

*The Cyma Reversa: a Classical Ornament in Northern Israel - Late Roman Period*¹

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SUMMARY.—The cyma reversa ornament is frequently used in architectural decoration throughout the Roman world, and appears also in pagan buildings and in synagogues in Northern Israel. This article attempts to trace the different stages of simplification and reduction of the ornament. This process resulted in the loss of its original characteristics, turning in from a plastic and asymmetric classical ornament, into a flat, symmetrical and unclassical one. The conclusion drawn in this paper is that this process can be attributed to the work of artisans that were unskilled and alien to the classical repertory, as well as to the application of the new cultural and aesthetic concepts of the Byzantine period.

RESUMEN.—El ornamento de la *cyma reversa* es frecuentemente utilizado en la decoración arquitectónica en todo el mundo romano y se encuentra igualmente en edificios paganos y en sinagogas en el Norte de Israel. La intención de este artículo es seguir las diferentes fases del ornamento, de las cuales ha resultado la pérdida de sus características originales, pasando de un ornamento clásico, plástico y asimétrico a otro plano, simétrico y no clásico. La conclusión es que este proceso puede ser atribuido al trabajo de artesanos no expertos y ajenos al repertorio clásico y asimismo a la aplicación de los nuevos conceptos culturales y estéticos del periodo bizantino.

The *cyma reversa* is the most complicated ornament in the classical repertory. It is one of the canonical ornaments with a fixed place in the decorative scheme of the Greek entablature (Leon71, p. 244). In Roman architectural decoration it occurs frequently and is used as adornment of several architectural members as well as in the framing of figured reliefs on sarcophagi, grave stelae, altars, etc. The pattern is usually carved in an upside down S-shaped mold (convex above and concave below).

The history of this motif was discussed and analyzed by C. Weickert in «Das Lesbische Kymation» (Weickert13). He defined three basic types, lat-

1. I am much indebted to the excavators of Kedesh, and to the Department of Antiquities and Museums, for the use of their photographs, reproduced here by their courtesy. I would also like to thank Prof. A. Ovadiah, who reviewed this article, for his kind assistance and advice.

er named by M. Wegner (Wegner57, p. 52): (1) «Buegelkymation», (2) «Scherenkymation», (3) «Herzblattkymation». These terms were adopted by other scholars and are widely used today². This typology was enlarged by Leon (Leon71, p. 245), who added variants to each of the basic types; according to his observations all the types were used concurrently, with no type characteristic of one period only.

The *cyma reversa*, as known in Roman Palestine, is a derivation either of the «Buegelkymation» type A, or of the special form C (Leon71, p. 245-6). The basic components of type A are: an alternating pattern of a triple (three-lobed) arch with a pendant and a double leaf separating the arches (fig. 1); Leon's special form C is composed of similar elements, but the crowning arch is cut across³.

In northern Eretz Israel a transformation of the motif of types A and special form C produced the local architectural ornament⁴. Formal analysis reveals two distinct types:

Type I (fig. 2): A simplified version of the Roman «Buegelkymation» of Leon's special form C. This type is connected to the Baalbek ornaments, the so-called «Syrian» type (Weickert13, p. 105). It appears on the entablature of the *Roman theaters* at *Beth-Shean* (Scytopolis) (Appelbaum63, pp. 380-383; Appelbaum78, pp. 77-105), *Sipporis-Diocaesarea* (Waterman37) and *Caesarea Maritima* (Négev67, pp. 136-145)⁵, on the *Roman temple at Kedesh* (Kedesh84), on fragments from *Hippos-Sussita* (unpublished) and in *Tel Afek* (Kochavi75, pp. 17-42).

2. Strong (Strong53) proposes a different typology and terminology.

3. These types appear in Rome during the Augustan period only: on the arch of Augustus (type C – Leon71, pl. 106₃) and on the Parthian arch (type A – Leon71, pl. 105₁). According to Leon (Leon71, p. 253) the latter type shows Hellenistic influence and resembles somewhat the *cyma reversa* motif found in Magnesia, Didema, Priene and Ephesos.

Another variant of the motif appears at Baalbek, in the temple of Jupiter (Weigand24, fig. A3) and in the temple of Bacchus (Weigand24, fig. A5; Lyttelton74, pl. 122). In Baalbek the connection with the Hellenistic pattern of Magnesia and Delos stands out plainly (Weigand24, fig. A1, A2), but parallel with this there is also an evident connection with the Roman Imperial type (Weigand24, fig. A3b). The search for prototypes of the motif in northern Eretz Israel points to the large architectural complex at Baalbek as the probable source.

The motif in the temple of Jupiter (Weigand I, fig. 34, pl. 62) basically consists of a triple arch, that is two halves of arches surmounted by an additional, smaller arch, which rests on a pendant fairly broad at its upper part and terminating in a pointed tip. Between the triple arches grow thin stalks carrying a double leaf, which spreads symmetrically to either side.

In the temple of Bacchus the motif acquires a geometric shape (Weigand II, fig. 37). The proportions are changed, and its contours grown stiffer and less subtle, the arches are disconnected, and the double leaves, now split all the way down, have lost their vegetal character and turned into a geometric pattern. This type appears also in the Nymphaeum in Jerash (Lyttelton74, pl. 141) as well as on other contemporary buildings.

4. A unique variation of the rare Roman type «fig sticks» (Leon71, p. 247) appears on a fragment of entablature from Bet-Shearim synagogue (Unpublished).

5. In some cornice fragments from Caesarea the *cyma reversa* ornament is replaced by a simple leaf cyma, a practice known from other monuments as well (Strong53, pl. XXXI-c).



Fig. 1.—Cyma Reversa Ornament from the Temple of Jupiter at Baaibek (from Weigand24, figs. A3A, A3B).



Fig. 2.—Cyma Reversa Ornament Type I from the Roman Theater at Beth-Shean.



Fig. 3.—Cyma Reversa Ornament Type II from the Mausoleum at Beth-Shearim.



Fig. 4.—Cyma Reversa Ornament from the Synagogue at Capernaum



Fig. 5.—Cyma Reversa Ornament from the Synagogue at Arbel (after Kohl & Watzinger16, fig. 132).



Fig. 6.—Cyma Reversa Ornament from the Synagogue at Alma.

Type II (fig. 3): A vegetative development of the motif: the separating leaf is now split into a bunch of leaves, with small bulbs at their tips. The triple arch and the pendant disappear among the leaves. This type appears on the cornice and arch of the *mausoleum at Beth-Shearim* (Maisler42, pp. 5-20) and also decorated the «Acanthus Sarcophagus B» (Avigad71, pl. LVI-b) at this site. A very stylized version of this type can be observed on the lintel of the *synagogue at Alma* (Dalman14, pl. VI:2), on the cornice of the *synagogue at Arbel* (Irbid) (Kohl-Watzinger16, pp. 59-70, fig. 132), and on the frame of the entrance to the *synagogue at Kanef* (Sukenik35, pl. XXIa).

The *cyma reversa* at the *Capernaum synagogue* (Orfali22) represents a merging of types I and II.

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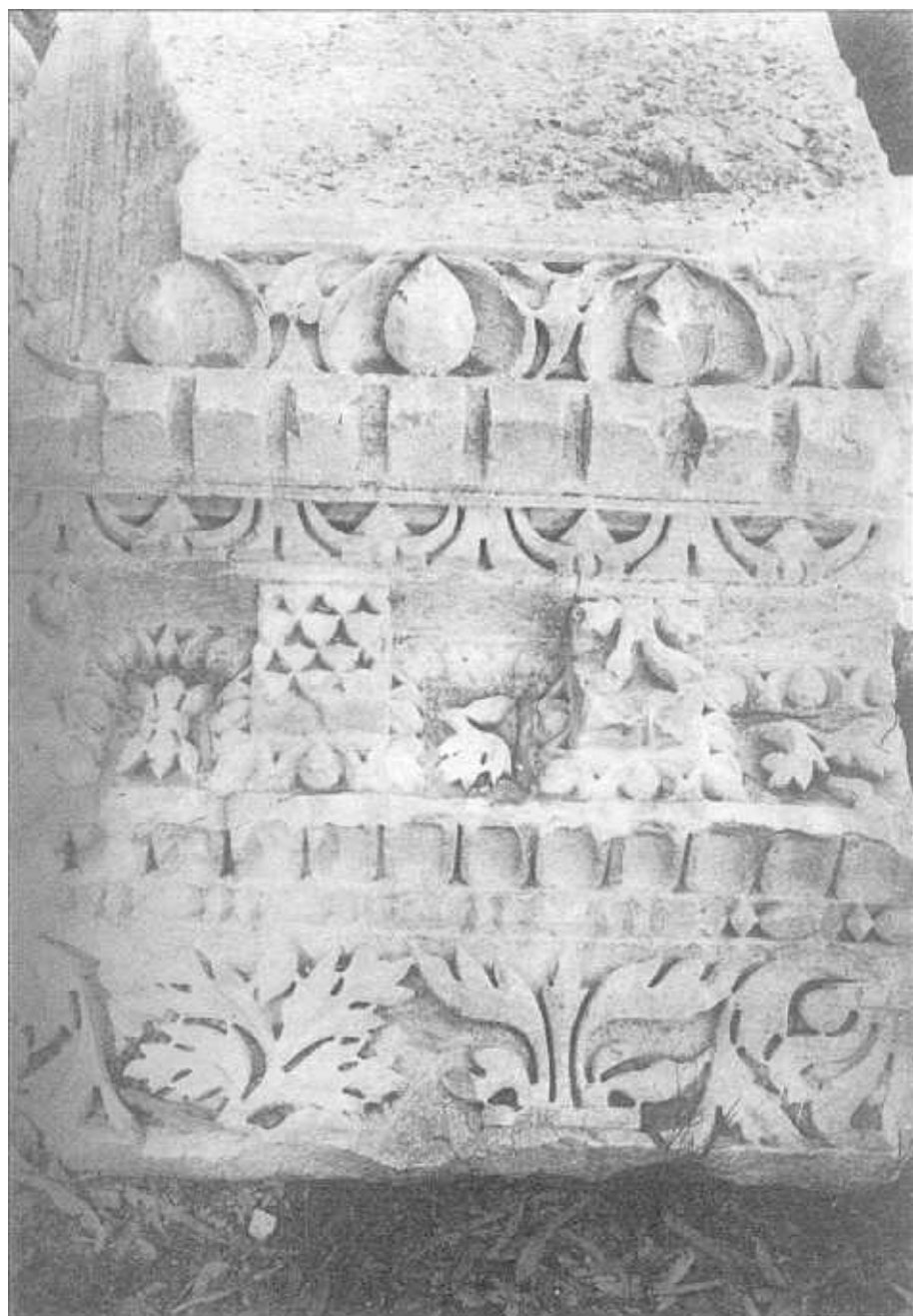
Compared to the design and execution of the *cyma reversa* ornament in the prominent centers of the Roman World (see note 3), the ornament in *Beth-Shean* is stylized and reduced. Although the mold retains its typical profile, the ornament itself has lost its elaborate surface and is executed by deep carving and drilling into the block, instead of the rich, modulated surface characteristic of many of the Roman examples. The lateral arches are set wide apart, while the crowning arch is cut across and often completely missing (resembling Leon's special type C). A little ball at the top of the pendant replaces the missing frame of the crowning arch (pl. 1)⁶. The ornament is stretched and squat⁷. The dividing leaf is split from top to bottom, each half fitted to the contour of the neighboring arch. Sometimes a thin link is discernible between the parted halves of the leaf. The pendant has been expanded to fill the enlarged inner space of the arches.

In *Beth-Shean* the ornament exhibits several levels of execution. On some fragments the crowning arch is still visible and the double leaves between the arches are not entirely split (pl. 2), both features indicating classical orientation. The «little ball» and «thin legs» are dominant features of the design. On other fragments the execution is too crude and angular to distinguish the different elements of the pattern. The little ball at the top, as well as the pendant, are incorporated in the triple arch; the separating leaf appears in one bulk (pl. 3)⁸.

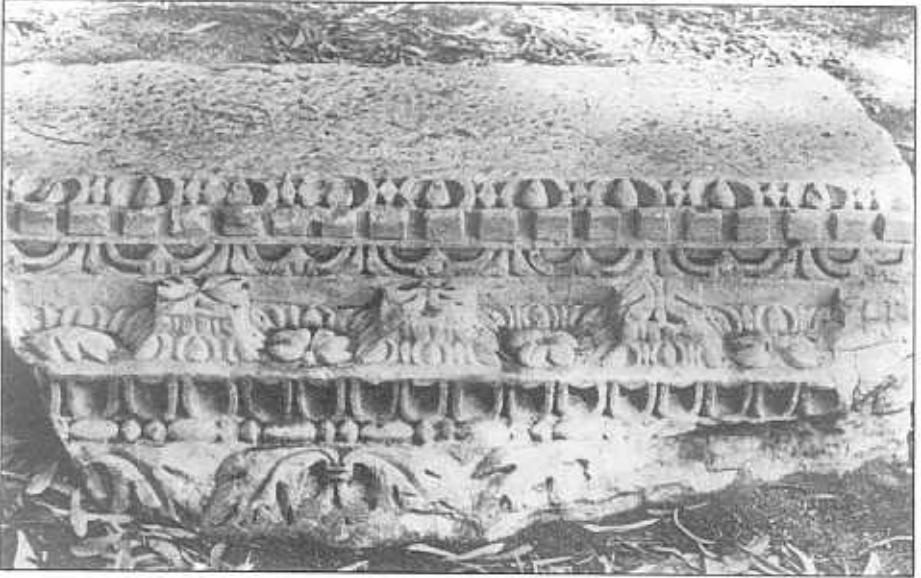
6. The little ball is reminiscent of the Hellenistic version of the ornament in Magnesia and Delos (Weigand24, figs. A1-A2). A fragment from the Hellenistic period, decorated in this style, was discovered recently at Ein Duk, near the Dead Sea (Tsafirir75, p. 31).

7. In the Augustan version the proportions of the motif are square (Leon71, pl. 106₃).

8. The different versions of the ornament found in *Beth-Shean* are reminiscent of the formation and execution of the *cyma reversa* in the round temple at Baalbek (Weigand24, fig. A7). A similar type decorates the severan arch at Lepcis Magna (Lyttelton74, pl. 211-12).



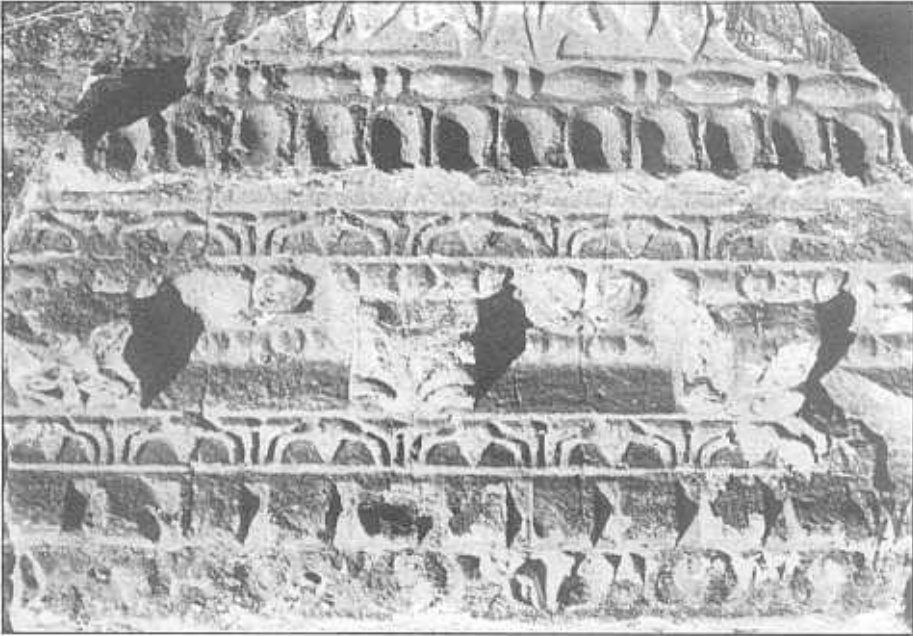
Pl. 1.—A Fragment from the Cornice of the Roman Theater at Beth-Shean.



Pl. 2.—A Fragment from the Cornice of the Roman Theater at Beth-Shean (from Appelbaum63, fig. 5).



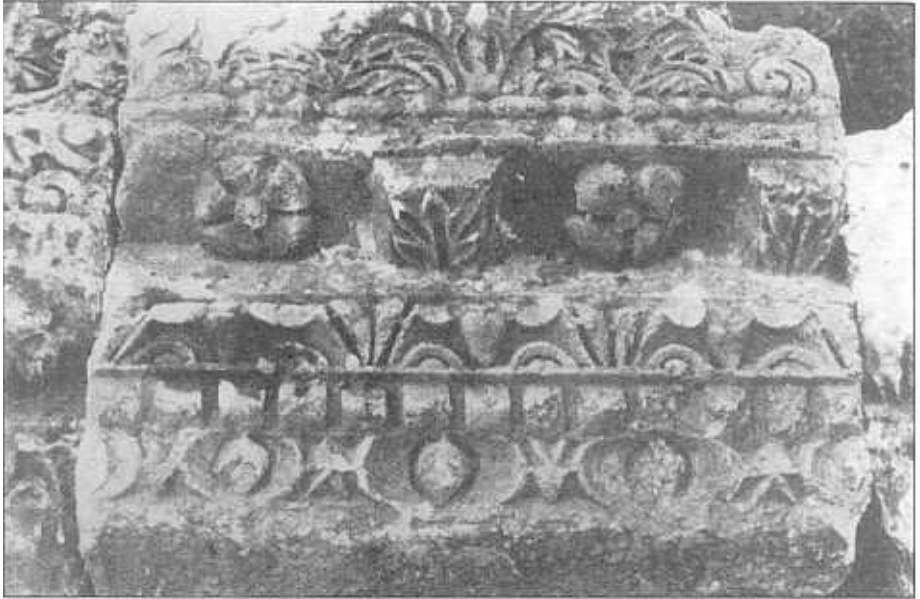
Pl. —A Fragment from the Cornice of the Roman Theater at Beth-Shean.



Pl. 4.—A Fragment of the Entablature of the Roman Temple at Kedesh (Courtesy of the Kedesh excavators).



Pl. 5.—Lintel of the Central Doorway of the cella, Roman Temple at Kedesh (Courtesy of the Kedesh excavators).



Pl. 6.—Fragment of the Cornice from the Synagogue at Capernaum.

At *Kedesh* the execution of the ornament is clumsier than that of the superior fragments at *Beth-Shean* (pl. 4)⁹. Here the motif was subjected to degeneration as the ball and pendant merged into the arch. Nevertheless something of the floral origin survived in the contour of the arch and in the curved shape of the separating leaf¹⁰.

A unique development of this ornament can be observed at *Kedesh*. Although type I is generally used on the cornice (where it appears twice, on the third and on the fifth molds [Kedesh84, p. 159, note 6]), a differently stylized *cyma reversa* ornament is carved on the lintel and northern jamb of the main entrance. The southern jamb retains the conventional type I. This ornament displays a complete fragmentation of the basic motif. The arch and the pendant split into three unconnected elements. The little ball topping the pendant disappears, merging completely with the pendant, and only the separating double leaf retains something of the original design of the ornament (pl. 5)¹¹.

9. It may be noted that the entablatures of the theaters at Beth Shean and Caesarea are carved from imported marble, whereas the other decorated architectural elements, discussed here, are made of local limestone.

10. The ornament as found in *Kedesh* closely resembles the version at *Bosra* Kalybe (Weigand24, fig. A6).

11. This design has some likeness to the *cyma reversa* ornament in several sites in Asia Minor: *Aspendos* (Lyttelton, pl. 184), *Ephesos* (Weigand14, fig. 34-d; Leon71, pl. 118₄), *Aphrodisias* (Weigand14, fig. 34-f).

A further disintegration of the pattern takes place in the *Capernaum synagogue* (pl. 6, fig. 4)¹². In addition to the vertical splitting of the basic motif displayed at *Kedesh*, it is also subjected to horizontal splitting. This creates two small arches on either side of the pendant, which fill the space of the reduced triple-arch. The now independent pendant has become a shape recalling a bawling-pin, pointed at the top and bottom, completely detached from the arch. The two lobes at either side, as well as the dividing leaves have become angular in shape. These changes have caused a complete transformation of the ornament. The pattern, previously consisting of bulging masses and depressions, lost its three-dimensional plastic character and acquired the optic (black and white) features of surface decoration.

Despite the angularity and fragmentation of the *cyma reversa* at Capernaum, the two arches added at the base of the pendant indicate a possible source of outside influence: the modified version of the *cyma reversa* (*type II*) carved on the entablature and arch of the mausoleum at *Beth-Shearim* (pl. 7, 8)¹³.

This version is characterized by the more elaborate vegetative development of the double leaves between the triple arches¹⁴. In addition to the small ball of type I, two further balls appear at the arch's sides. These small balls seem to adhere to the curving arches, creating the effect of stalks carrying bulbs. The pendant is similarly transformed into a stalk-like support for the small ball in the center. At either side of the pendant are two small leaf-like arches¹⁵. The two leaves appearing between the foliate arches form the principal feature of the bunch-like design of leaves and flowers. The pendant separates the motifs from each other. The ornament originally characterized by interplay of the two basic elements (the triple arch and the separating leaf), was reduced to a repetitive, monotone ornament, based on a single motif. This design also decorates the «acanthus sarcophagus B» at *Beth-Shearim* (Avigad's «leaves motif» – actually a derivative of the «Buegelkymation», Avigad71, pl. LVI).

The clue to the origin of the «leaves motif» from the «Buegelkymation» is provided by an unfinished fragment from the cornice of the *Beth-Shearim mausoleum*. There the *cyma reversa* ornament is already outlined but the carving has not been completed. The shape of the arches and the little ball as well as the pendant are clearly visible (pl. 9). It is surprising to observe

12. In the temple of Zeus in Kanatha (Qanawât) is an ornament in a stage preceding the disintegration of the pattern (Weigand24, fig. A8).

13. The fragment in plate 7 is unpublished. Photograph by courtesy of the Department of Antiquities and Museums.

14. According to Robertson (Robertson69, p. 38) the *cyma reversa* was originally a vegetative design.

15. The two small arches as well as the pendant joined to the ball in center, are paralleled by elements in the design at Capernaum.



Pl. 7.—Fragment of the Cornice of the Mausoleum at Beth-Shearim (Courtesy of department of Antiquities and Museums).

this classical outline turning into a very unclassical leaf ornament (pl. 7, 8). Evidently the design was executed by an artisan not conversant with the classical tradition, who probably used the ornaments carved on the imported marble coffins for his model¹⁶. Some of these coffins had decorative frames consisting of the above type of *cyma reversa*, as for instance, the

16. A limestone sarcophagus from a tomb in Samaria, apparently of local manufacture, also has a frame of *cyma reversa* ornament. All the elements of classical design are present, but crudely executed with distorted proportions. Despite the molded profile of the design, the impression is flatly optical rather than plastic (Tsafirir84, pl. 198).



Pl. 8.—Fragment of the Arch of the Mausoleum at Beth-Shearim (Courtesy of Department of Antiquities and Museums).

«Leda sarcophagus» found near the mausoleum (Avi-Yonah72, fig.1). Fragments from other marble coffins found at the same site clearly show that this sarcophagus was not unique (Avigad71, pl. LVI:1, LVI:2, LVII:3).

In contrast to the parallel design in Rome¹⁷, the *Beth-Shearim mausoleum's* ornament, has lost the alternating rhythm typical of all classical *cyma reversa* variants. As a result of the merging and unification of the two elements — the design in *Beth-Shearim* is reduced and transformed into a much simpler ornament. Although this new motif is richer and more elaborate than any of the individual components of the classical *cyma reversa*, its formation destroyed the asymmetrical and alternating rhythm of the classical ornament, producing a repetitive, endlessly recurring pattern of Oriental character.

A further stylization of the ornament is visible on the cornice of the *Arbel synagogue* (fig. 5, & Kohl-Watzinger16, pl. 132) and on the lintel of the *Alma synagogue* (pl. 10, fig. 6). At *Alma* especially the rhythmic character of the motifs is preserved; the stalks merge into a kind of elaborate flower,

17. The design as it appears in the frieze of the mausoleum has close parallels in Rome itself (Leon71, pl. 106:2, in the frame of an [undated] figured relief in the Museo Conservatori in Rome). There the vegetative association is likewise present, though the triple arch is preserved and only the central pendant is reduced and transformed.



Pl. 9.—Fragment of the Cornice of the Mausoleum at Beth-Shearim (Courtesy of Department of Antiquities and Museums).

from whose base spread two low arched leaves while two pointed leaves rise at either side. At *Alma* the design is carved in a crude, simple convex molding¹⁸. Apparently another band with the same motif existed above the

18. The carving technique employed at *Alma* is described by Avi-Yonah (*Avi-Yonah*50, pp. 49-50) as «raised border with gouged out interior» and has much in common with the stucco carving from Seleucia (*Colledge*77, fig. 34).



Pl. 10.—Lintel from the Synagogue at Alma (Courtesy of Department of Antiquities and Museums).

line of remaining leaves, which here are integrated into a surface pattern and no longer function as a mere decorative border¹⁹. A similar design of leaves is found in *Jerusalem* in the decoration of the *Church of the Holy Sepulcher* (Weigand14, pl. 33c), as well as in the upper frame of the lintel of the *Kanef synagogue*, where it is carved on a concave mold (Suknik35, pl. XXIa). Although in the *Arbel synagogue* the typical *cyma reversa* mold remains, the ornament here is reduced to a flattened surface design of angular outlines. The basic motif of the design has completely disintegrated, both lengthwise and crosswise, with its separate elements now forming a pattern of parallel-horizontal zigzag lines.

SUMMARY

The *cyma reversa* ornament appears in northern Eretz Israel in two distinct types, both developed from the *Buegelkymation* type A and special form C.

Type I, found at *Beth Shean* and *Kedesh*, has retained the characteristics of the classical design, although reduced and simplified. It would seem that its origin must be sought in the form the *cyma reversa* assumed in *Syria*:

1. The double structure of the motifs complementing and alternating with each other.
2. The elaborate mold on which the design is carved.
3. The plastic and rich modulation of the details.

Although the design's basic form is simple, its carving is elaborate and multi-nuanced.

In *type II*, appearing mainly in the synagogues, the design has become plain and flatly optical. The *cyma reversa*, in the synagogue context, is characterized by reduction and disintegration of the classical design. The pendant which used to be the center of the motif is now transformed into the separating element while the separating leaf serves as its central axis. This apparently trivial shifting of the «midrib» of the ornament causes a complete change in its character (evolving from an alternating asymmetrical ornament to a symmetrical-repetitive one) and therefore displays a different aesthetic and spiritual concept completely indifferent or even opposed to the classical concept (Kitzinger40, pp. 10-19).

The various motifs in the architectural decoration of the synagogues gradually draw apart from one another, to the degree that the design at *Kanef* and *Alma* no longer has any connection with that at *Capernaum*. Although both versions apparently developed from the same classical prototype, a disparity between these local variants appears to have been caused by the use of differing models for the same motif, as well as individual interpretation or misinterpretation by the artisans.

The design at *Capernaum* comes midway between these two trends: it preserves something of the classical structure by its stylization and angularity as well as by the optical interplay of its surfaces and inverted hollows.

19. Surface patterns are typical in Oriental decorative traditions. In this case the artist, whose signature is preserved on the *Alma* lintel: «Yossi Bar Levi Halevi», was obviously a Jew, and probably trained in local tradition.

The *cyma reversa* is not common in the repertory of Northern Eretz-Israeli architectural ornaments during the Late Roman period²⁰. This may be due to the complicated nature of the design and molding which required sophisticated knowledge and carving skill by the artisan, and to the plastic and asymmetrical character of the ornament, which had no appeal for local artisans and patrons steeped in a different Oriental tradition. The adoption of the classical repertory during the Late Roman period involved the abandonment of the distinctive features of the motifs and their transformation into ornaments with new characteristics. The abandonment of the traditional S-shaped molding of the *cyma reversa* in *Alma* (in favor of a convex one) and in *Kanef* (in favor of a concave one) is another symptom of this phenomenon. The decrease of classical influence renewed the adherence to local Oriental tradition, i.e. the preference for flat, symmetrical and rhythmic design, and the rejection of the plasticity and depth of the classical ornament (Avi-Yonah50, pp. 77-78).

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20. Kohl & Watzinger (Kohl-Watzinger16, p. 191) state that the *cyma reversa* is replaced at Khirbet Dika by a design of flower buds (ibid, pl. 235-6), while at Korazim the *cyma reversa* ornament has entirely disappeared.

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