

Ancient Jewish Communities in Macedonia, Thrace and Upper Epirus

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ABSTRACT

Literary, epigraphic and archaeological-architectural evidence attest to the existence of Jewish communities in Macedonia, Thrace and Upper Epirus (nowadays Albania) during the Roman and early Byzantine periods. The *Acts of the Apostles* mention Jewish communities and their synagogues in Philippi, Thessaloniki and Verroia in Macedonia. The discovery of Greek inscriptions at Bizye (in Thrace), in Thessaloniki, in Dion and in the ancient synagogue at Stobi, suggests that these communities had preserved their religious independence and enjoyed a secure social, economic and cultural status. An ancient Jewish tomb found in Thessaloniki, decorated with a *menorah*, and the synagogue of Claudius Tiberius Polycharmos at Stobi and that in Saranda (Upper Epirus), add archaeological-architectural evidence to the literary sources. Although the literary sources, the epigraphic evidence and the archaeological-architectural finds are relatively scant, it would seem that other Jewish communities too existed in these regions and in other parts of the Balkan peninsula.

Key words: *Archisynagogos*. Balkan peninsula. Guild. *Menorah*. Patriarch. Synagogue. *Tetrastoon*. *Triclinium*.

Antiguas comunidades judías en Macedonia, Tracia y Épiro Superior

RESUMEN

Evidencias de carácter literario, epigráfico y arqueológico-arquitectónico, atestiguan la existencia de comunidades judías en Macedonia, Tracia y Épiro Superior (hoy Albania) durante los períodos romano y bizantino temprano. Los *Hechos de los Apostoles* mencionan la presencia de comunidades judías, y sus sinagogas, en Filipos, Tesalónica y Verroia, en Macedonia. El descubrimiento de inscripciones griegas en Bizya (Tracia), en Tesalónica y Dión, y en la antigua sinagoga de Stobia, sugieren que dichas comunidades preservaron su independencia religiosa y gozaron de un seguro estatus social, económico y cultural. Una antigua tumba judía encontrada en Tesalónica, decorada con una *menorah*, la sinagoga de Claudius Tiberius Polycharmos en Stobia y la de Saranda (Épiro Superior), añaden pruebas arqueológico-arquitectónicas a las fuentes literarias. A pesar de que las fuentes literarias, los datos epigráficos y los hallazgos arqueológicos son relativamente escasos, parece que en estas regiones, y en otras de la Península Balcánica, existieron también otras comunidades judías.

Palabras clave: *Archisynagogos*. Península Balcánica. Gremio. *Menorah*. Patriarca. Sinagoga. *Tetrastoon*. *Triclinium*.

Literary sources, epigraphic evidence and archaeological-architectural remains shed light on the existence of Jewish communities in Macedonia, Thrace and Upper Epirus (nowadays Albania) in the Roman and early Byzantine periods.¹ These three sources reveal not only the existence of ancient Jewish communities in Phillipi,² Thessaloniki,³ Beroea (Berrhoea or Verroia), Dion and Stobi in Macedonia, Bizye in Thrace and Saranda (Onchesmos/Anchiasmos) in Upper Epirus, but also attest to their importance and status.

According to *Acts of the Apostles*, Paul, on his journeying to disseminate Christianity and its teachings, passed through some towns in Macedonia in which there were Jewish communities and synagogues. He prayed at a number of synagogues, where he also preached and reproved the congregation, until he and his followers were forced to flee from the Jewish objectors. Paul spent a number of days in Phillipi, arriving there with his followers straight from the island of Samothrace and the city of Neapolis: “And from there to Phillipi, a city of the first rank in that district of Macedonia, and a Roman colony. Here we stayed for some days, and on the Sabbath day we went outside the city gate by the riverside, where we thought there would be a place of prayer, and sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there”.⁴

Spurred on by their faith, Paul and his followers persisted on their missionary journey with great courage and self-sacrifice; steadfastly and confidently persuasive in their efforts, with their beliefs guiding their steps. They chose for their targets large, famous cities with a flourishing Jewish population, such as Thessaloniki and Beroea / Verroia, where they visited the synagogues, preached their sermons and expounded upon the Law: “They now travelled by way of Amphipolis and came to Thessalonica, where there was a Jewish synagogue. Following his usual practice, Paul went to their meetings: and for the next three Sabbaths he argued with them, quoting texts of Scripture”. In Thessaloniki, Paul met with sharp opposition from the local Jewish community. To avoid being harmed, he and his followers were forced to abandon their mission and escape in the middle of the night to Verroia, where they were received with greater tolerance: “As soon as darkness fell, the members of the congregation sent Paul and Silas off to Beroea (Verroia). On arrival, they made their way to the synagogue”.⁵ Their words and expositions were heard out patiently in the synagogue, but there too the long arm of the Jews of Thessaloniki reached them, for upon hearing that Paul and his followers were persisting in preaching and discoursing on the Law, they came to Verroia and stirred up the local Jews against them.⁶

¹ For an historical background and discussion on Jewish settlements in Greece (including the Aegean Islands and Crete), see MAZUR 1935, 7-14.

² For an epitaph of Flavius(?) Nicostratus Aurelius Oxycholius, discovered in 1987 in the western cemetery of ancient Philippi, where a synagogue is mentioned there, see NOY – PANAYOTOV – BLOEDHORN 2004, 88-91 (with bibliographical references).

³ A bilingual dedicatory inscription in Hebrew (in Samaritan letters) and Greek, found in Thessaloniki, attests to the existence of both a Samaritan community and a synagogue in the city (see SCHIBY 1977, 103-110; NOY – PANAYOTOV – BLOEDHORN 2004, 100-105).

⁴ ACTS 16, 11-13.

⁵ ACTS 17, 1-2, 10.

⁶ ACTS 17, 11-13.

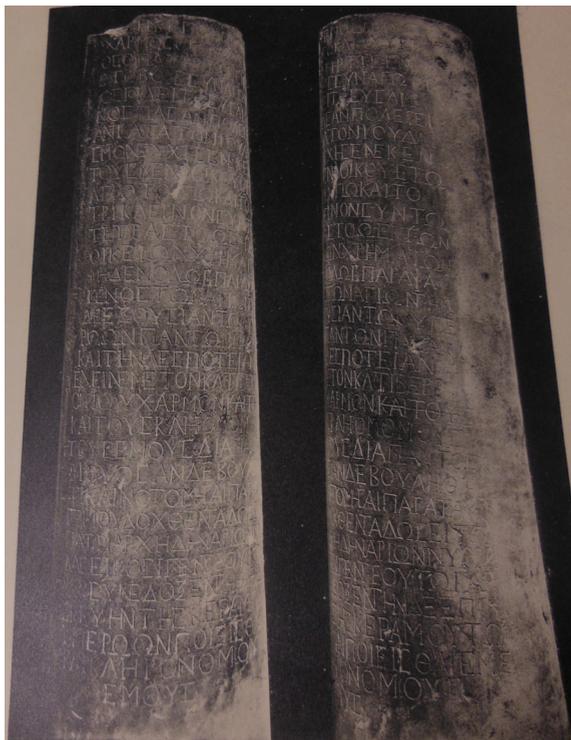


Fig. 1. Stobi, the Greek inscription of Polycharmos (after: VULIC 1932, Pl. XIX).

Philo of Alexandria too states in his writings that there were Jews in Macedonia:

..., τὸν αὐτὸν τρόπον καὶ εἰς Εὐρώπην, Θετταλίαν, Βοιωτίαν, Μακεδονίαν, ... οὐ μόνον αἱ ἡπειροὶ μεστὰὶ τῶν Ἰουδαϊκῶν ἀποικιῶν εἰσιν, ...

..., similarly also into Europe, Thessaly, Boeotia, Macedonia, ... And not only are the mainlands full of Jewish colonies, ...⁷

It can be assumed that the Jewish communities, referred to in a wide region of the Balkan peninsula, were flourishing ones, as can also be inferred from *Acts of the Apostles*, as quoted above.

Some inscriptions in Greek, discovered in Macedonia and Thrace, throw light upon the ancient Jewish communities in these regions.

1. The longest of those inscriptions is that of Claudius Tiberius Polycharmos (Κλαύδιος Τιβέριος Πολύχαρμος), also called Achyrios (Ἀχύριος), discovered in Stobi in 1931 (**Fig. 1**). The marble column on which the inscription is inscribed was found in

⁷ Philo, *De Legatione ad Gaium* 281-282 (F. H. Colson, trans., The Loeb Classical Library, X, London-Cambridge [Mass.], 1962).

secondary use in the forecourt (*atrium*) of a basilical church of the late 5th century CE, erected over the remains of two earlier buildings, almost certainly of two synagogues, built one above the other (Figs. 5-7).⁸ The southern wall of the church, perhaps also that of the two earlier synagogues, adjoins the northern wall of a huge and luxurious building, called by the excavators The Palace of Polycharmos (Figs. 3-4).

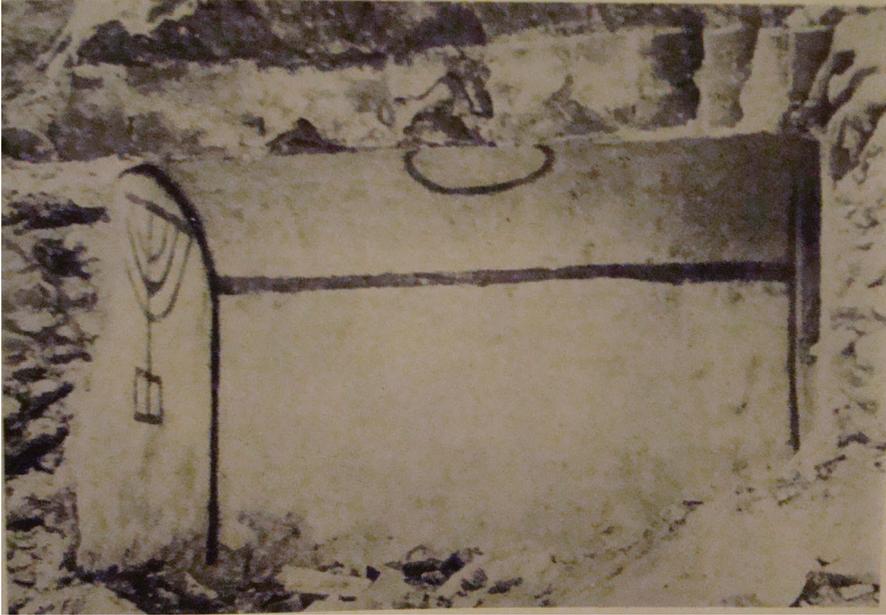


Fig. 2. Thessaloniki, a Jewish burial chamber (after: RECANATI 1972, 4).

The inscription describes the construction of halls (*οἴκοι*) and a *triclinium* (*τρικλινιον*) with a *tetrastoon* (*τετράστοον*), annexed to the synagogue (*ἅγιος τόπος*), thanks to the donation of Claudius Tiberius Polycharmos, the head or president of the community, referred to as “the father of the Stobi synagogue” (*ὁ πατήρ τῆς ἐν Στόβοις συναγωγῆς*). In the last section of the inscription, the benefactor reserves lifetime ownership and the possession of the upper floor for himself and his heirs. Anyone wishing to assume this right or to alter something on the upper floor, must pay the Patriarch 250,000 dinars (*μυριάδας εἴκοσι πέντε*). This huge amount, specified in the inscription, attests to the inflation that plagued the Roman Empire in the third century, especially from 235 to 284 CE, and helps to date both the inscription

⁸ See VULIC 1932, 291-298; SUKENIK 1934, 79-80; FREY I, 1936, 504-507 (No. 694); MARMORSTEIN 1936-37, 373-384; HENGEL 1966, 145-183; LIFSHITZ 1967, 18-19; WHITE 1996, 71; FINE 1997, 139; NOY – PANAYOTOV – BLOEDHORN 2004, 62-71; KLOPPENBORG – ASCOUGH 2011, 340-345 (with bibliographical references). The existence of an active Jewish community at Stobi, at least from the 2nd century CE to the middle of the 5th century, is also evinced by several other inscriptions on stone, metal (one includes a *menorah*, *lulab* and *ethrog*), in mural paintings and graffiti, that were discovered in the site (NOY – PANAYOTOV – BLOEDHORN 2004, 72-74; WISEMAN 2009-2011, 325-350). For the archaeological excavations in Stobi, see below, n. 23.

and the Polycharmos synagogue. Accordingly, the reasonable date for this inscription is the end of the 3rd century CE, possibly 279 CE.⁹

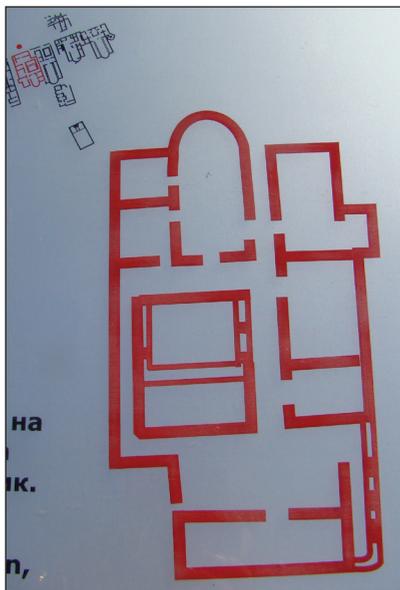


Fig. 3. Stobi, ground plan of the Palace of Polycharmos (drawing on a signboard *in situ*).

Polycharmos's private dwelling would seem to have been modified during the owner's lifetime as a place of prayer (synagogue) and to serve, *inter alia*, the local community.¹⁰ In return for the right to live on the upper floor, Polycharmos undertook to pay for the repair of the roof, desiring that he and his heirs be able to live out their lives in the "holy place", that is, on the premises of the synagogue. As a man of standing and wealth, Polycharmos could doubtlessly have purchased a house wherever he wished, but he preferred to retain for himself and his heirs the right to dwell forever in a place where the Divine Presence also dwelt. The precautions he took to ensure this, to which the inscription bears witness, indicate that he anticipated opposition, particularly after his death, from the members and heads of the Stobi community. There is no doubt that Polycharmos had been active and influential in the Jewish community of Stobi. His wealth and status must have helped considerably, but the question nonetheless remains as to why he had found it necessary to affirm in the inscription that he had lived all his life according to the tenets of Judaism (κατὰ τὸν Ἰουδαϊσμόν). Perhaps Polycharmos had been a proselyte by conviction, who crowned his new mode of life with the donation of the synagogue. This may well be a possibility, since such

⁹ See HENGEL 1966, 159, 181, although other scholars attribute it "to the 2nd-century renovation and expansion of the main hall in the 2nd century" (see WISEMAN 2009-2011, 345 and n. 63), that is, to 163-164 CE.

¹⁰ Cf. HENGEL 1966, 173.

proselytes were permitted to receive the sort of honorary titles as that conferred upon Polycharmos.¹¹



Fig. 4. Stobi, general view of the Palace of Polycharmos, facing east (photo: author).

The title of Patriarch (Πατριάρχης) in the inscription, which was surely meant to refer to the leader of the Jewish community in Stobi, is also found in one of the nine Greek inscriptions inlaid in the mosaic floor of the mid-4th century Hammath-Tiberias synagogue (λαμπροτάτων πατριαρχῶν).¹² The Stobi inscription may be the first mention of the title of Patriarch in the Diaspora. This emphasizes the connection between the Jews of the Land of Israel and the Diaspora Jewry in the latter days of the Roman Empire.

2. A burial inscription, discovered in Thessaloniki in the second half of the 19th century and attributed to the end of the 2nd century CE, reads:

Μημόριον Ἀβραμίου [υ] καὶ τῆς συνβιοῦ Θεοδότης

*The grave of Abramios (i.e. Abraham. – AO) and his wife Theodotes.*¹³

This inscription is clear evidence of the existence of a Jewish cemetery in Thessaloniki during the Roman period. The combination of names is interesting: the husband's, pure Hebrew; the wife's, patently Greek (*gift of God*).

¹¹ See HENGEL 1966, 178-181.

¹² See LIFSHITZ 1967, 63 (Nos. VII-VIII); DOTHAN 1968, 116-123; *Id.* 1981, 63-69; *Id.* 1983, 54-60; OVADIAH – OVADIAH 1987, 64-65.

¹³ FREY I, 1936, 504 (No. 693).



Fig. 5. Stobi, general view of the basilical church, erected over the remaining walls of two earlier buildings (synagogues), facing east (photo: author).

3. Archaeological excavations, directed by Georgios Sotiriades in 1930 in Dion, about 70km south-west of Thessaloniki, unearthed a Greek inscription that was published in a Greek archaeological journal without attracting much scholarly attention.¹⁴ The inscription is engraved on a fragmentary plaque of a tombstone and comprises two words, the first of which is incomplete:

-ιμος ἀρχισυνάγωγος

Sotiriades has proposed Μάξ- or Δέκ- as the prefix of the first word, so that the full name of the deceased would be Μάξιμος or Δέκιμος. The complete inscription would thus read:

[Μάξ]ιμος / [Δέκ]ιμος ἀρχισυνάγωγος

[Max]imos or [Dec]imos the head of the Synagogue.

Sotiriades notes:

Among the sporadic Roman-period finds from the excavations here, there is a fragmentary plaque of a tombstone bearing the name of Maximos or Decimos, the *archisynagogos*. It was by no means unusual for a small and affluent Greek city to have a substantial Roman community within it, at least from the reign of Emperor Tiberius onwards. At the same time, this city, which is not far from Thessaloniki and Verroia, also possessed a flourishing Jewish community, going back at least to the time of Paul the Apostle.¹⁵

¹⁴ SOTIRIADES 1932, 50.

¹⁵ SOTIRIADES 1932, 50 (Translation from the Greek. – AO).



Fig. 6. Stobi, ground plan of the basilical church; mosaic pavement, probably of the 4th-century CE synagogue; general view of the church and the earlier walls of the synagogues in the nave, facing west (after: PETROVA 2003, 77).

One inference from this burial inscription is that Dion may have possessed a Jewish community during the Roman period, with Maximos or Decimos (the deceased) as head of the synagogue, although the title *archisynagogos* does not necessarily refer only to this position; the term can also refer to the president or the head of an association or guild. To the best of our knowledge, the recent archaeological excavations in Dion, by the University of Thessaloniki, have not turned up any further evidence of the existence of a Jewish community there.

4. A burial inscription from Beroea / Verroia, in memory of one Gemellos, attributed to the period of the Roman Empire, reads:

Ἀμμία ἡ γυνὴ καὶ Κουαρτίων ὁ υἱὸς Γεμέλλω μνήμης χάριν καὶ οἱ συνήθεις οἱ περὶ Ποσιδῶνιν τὸν ἀρχισυνάγωγον

*His wife Ammia and his son Kouartion, and the members of the association (or guild) of Posidonis the president (the archisynagogos) to the memory of Gemellos.*¹⁶

The inscription notes that Gemelos was a member of the *συνήθεια* (association or guild) of which Posidonis was president. The point at issue is how to interpret the term *ἀρχισυνάγωγος*. Does it signify the head of a synagogue or the president of an association / guild? If we opt for the second, less common, interpretation, then the title indicates that the person held an administrative position.

¹⁶ ROMIOPOULOU 1973, 439, Pl. 392γ; *SEG* 27, 1977, No. 267; TOUCHAIS 1978, 706 (with Fig. 145 on p. 707). Several other epitaphs in Greek with Hebrew names and Jewish motifs (*menorah*, *ethrog*, *shofar* and *lulav*), dated to the 4th and 5th centuries CE, were found at Beroea (see NOY – PANAYOTOV – BLOEDHORN 2004, 76-87).



Fig. 7. Stobi, the remaining walls of the synagogues beneath the nave of the church, facing east (photo: author).

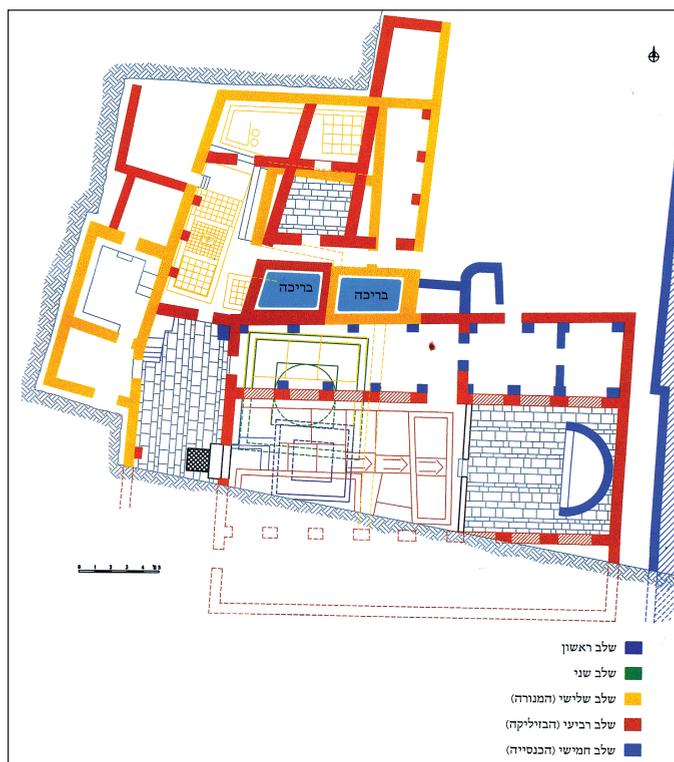


Fig. 8. Saranda, plan of the excavated area with the architectural remains (after: NETZER – FOERSTER 2005, 51).



Fig. 9. Saranda, general view of the basilica, facing east (photo: author).

5. A Greek burial inscription from the city of Bizye in Thrace (modern-day Viza) reads:

Μνη(μ)α Ῥεβέκας τῆς πρεσβυτέρας τῆς κεκυμημένης

*The tomb of the aged (or venerable) Rivka asleep (or at rest).*¹⁷

The *menorah* (seven-branched candelabrum) and the *ethrog* (citron) engraved above the inscription leave no doubt as to the Jewish identity of the deceased. The term *πρεσβυτέρα*, however, presents certain difficulties. Do we have here a venerable woman of position and standing in the community, whose title is identical to that of *ἀρχισυνάγωγος* as in the title of Roupheina the Jewess (Ῥουφεῖνα Ἰουδαία ἀρχισυνάγωγος) in a burial inscription from Izmir?¹⁸ In other words, are the two terms *πρεσβυτέρα* and *ἀρχισυνάγωγος* related, or does the term *πρεσβυτέρα* merely indicate a woman who has reached advanced age, i.e. Rivka the elderly Jewess? The term *πρεσβυτέρα* may even designate the wife of a *πρεσβύτερος*, that is, one of the members of the local *gerousia* (= council of elders),¹⁹ just as “*rebbetzin*” designates

¹⁷ DAWKINS – HASLUCK 1905-1906, 179-180 (No. 5); FREY I, 1936, 503 (No. 692).

¹⁸ OVADIAH 1978, 858.

¹⁹ FREY I, 1936, 503 (No. 692 – bottom). The title *πρεσβυτέρα* appears in one of the Greek inscriptions from Crete: Σοφία Γορτυνία πρεσβυτέρα κὲ ἀρχισυναγωγισσα Κισάμου ἐνθά. Μνήμη δικέας ἱς ἔῶνα, Ἀμήν (*Sophia, a Gortynian, an elder and leader of the synagogue of Kisamos, [lies] here. May the memory of the just woman be for ever, Amen*; see BANDY 1970, 143 [No. 3]). The inscription is clearly Jewish. In another case, the title *ἱέρσα* appears in a Greek inscription on a stele from Leontopolis (Tell el-Yehoudieh, Egypt), dated to 27 BCE. The meaning of this title is probably “of priestly family, daughter or wife of a *kohen*” and not a priestess in the cultic sense, or a woman with synagogue functions such as giving the blessing or reading from the *Torah* (see KASHER 1985, 130, 132, 162 and n. 190; HORBURY – NOY 1992, 157-158 [No. 84]).

the rabbi's wife. A reasonable assumption would be that the term *πρεσβυτέρα* designates the social status and position that Rivka had acquired in her own right by her deeds and abilities, as exercised within the Jewish community in Bizye.



Fig. 10. Saranda, one of the *aediculae* in the mosaic pavement of the nave of the basilica (synagogue – fourth stage), facing east (after: NETZER – FOERSTER 2005, 50 [top]).

6. Another inscription from Thrace mentions Γ. Ἰούλιον [Ο]ὐαλέντα as ἀρχισυνάγωγος, that is, president or head of the guild of barbers: τῆς συναγωγ[γ]ῆς τῶν κουρέων.²⁰ Does the word *συναγωγή* here refer to a professional guild or perhaps to a section of seating reserved for members of the barbers' guild in the synagogue? In the *diplostoon* (διπλόστοον = double colonnade), or the great synagogue in Alexandria, for instance, there were 'seventy-one golden chairs (*cathedrae*) corresponding to the seventy-one elders' and assigned sections for the different categories of craftsmen: goldsmiths, silversmiths, blacksmiths, etc. "They did not, however, sit together promiscuously, but goldsmiths themselves, silversmiths by themselves, blacksmiths by themselves, weavers by themselves, carpet-makers by themselves, so that if a stranger [ξένος = אַנְשׁוֹכַח] came he associated himself with his profession in order to get his livelihood".²¹ If we accept this possibility, then the ἀρχισυνάγωγος in the inscription under discussion signifies the head of a synagogue.

²⁰ *IGRRP I*, 1911, No. 782.

²¹ On the *diplostoon*, see *BABYLONIAN TALMUD*, *Sukkah* 51b; *TOSEFTA*, *Sukkah* IV 6; *JERUSALEM TALMUD*, *Sukkah* V 1. According to the Talmudic sources it was customary in Alexandria for members of the appropriate guild or association to extend hospitality to Jewish craftsmen who had come from out of town. As mentioned in *ACTS* (18:3), the Apostle Paul, while staying in Corinth, benefited from this custom and was the guest of Aquila, since both men were tent-makers.



Fig. 11. Saranda, general view of the rooms (third stage) in the western part of the excavated area, facing north (photo: author).

Among the Jewish relics that have come to light in Macedonia, a decorated Jewish tomb from the early Byzantine period deserves mention (**Fig. 2**). It was unearthed during foundation excavations for the University of Thessaloniki's new campus, which was built over the site of the ancient Jewish cemetery in the city. The tomb comprises a single rectangular chamber, with plastered and white-slipped walls and a barrel-vaulted ceiling. In the centre of the barrel-vaulted ceiling is a circle, perhaps a stylized and schematic wreath. On one of the end walls is a *menorah*, drawn in simple linear manner, with a horizontal line joining the feet of the three legs to form a rectangle. The opposite end wall appears to have featured a niche.²² The *menorah* leaves no doubt that this was a Jewish tomb.

I conclude this discussion with archaeological-architectural evidence from Stobi (Macedonia) and Saranda (Onchesmos / Anchiasmos in Upper Epirus), referring to the synagogues discovered at these two sites. This evidence undoubtedly adds another level to our understanding of the life and activity of the Jewish communities in Macedonia and Upper Epirus in general and Stobi and Saranda in particular in Late Antiquity.

²² RECANATI 1972, 4 (photo); *XPONIKA* 1979, 9. Interestingly, a Greek inscription, set in a *tabula ansata* on a marble sarcophagus, was found in 1964 in the eastern necropolis of Thessaloniki. The inscription, probably dates from the 3rd century CE, mentions Marcus Aurelius Iakob also (called) Eutychios, a Jew who made the sarcophagus while he was alive, for his wife and for himself. The inscription does use a formula requiring payment to "the synagogues" (probably a number of independent gatherings of Jews in the city) in the case of tomb violation (see NOY – PANAYOTOV – BLOEDHORN 2004, 95-98; KLOPPENBORG – ASCOUGH 2011, 375-377).



Fig. 12. Saranda, general view of the elongated hall (third stage) in the north-western part of the excavated area, facing north (photo: author).

The archaeological excavations conducted in the 1970s in Stobi²³ revealed, as mentioned above, that the late 5th-century CE church had been erected over the remains of two earlier buildings, identified as synagogues, although their plans are not sufficiently clear (**Figs. 5-7**). The earlier one was probably that of Polycharmos with the two annexed architectural units –the *triclinium* (τρίκλεινον) and the *tetrastoon* (τετράστοον)– referred to by the 3rd-century CE Greek inscription.²⁴ It is difficult to identify these units and define their function. Above the synagogue of Polycharmos was constructed the late 4th-century CE synagogue,²⁵ which was abandoned and demolished sometime during the 5th century.

Out of the five stages of the architectural complex, discovered in the city centre of Saranda, two –the third and fourth– unequivocally indicate the existence of a synagogue and a Jewish community in the 5th-6th centuries CE, and perhaps even earlier (**Figs. 8-9, 11-12**).²⁶ The third stage consists of an elongated hall and a number of rooms, located in the western and north-western part of the excavated site (**Figs. 8, 11-12**). A coloured mosaic pavement decorates this hall, depicting various motifs,

²³ See WISEMAN – MANO-ZISSI 1971, 395-411; *Id.* 1972, 408-411; *Id.* 1973, 391-393; *Id.* 1974, 146-148; *Id.* 1976, 293-297; MOE 1977, 148-157; WISEMAN 1978, 392-395; POEHLMAN 1981, 235-248; KRAABEL 1995, 112-115; WHITE 1996, 63 (Fig. 9 [No. 6]), 72 (Fig. 13); PETROVA 2003, 53-54; NOY – PANAYOTOV – BLOEDHORN 2004, 56-62.

²⁴ This synagogue is called by the excavators Synagogue I and is attributed to 2nd-late 3rd centuries CE (see WISEMAN 2009-2011, 325-326).

²⁵ Synagogue II is attributed by the excavators to early 4th-first half of the 5th centuries CE (see WISEMAN 2009-2011, 326).

²⁶ NETZER – FOERSTER 2005, 45-53. I also examined the remains of the site during a visit to Saranda in October 2013.

including a *menorah* flanked by a *shofar* (ram's horn) and an *ethrog* (citron) in its centre (Figs. 13-14). The fourth stage is represented by the basilical building (the synagogue), oriented to the east, in the south part of the excavated area (Figs. 8-9). Among the mosaics, decorating its floor, there are three *aediculae* in front of the bema, one below the other, most probably representing the Arks of the Law (Fig. 10).²⁷ Later, sometime in the 6th century CE, the synagogue complex, especially the basilica, was converted into a church, as occurred in Stobi²⁸ and Gerasa in Jordan²⁹ in the late 5th and 6th centuries CE, respectively.



Fig. 13. Saranda, the mosaic pavement in the elongated hall with the *menorah* in its centre, facing north (after: NETZER – FOERSTER 2005, back cover).

The term *archisynagogos* (ἀρχισυνάγωγος) is found in the Jewish world in Antiquity, as a title of the head of the synagogue. It appears already in the Theodotos's inscription of the 1st century CE, found in Jerusalem.³⁰ This title is also to be found in the pagan world, bearing the significance of head or president of a guild or a certain association (religious, commercial, etc.). The question is whether the Jews borrowed this title from the gentiles and adopted it for their own needs, giving the term a reli-

²⁷ For similar *aediculae*, depicted in the mosaic pavements of the synagogues at Beth Shean, Hammath Tiberias, Jericho and Kh. Susiyah, see OVADIAH – OVADIAH 1987, Pls. XXIX (1), LXV, XCH (1), CVI, CLXXIX; Beth Alpha and Na'aran, see OVADIAH 2002, 492 (Fig. 3), 493 (Fig. 4); Sepphoris/Zippori, see WEISS – NETZER 1996, 14, 18.

²⁸ See above.

²⁹ See BROWNING 1991, 200-201, Figs. 129-130 (on p. 203).

³⁰ SCHWABE 1956, 362-365.

gious significance; or perhaps the gentiles adopted the title from the Jews to designate the head or the president of a guild/association or group of devotees.³¹

All the above indicate that the ancient Jewish communities in the Balkan peninsula, and especially in Macedonia, Thrace and Upper Epirus, had preserved their religious independence and enjoyed a firm social, cultural and economic status. Despite the paucity of literary sources, epigraphic material, and archaeological-architectural finds, it is reasonable to assume that there were other Jewish communities too. All these communities together might have formed the nucleus for later Jewry up to modern times in the regions in question and in the Balkan peninsula. This hypothesis, relied on historical and logical cogitation, may be a challenge for future studies.

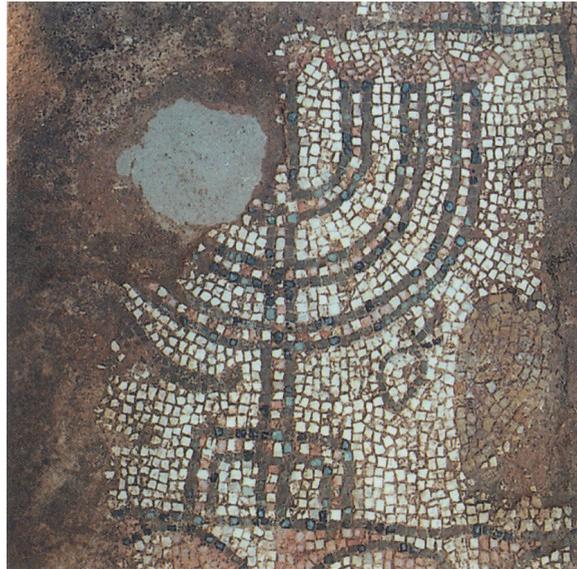


Fig. 14. Saranda, the *menorah* with the *shofar* and *ethrog* (after: NETZER – FOERSTER 2005, back cover).

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³¹ For a discussion on the *archisynagogoi*, see RAJAK – NOY 1993, 75-93.

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