..." (here—in a negative context). Appeal to God as part of a blessing in a dedication is found in the Aramean inscription in the synagogue of Jericho, which reads as follows: "The One Who knows their names...will inscribe them in the Book of Life..." In the inscriptions in ancient synagogues sculptors tended to use an

epithetical substitute (e.g., "The King of the World") instead of the name of God.<sup>13</sup>

First, because it was found in destruction debris and was part of the destroyed building in close association with a menorah, it seems safe to assume that the lower building was used by Jews at some period of its use, probably as a synagogue. Second the provisional dating of the inscription to the third or possibly the early fourth century fits the archaeological context that we have uncovered in our current excavations. Third, it indicates that Jerusalem, even if part of a biblical quote is viewed as important by this Diaspora community (or taking a minimalist approach by at least one Jew who carved on a plaster wall in the fourth or fifth century). The inscription parallels another inscription in the Crimea from roughly the same period that has Hebrew, the bilingual Hebrew - Greek funerary inscription from Panticapaeum (CIJ 688) from the third or fourth century.<sup>14</sup>

The third piece of evidence for a synagogue occurred in 1957 when Zhrebtsov while working on the restoration of the Basilica 1935, came across a limestone block with a well crafted relief of a menorah.<sup>15</sup> The block had been re-used as construction material in the foundation of the apse of the sixth century Christian basilica<sup>16</sup>. The nicely cut menorah has a lulab and shofar flanking it. The stone seems part of a building for reasons outlined below. Hachlili observes that most menorah flanked by ritual objects in the Diaspora began between the 3rd-4th centuries and were generally associated with tombs. After the fourth century they were associated with both funerary and non-funerary arenas, a pattern fitting our archaeological context.<sup>17</sup> The only shofar that I could find that had holes similar to the Chersonesus example was one found at Beth Shean, which had 3 in the end<sup>18</sup> and another with 2 holes from Ma'on.<sup>19</sup> Most do not have holes. Indeed this seems a misconstrued notion of what a shofar should look like, perhaps integrating elements of flute or pipe. In any case the menorah's fine condition is a tribute to the hardness of the stone and the fact that it did not travel far.

Thus the mosaic building with associated frescoes was a public building, dating to the late 4th or early 5th c. The proximity of the half circle, the finely cut menorah and Hebrew inscription suggests this was a Jewish public building. The frescoes were on the north side of a wall buttressing or less likely connected to the fifth century apsidal building. The quality of stone used as well as the

association with a monumental building suggest that the Jewish community in fifth century was well entrenched in the city. Thus, like evidence from most of the rest of the empire, one community of Jews appears to flourish during the pagan period into the fourth and fifth centuries C.E. Clearly the apsidal building and the mosaic building complex changed the neighborhood substantially. It also appears that based on the half circle, the inscribed plaster and the menorah that the mosaic building at some point in its life, notably late fourth/early fifth to its sixth century destruction functioned as a synagogue.

The Byzantine period brought dramatic changes to the landscape of Chersonesus.<sup>20</sup> Over two dozen churches and four major basilicas (one ours, the other the Uvarov basilica over 50 meters long) were apparently built over the subsequent four centuries.<sup>21</sup> New houses sprang up, pottery was prodigiously produced, numbers of Chersonesian coins from the period are found and a great deal of material remains discovered.<sup>22</sup> Although some uncertainty exists when the actual foundation of some of the churches on site occurred, our excavations and the excavations of Belov confirm at least one basilica, the "1935 basilica" where such vigorous growth and redevelopment took place. Apparently the builders not only reused a menorah stone in the foundation of the second basilica but systematically hacked up second-fourth century CE sarcophagi from a nearby Roman necropolis using some of those decorated with figures and inscriptions as part of the same foundation layer as the stone with the menorah.<sup>23</sup> At the least, it was reuse of easy to get high quality marble. At worst it was a crass disregard for the sacred character in which the stones were originally placed. No big surprise actually. In the fourth or fifth century fortress built by Christians after the destruction of Sepphoris in Galilee, the builders used Roman sarcophagi as the corner stones in plain view to the public. Further, destruction of fourth century synagogues occurred at Stobi, Apamea, and Gerasa and were replaced by Christian basilicas.<sup>24</sup> Such destruction was not systemic across the Byzantine empire as the continuation of the Sardis synagogue into the 7th century indicates.<sup>25</sup> But such activities stemmed from the increasingly harsh strictures placed on pagans and Jews from Theodosius I (379-395) on (cf. the destruction of the pagan temples in Carthage, Alexandria<sup>26</sup> and

Aphrodisias where the temple was converted into a church, probably in the fifth century)<sup>27</sup>. The use of stones with pagan and Jewish symbols was more than simply re-using available stone. It represented a clear, albeit crude, signal as to where political and spiritual power now lay (cf. decree forbidding the rebuilding of destroyed synagogues by Honorius and Theodosius II in 423).<sup>28</sup>

In summary, recent evidence indicates that Chersonesus in west Crimea also had a Jewish presence in the form of a public building, probably a synagogue that existed from at least the fifth century CE. In addition, at least one Jew at Chersonesus sought a connection to Jerusalem, even if symbolic, suggesting a kind of identity existed between Jews even from the farthest reaches of the empire. Moreover, the Hebrew inscription indicates an effort to express allegiance to the Holy language, another source of identity. The writer or dedicant apparently expected others to agree. The space of the lower basilica was destroyed or out of use by the sixth century CE. One monumental structure replaced by another. Frank Trombley discusses what he calls «temple conversion» in this period, which he defines as «demolition or partial dismantling of a sacred edifice and its modification into a church or martyrion»<sup>29</sup>. Demolition of

buildings was one way to make way for Christian basilicas since most of the prime public space (agora, council chambers, etc.) was already taken. Thus for economic and, one must still suppose, theological reasons such areas drew the bulk of attention.<sup>30</sup> Christian rebuilders had no qualms about using stones with clear pagan and Jewish symbols. At best this was benign indifference. How this destructive reconstruction was viewed at a later time at Chersonesus is less clear and indeed the next generation would not necessarily know about the incorporation of such symbols in the sixth century complex. But those who built the structure knew. And they didn't care. The lack of systematic desecration of the menorah or the portraits on the sarcophagi (as occurred at Aphrodisias)<sup>31</sup> suggest that arrogance or indifference rather than open hostility was operative. But the incorporation of powerful religious and cultural symbols, one from a synagogue, the other from pagan graves makes a key point as to where power now resides. This transformation of space provide yet more evidence for what F. Millar has observed; that is, Jewish communities had a period of prosperity during the second through fourth centuries but faced increasing persecution from the Christian church in the fifth and subsequent centuries.

#### NOTES

1. Information presented in this paper could not have happened without the work and support of my colleagues Drs. Miron Zolotarov, Robert MacLennan, J. Andrew Overman, and Mr. Jack Olive, Mr. Gary Lindstrom, and Mr. Dmitry Korobkov. They are not responsible, however, for any errors of interpretation.
2. For a useful overview see L. M. White, *The Social Origins of Christian Architecture, Volume I Building God's House in the Roman World: Architectural Adaptation among Pagans, Jews and Christians* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990).
3. J. Reynolds and R. Tannenbaum, *Jews and Godfearers at Aphrodisias* (Cambridge: The Cambridge Philological Society, 1987). The resultant discussions of this important find are too voluminous to list here.
4. Previous reports on the results of the Black Sea Project's excavations at Chersonesus include R. S. MacLennan. In *Search of the Jewish Diaspora: A First Century Synagogue in Crimea?* // *BAR*, (March/April), 1996, v.22. P. 46-52; Overman Э., Макленнан Р., Золотарев М.И. К изучению иудейских древностей Херсонеса. *Археология*, 1997, №1. С. 57-63.
5. Portions of this paper have been presented in a number of places notably at the international meeting held at Chersonesus in 1997, August 29 - September 1: see «Chersonesus Tavricheskiy: Istorico-archeologicheskii aspekt». Sevastopol, 1997.
6. Leonard V. Rutgers, "Diaspora Synagogues: Synagogue Archaeology in the Greco-Roman World," in S. Fine (ed.) *Sacred Realm: The Emergence of the Synagogue in the Ancient World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 67-95. Rutgers also has a picture of the aedicula at Ostia.
7. See Reports No.609 and No.2875. All reference to these archive reports is possible because of the excellent archival work directed by Dr. Robert MacLennan and the numerous persons who worked with him, notably Dr. James van Geldern of Macalester College.
8. See Zherebtsov, E.N., Report No.734, 1957. The material discovered on the same site and in the same layer (see Reports Nos.617-618, 1950, and Nos.609, 1301 of 1950), they were originally dated to a much later time period (7th or 8th centuries). But after additional study of the monument

- and the dating of the destruction of the Basilica I by the time no later than the 6th century, 9. Report No.609, pp.39-40.
10. Report No.609, p.41.
11. I. A. Zavadskaya, «Problems of Stratigraphy and Chronology of the Architectural Complex «Basilica 1935» in Chersonesos. Materials in Archeology, History and Ethnography of Tavria volume 5 (Simferopol: Tavria, 1996), pp. 94-105 (Russian).
12. See her forthcoming article in the Jewish Quarterly Review. I thank her for providing a preliminary reading and analysis of the inscription. For early discussions of the fragment and its provenance see Chersonesos archive Report No.1301, p.57 and p.66; Report No.609, p.29; report No.617, p.16.
13. Seth Smith from the Jewish Theological Seminary (New York, USA) suggests that the inscription «Bosporos» serves as indication of Hanania's origins.
14. Schurer, 37.
15. See Report No.734, 1957.
16. E.N. Zhrebtsov, «Toward the Study of Early Middle Ages Monuments in Chersonesos», Byzantine Chronicle 23 (1963), p.210.
17. Rachel Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Land of Israel*. Brill, 1988, pp. 266-267.
18. Hachlili, p. 258.
19. Hachlili, p. 260.
20. A pattern reflected throughout the late antique world. See A. Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity AD 395-600* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), pp. 159-175.
21. Dating the building of particular buildings is problematic. A careful reexamination of excavation reports combined with select probes using more rigorous modern techniques of excavation and the sharper understanding of ceramic typology is needed such as has been done by the BSP for the "1935" basilica, which clearly date to the sixth century.
22. John Smedley, «Archaeology and the History of Cherson: A Survey of some Results and Problems», In: *Archeion Pontou*, pp. 172-192 (esp. p. 180).
23. Below, G. Report of the Excavations at Chersonesus, 1935-1936. National Publishing House, Crimea, 1938, pp. 40-58.
24. F. Millar, "The Jews of the Graeco-Roman Diaspora between paganism and Christianity, AD 312-438 «In: Judith Lieu, John North, Tessa Rajak (eds). *The Jews Among Pagans and Christians in the Roman Empire* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 100-102.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 116.
27. Averil Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity AD 395-600* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 156.
28. A. Linder, *The Jews in Roman Imperial Legislation* (Detroit and Jerusalem, 1987) and F. Millar, "The Jews of the Graeco-Roman Diaspora," p. 118.
29. Frank R. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion and Christianization c. 370-529*, volume I. (Brill, 1993), p. 108.
30. *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110; Friedrich W. Deichmann, «Früchristliche Kirchen im antiken Heiligütern», *Jahrbuch des Deutschen Archeologischen Instituts* 54 (1939), pp. 105-136.
31. Three Christians went to letters inscribed on the theater walls and semi-systematically crossed out the name of Aphrodite. The city's name itself was changed in the seventh century to Stauropolis, city of the Cross; see A. Cameron, *The Mediterranean World in Late Antiquity (AD 395-600)*, p. 156.