

## THREE ANCIENT JEWISH RELIEFS

BY L. A. MAYER AND A. REIFENBERG

AT various times there have been found in Palestine, Syria and Egypt flat reliefs or round figures of soft limestone, wood or other material with circular openings inset with glass. Some of them represent male or female figures, others represent birds, such as doves or peacocks, and some are but square, many-sided or round frames for glass insets. Father L. Cré, who knew but a single object of this type in the shape of a bird (he regarded it as a peacock), saw in it an eucharistic vessel.<sup>1</sup> Macalister<sup>2</sup> made this theory his own and applied it to a specific case. Moulton<sup>3</sup> went a step further and pronounced all objects of this type to be eucharistic, whilst others<sup>4</sup> have described them as mirrors, amulets, votive offerings or children's toys.

Among several such flat reliefs in the collection of the Benedictine Fathers in the Monastery of the Dormition in Jerusalem, three are of outstanding interest.<sup>5</sup>

The first relief (fig. 1), 26 cms. long, 31.5 cms. high, 3.5 cms. thick, represents the pedimented or gabled wall of a building. A large opening or portal which rises above the base of the gable consists of a square headed door surmounted by a circular panel or tympanum ornamented with four small

<sup>1</sup> 'Une découverte eucharistique' (in *Revue Biblique*, 1894, vol. III), pp. 277-91.

<sup>2</sup> *The Excavation of Gezer*, 1912, I, p. 387 f., II, p. 455.

<sup>3</sup> 'Gleanings in Archæology and Epigraphy' (in *Annual of the American School in Jerusalem*, vol. I, 1920), pp. 70-86.

<sup>4</sup> Strzygowski, *Koptische Kunst* (in *Catalogue Général des Antiquités Egyptiennes*), 1904, No. 8825, p. 144; Kisa, *Das Glas im Altertume*, 1908, II, pp. 357-61; Michon, 'Miroirs antiques de verre doublé de plomb' (in *Bulletin archéologique du Comité des travaux historiques*, 1909), pp. 231-50; Ronzevalle, 'Some alleged Palestinian pyxes' (in *Quarterly Statements*, 1921), pp. 172-4.

<sup>5</sup> We avail ourselves of this opportunity to reiterate our warmest thanks to Father Mauritius Gisler for permission to photograph and publish these objects.

columns. On either side of the doorway are four vertical slits, in part masked by seven-branched candlesticks on tripods placed in front of them. In the gable above a shell-like semi-circular niche is represented. On either side of this niche shallow semi-circular recesses have been cut out, and in the centre there is a similar but circular recess. These recesses once contained glass, splinters of which were found in position. The lower end of the whole relief is finished off with an animal frieze showing two long-beaked birds pecking at a third of a similar species.

The second relief (fig. 2), 48 cms. long, 34 cms. high and 2.3 cms. thick, is more complicated. A seven-branched candlestick without base is closely flanked by two gables or pediments, each supported by two columns, and provided with a semi-circular aperture. Above the candlestick is a semi-circular arch supported by a pair of columns. The panel or tympanum of this arch again is ornamented with two small columns. Flanking the architectural ensemble are two representations of large birds. The shallow circular recesses in each of the three niches, as well as those that form the eyes of the birds, once contained pieces of glass.

The third relief (fig. 3), which is fragmentary, 20 cms. high, 2 cms. thick, includes portions of a seven-branched candlestick and of a niche with one column, two small columns marking a window and one bird in the upper field. Below these columns and above the candlestick is a shallow circular recess which by analogy with the other reliefs we may assume to have once been fitted with glass. Owing to the striking similarity of many details we may assume that but for the birds this relief looked almost exactly like fig. 2.

All three reliefs are made of very soft white limestone. The first two have small holes (fig. 1 above the niche in the gable, fig. 2 behind the leg of each bird), as though intended to be suspended as wall-ornaments.

How are these plaques to be interpreted? The seven-branched candlestick, one of the few Palestinian symbols which belong to one community alone, proves the Jewish origin. This in itself would hardly be sufficient proof that the stone-carver meant to represent the wall of a synagogue, but the composition of the three reliefs, particularly of the two

complete specimens, the prominence given to the candlesticks as well as the niches in the upper floor, show that we are confronted here with religious monumental buildings, in this case with the walls of a synagogue. Thus we shall interpret the first relief as the façade of a synagogue approximately of the type of the one in Capernaum, as reconstructed by Kohl and Watzinger.<sup>1</sup> In view of this close resemblance one inevitably looks for differences. These are to be found in the two candlesticks of the first relief, presumably placed there to dispel any possible doubt, even in the mind of the most casual observer, regarding the character of the building. The second relief cannot well be anything else than the main inner wall of the synagogue. The double shrine of the Law each flanked by a pair of columns and crowned by a shell is also familiar to us from Capernaum<sup>2</sup>; nor need we look far for parallels for the niche high up in the wall.<sup>3</sup> Thora-shrines with gabled roofs and shells<sup>4</sup> have frequently been found, or assumed on the strength of the fragments found.<sup>5</sup>

The most difficult to explain are the birds. Once the opposition to eagles as symbols of Roman power had been overcome, birds were certainly met with in various synagogues of the Roman period in Palestine,<sup>6</sup> as in Capernaum, al-Jish, ad-Dikke, Umm al-Qanāṭir, although never of such relatively huge shape. Small birds repeatedly figure as acroteria on thora-shrines.<sup>7</sup> The nearest design is that on a gilt glass<sup>8</sup> where the thora-shrine is flanked by two birds closely resembling those on the

<sup>1</sup> Kohl and Watzinger, *Antike Synagogen in Galiläa*, 1916, pl. V, but compare also with the façade of the south wing of the Church of St. Simeon Stylites at Qal'at Sim'ān, Butler, *Early Churches in Syria*, fig. 101.

<sup>2</sup> Kohl and Watzinger, *l.c.*, p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> We are dealing in detail with this problem in our forthcoming report on the excavations of the synagogue of Eshtemoa, meanwhile cf. our 'The Jewish Buildings of Nawe' (in *Bulletin of the Jewish Palestine Exploration Society*, 1936), p. 7f.

<sup>4</sup> Ben-Zevie, 'Discoveries at Pekiin' (in *Quarterly Statements*, 1930), p. 213f., pl. II, 2; Sukenik, 'Designs of the Torah-Shrine in ancient Synagogues in Palestine' (in *Quarterly Statements*, 1931), p. 22 ff; id. *Beth Alpha*, pl. VIII.

<sup>5</sup> Kohl and Watzinger, *l.c.*

<sup>6</sup> Kohl and Watzinger, *l.c.*, p. 195 ff.

<sup>7</sup> Sukenik, *Beth Alpha*, pl. VIII, fig. 35.

<sup>8</sup> *The Jewish Encyclopædia*, vol. II, p. 107 (after Garrucci) and often elsewhere.

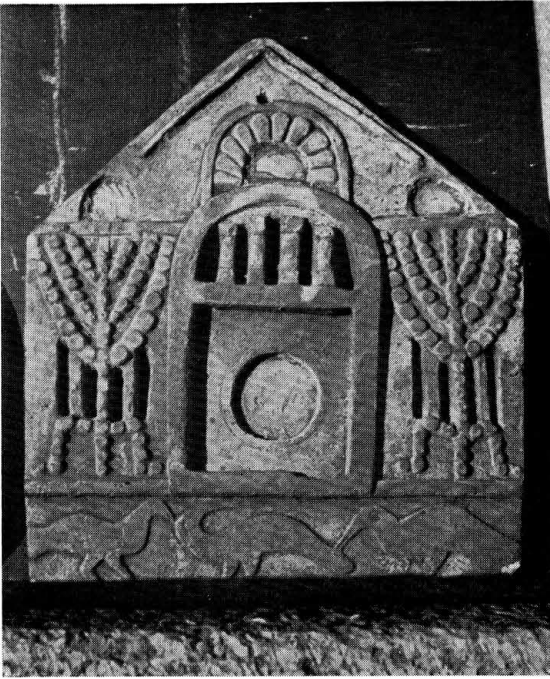


FIG. 1



FIG. 3

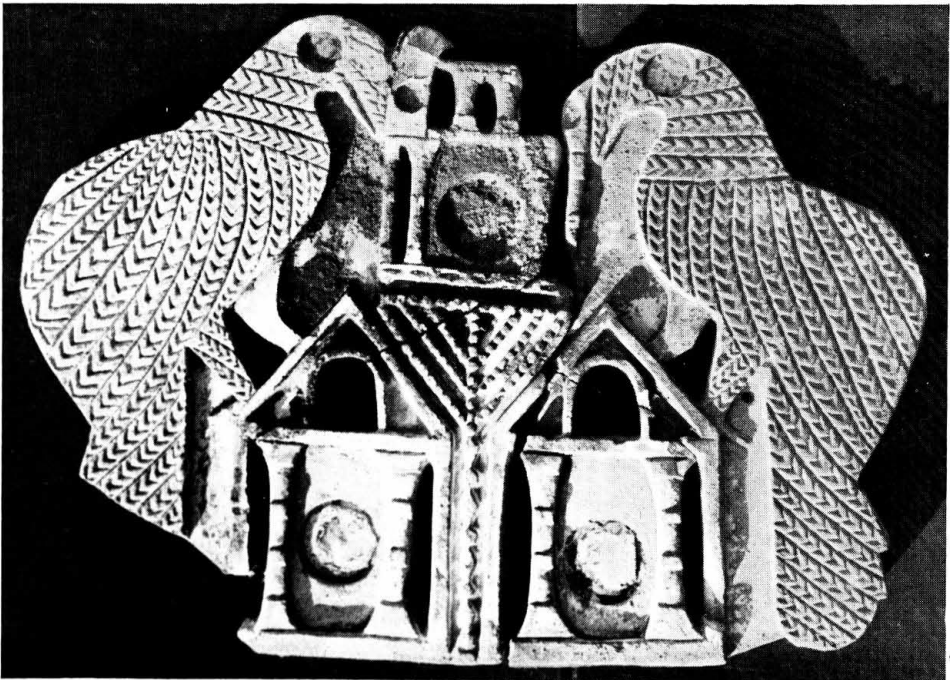


FIG. 2

second relief. One is tempted to explain these birds as cherubim, the representation of which in their original form—probably in the shape of gryphons—was forbidden<sup>1</sup> by Jewish law.

Representations of the Temple, of synagogues and of the Ark of the Law are common enough on mementoes of many kinds and do not require any special explanation as such. The novum of our reliefs lies in the fact that—to judge by the holes—they must have been kept fixed to a wall and so are *mutatis mutandis* in a way the prototype of the so-called “mizrah-pictures,” to be found on the eastern wall of orthodox Jewish houses, indicating the direction of the prayer.

<sup>1</sup> *Mekhila Yethro*, ed. Horowitz, 241, 1.20. We have to thank Prof. J. N. Epstein of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, for having called our attention to this passage.