

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SECTION NO. 2151.

THE MOST ANCIENT SYNAGOGUE MONUMENTAL REMAINS: THE NEWLY DISCOVERED OSTIA SYNAGOGUE IN ITS FIRST AND FOURTH CENTURY A.D. PHASES.

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FIFTEEN miles from Rome, on the ancient sea shore, are the ruins of Roman Ostia, which was built at the mouth of the Tiber in the 4th century B.C. as a defence for Rome towards the sea. However, the function of Ostia was not limited solely to defence. The river port was also important for Rome, for imports from overseas; and, as the power of Rome grew, so also Ostia, Rome's harbour, grew.

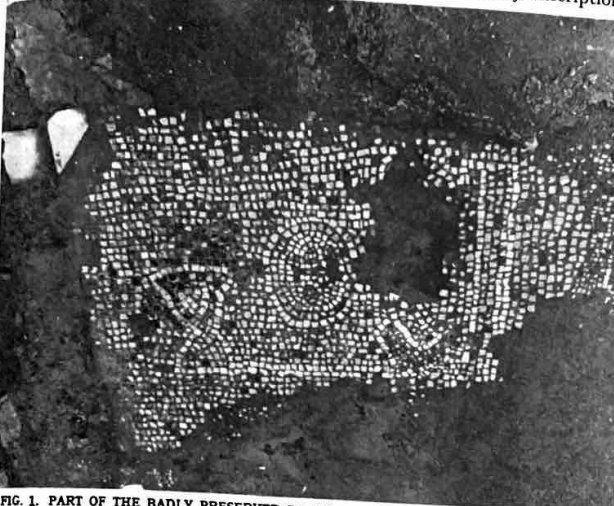


FIG. 1. PART OF THE BADLY PRESERVED BLACK-AND-WHITE MOSAIC FROM THE FRONT PART OF THE HALL OF THE OSTIA SYNAGOGUE. ON THE LEFT CAN BE SEEN A CHALICE IN OUTLINE, IN THE CENTRE A ROUND OBJECT WHICH MAY REPRESENT A LOAF.

The excavations, which have continued without interruption from the middle of last century, have revealed the ancient castrum (the fortified military camp) of the 4th century B.C., as well as the phases of development of the Republican and Imperial town.

The most striking feature of Imperial Ostia is the modernity of its streets and houses, tall apartment blocks, strongly built and well lighted, so different from the houses of Pompei, but very like the houses and streets of Rome in the 2nd century A.D.

The excavations have also revealed a wide variety of cults: temples of old Latin divinities (such as the Capitolium, built in the centre of the town at the north end of the Forum, for the traditional cult of Jupiter, Juno and Minerva) and sanctuaries of oriental gods such as Cybele, Isis and Serapis, Mithras.

But Ostia was primarily a harbour town, and so warehouses are among its most distinctive buildings. We also find plenty of evidence, especially in funerary reliefs, of the town's trades. Most of these trades had guilds, and the guilds had social centres, most of which have been excavated.

Up to the present time more than twenty public baths, a large theatre and other public buildings have been brought to light. Through the monuments we can once more live the life of this town during the nine centuries of its life. The many statues and reliefs found in the excavations give us images of divinities, portraits of emperors, of magistrates of the town, and of ordinary people. The inscriptions inform us about religious beliefs, public administration, politics, trade, and all the many aspects of the life of the people of Ostia. From the proper names cited in the inscriptions we know that in Ostia there lived people not only of the old Latin race, but also of other origins: Greek, Asiatic, African, Gaul, and Spanish. And what is revealed by the names in the inscriptions is often confirmed by the individual ethnical characteristics of the portraits. Like every port and commercial town, Ostia had a cosmopolitan population.

It was therefore surprising that no clear memorials of the presence of the Jews in Ostia had been found until now. The classical and Jewish sources had both remained completely

silent, while in Rome, to which Ostia is so closely connected, the existence of the Jewish community is documented by literary and archaeological evidence almost from the beginning of the 1st century B.C.

Actually in Ostia the archaeological evidence for a Jewish community was so scanty and incomplete that it might almost have been considered non-existent. The documentation rested upon the funerary inscription in Latin of the *gerustianes* (that is to say the chief of the council of the Jewish community) Caius Iulius Iustus, found a few miles to the South of Ostia, at Castel Porziano, and on a group of funerary inscriptions in Greek formerly preserved in the Episcopium near the Port of Ostia. But for various reasons these inscriptions might give rise to discussion.

The discovery of a synagogue (of the house of prayer and meeting place of the community), while proving the undoubted existence of a flourishing community in the city, also gave new importance to the previous testimonies.

The synagogue was discovered by chance while the road to the International Airport Leonardo da Vinci was being constructed. It stood on the

outskirts of the ancient town of Ostia towards the shore, in accordance with a fairly widespread custom among the synagogues of the Diaspora, and lay between the sea and an ancient road (the Via Severiana), in continuation of a row of buildings that have only been partly excavated.

In the first campaign of excavation, in 1961, the Direction of Antiquities of Ostia brought to light the hall of the synagogue and some of the adjoining rooms (Fig. 5). The restoration of the excavated part was carried out at the same time, and the columns were raised (Figs. 2, 3, 6, 8, 12). In the second campaign of 1962, the whole building was excavated, and the mosaics and part of the *opus sectile* of the pavement were lifted. Also one of the fallen walls of the synagogue was raised—a very delicate and difficult operation.

The lifting of the pavement enabled us to begin trial excavations in depth for the purpose of throwing light on the vicissitudes of the edifice. From the type of structure of the walls and the style of the mosaics and of the reliefs, we know that, in its undoubted, well-established phase, the synagogue belongs to the 4th century A.D. But it was evident that it had been built upon a construction which, from the type of structure, could be dated to the end of the 1st century A.D. It was a question of deciding whether this building had been a synagogue too, or if, as elsewhere (at Dura Europos and Delos, for

example), it had been used for some other purpose and had only been transformed into a synagogue in the 4th century. To anticipate our conclusions, I will state that the latest discoveries have proved that even the earliest edifice was a synagogue (Fig. 16).

The 4th-century A.D. synagogue with the adjoining rooms occupied a rectangular space 103½ ft. by 77 ft. (33.60 by 23.50 m.), with one of the short sides facing east-south-east, that is to say towards Jerusalem. The main entrance of the complex, probably flanked by two pilasters, opened out of the Via Severiana and led into a sort of corridor or elongated vestibule, on the south-east side of which was a row of little rooms unfortunately almost entirely destroyed (Fig. 10). The three doors of the prayer hall, that is to say the true synagogue, the façade of which was turned towards Jerusalem, opened on to this vestibule. The orientation of the front of the synagogue towards the Holy City is characteristic of the oldest group of synagogues so far known to us—those of Galilee—which go back to the 3rd century A.D.

The hall, 81 ft. 8 in. by 41 ft. 1 in. (24.90 m. long and 12.50 m. wide), has a slightly curved back wall (Fig. 7). Four marble columns with Corinthian capitals rise up in the middle of the hall and form a sort of monumental entrance to the inner part of the synagogue (Fig. 6), where stands the Torah shrine—that is to say the site where the Ark with the Scrolls of the Law was preserved.

The Torah shrine stands by itself between the left wall of the hall and the columns (Fig. 8). It is entirely built in *opus vittatum* (a type of Late Roman structure in regular rows of small tufa blocks and bricks) and has a high podium with four steps leading up in front, and an apse. In front of the pillars of the apse there were two small marble columns with composite capitals. Two architraves (Figs. 14 and 15) were grafted into the pillars of the apse, and rested on the capitals of the columns where they terminated in brackets on which were sculptured in flat bas-relief, almost like drawings, the well known symbols which are so often repeated in monuments of Hebrew art: the *menorah* (seven-branched candlestick), flanked



FIG. 2. AN ASSONOMETRIC PLAN OF THE OSTIA SYNAGOGUE IN ITS 4TH-CENTURY A.D. PHASE. THE FOUR COLUMNS IN THE CENTRE FORM A SORT OF MONUMENTAL ENTRANCE TO THE INNER PART, AND BESIDE THEM STANDS THE TORAH SHRINE WITH TWO COLUMNS AND APSIDAL BACK.

on the right by a ram's horn, the *shofar*, and on the left by a palm branch, *lulab*, and a citron, *etrog* (Fig. 15). The reliefs show traces of gilding. Such an isolated Torah shrine is unknown in other synagogues, but its outward appearance, with columns and apse, is like that of the niche dug out of the wall in the synagogue of Dura Europos, or that of the Ark of the Law in certain Jewish mosaics and glass objects decorated with gold, and in a relief of the [Continued opposite.

THE OSTIA SYNAGOGUE: CONCLUSIVE EVIDENCE OF A PROSPEROUS JEWISH COMMUNITY IN THE PORT OF IMPERIAL ROME.

[Continued.] Jewish catacombs at Beth She'arim in Israel. In the inner part of the synagogue of Ostia, just in front of the Torah shrine, and backing on to the central part of the back wall of the hall, there is a podium. In this structure we might recognise the *bema* or pulpit from which the Sacred Scriptures were read (Fig. 9). Two fallen marble columns, not of the same height as the other four, were found in this innermost part of the hall. We have scanty indications of their original position. The front part of the hall was divided into three sections by low balustrades. Possibly the left-hand division may have been reserved for the women, while in the right-hand division there was a shallow basin for ritual ablutions. This front part has black and white mosaic pavements, unfortunately badly preserved, but we can recognise in the decoration a square with a conventional rosette of a well-known type in Hebrew art, and a panel near the principal doorway with a chalice and a round object, perhaps a loaf (Fig. 1). Two other rooms were joined to the synagogue. In one of these, which opened on to the vestibule (Fig. 4) we found an oven, a table with a marble top and some amphoras sunk in the pavements, perhaps for preserving wine, oil or other foodstuffs. The room had a rough floor of earth, ash, marble and terracotta fragments, in which many terracotta lamps [Continued below.

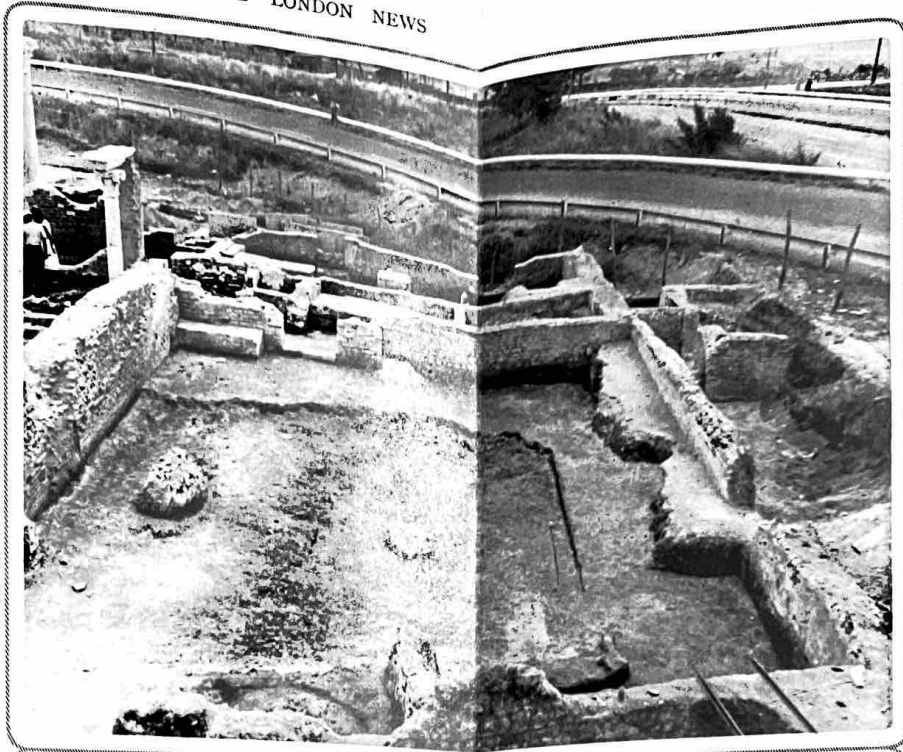


FIG. 3. THE VERY LARGE ROOM AT THE SOUTH-WEST SIDE OF THE SYNAGOGUE (SEE FIG. 2). THE LARGE SIDE BENCHES SUGGEST THAT IT WAS A MEETING-PLACE. IN THE BACKGROUND, THE CORRIDOR AND SMALL ROOM WITH MOSAICS.



FIG. 4. THE ROOM WITH THE OVEN IN THE SOUTH-EAST CORNER OF THE SITE (SEE FIG. 2) AND THE MOSAIC FLOORS. IN THE 1ST CENTURY PHASE THIS WAS ALL PART OF A LARGER ROOM.

[Continued.] (Fig 13) with the seven-branched candlestick were found. But when this later floor was removed we discovered a mosaic pavement underneath, adorned with different patterns, probably to be referred to a 2nd- or 3rd-century restoration. The other room, a very large one, is on the left-hand side of the synagogue (Fig. 3). Its most characteristic feature is wide benches along two sides, which bring the triclinium couches to mind. Perhaps it was a meeting place, or the school where the law was taught. This large chamber and the vestibule were built in the 4th century A.D. Up to that time the synagogue covered a less extensive area. In the 1st century A.D. the hall of the synagogue was limited to the inner part of the later hall. It had three doors front orientated towards Jerusalem, and the main central door was flanked

by the four columns afterwards re-employed in the 4th-century building. Along the sides and the back wall of the hall were masonry seats for the faithful, seats that are typical of the synagogues found both in the Diaspora and in Palestine. In the 1st century the front part of the later synagogue hall, together with the "room of the oven," formed one single prolonged room, paved in *cocciopesto* (i.e., random pottery fragments, set in concrete) and with benches 6 ft. (2 m.) wide round three walls, towards the south-west. These benches are identical in size and structure with those brought to light in the hall adjoining the 4th-century synagogue. The prolonged shape of the room and its position calling to mind that of the later vestibule, the presence in part of it of wide benches, suggest that, in the 1st-century [Continued overleaf.

THE UNIQUE TORAH SHRINE; AND OTHER FEATURES OF THE SYNAGOGUE



FIG. 5. A GENERAL VIEW OF THE OSTIA SYNAGOGUE SITE AT THE END OF THE FIRST SEASON—FROM THE EAST, BEFORE RESTORATION.



FIG. 6. AFTER THE RE-ERECTION OF THE FOUR CORINTHIAN COLUMNS WHICH FORMED THE MONUMENTAL ENTRANCE TO THE MAIN HALL.

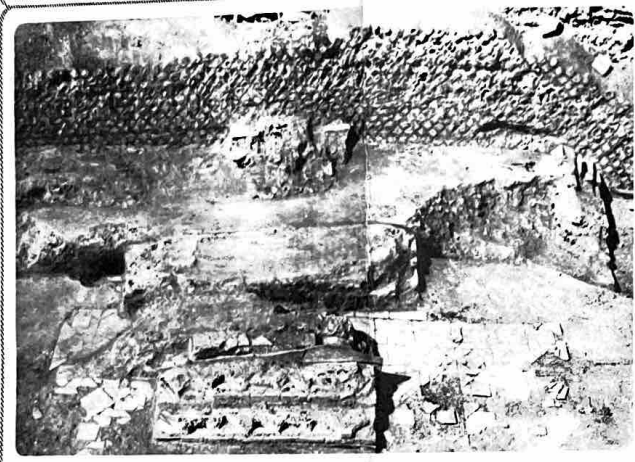


FIG. 9. THE STEPS LEADING UP TO THE BEMA OR PULPIT—AGAINST THE BACK WALL OF THE MAIN HALL—WITH OPUS SECTILE PAVEMENT SURROUNDING THEM.



FIG. 10. THE LONG VESTIBULE AT THE SOUTH-EAST END. NEAR THE ENTRANCE CAN BE SEEN THE WELL, AND, NEARER, THE THREE DOORS TO THE MAIN HALL.

Continued.] synagogue, this room had the same function which, in the 4th century, was divided between the vestibule and the hall with the benches. Evidently these large benches, like *klinai* of the triclinia, had a very particular function and must have been indispensable annexes of the synagogue. Therefore, although in the 1st century the edifice was less extensive, it had similar equipment as that noted in the 4th-century synagogue. In the primitive building there was no shrine for the Torah, but probably, as supposed for other synagogues, the Scrolls of the Law were at that time kept in a movable cupboard which was taken into the synagogue during the ceremonies. Excavations in depth have also shown the presence of an intermediary phase between the 1st-century and the 4th-century synagogues. To this period can be ascribed thin walls dividing

the primitive vestibule into four sections (Fig. 16), walls which preserve traces of paintings. And perhaps also to this period can be attributed the mosaic of the "room of the oven" (Fig. 4). This phase has not been completely cleared up in its entire extension, but probably an inscription found re-erected with many others, in a later restoration of the paving, can be referred to the works. It is an inscription with the first line written in Latin, whereas the rest of the text is in Greek; the lower part is much mutilated. It reads: "Mindis Phaustos . . . founded and erected at his own expense and placed the Ark of the Sacred Law, for the Emperor's health. . . ." Mention of the Ark of the Law might make one inclined to think that this Mindis Phaustos may have erected the Ark of the Torah and founded or reconstructed the [Continued]

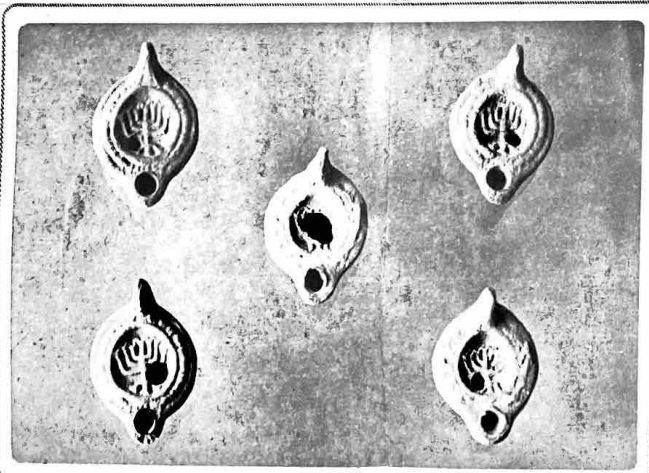


FIG. 13. FIVE OF THE MANY TERRACOTTA LAMPS FOUND IN THE ROOM WITH THE OVEN. ALL BEAR THE MENORAH OR SEVEN-BRANCHED CANDLESTICK.



FIG. 14. THE TWO ARCHITRAVES WHICH ORIGINALLY RESTED ON THE PILLARS OF THE TORAH SHRINE (FIG. 8)—HERE UPSIDE DOWN.

OF OSTIA OVER SOME FOUR HUNDRED YEARS.



FIG. 7 THE MAIN HALL BEFORE RESTORATION, SHOWING THE FALLEN COLUMNS, THE STEPPED PULPIT AND THE CURVED BACK WALL. (SEE ALSO FIG. 9.)



FIG. 8 THE UNIQUE ISOLATED TORAH SHRINE, AFTER RESTORATION, WITH THE ARCHITRAVES (FIGS. 14 AND 15) IN PLACE.



FIG. 11 THE LITTLE CORRIDOR, LEADING FROM THE MAIN HALL (BACKGROUND) TO THE MEETING ROOM (LEFT FOREGROUND). (SEE FIG. 8.)



FIG. 12 THE MAIN HALL OF THE SYNAGOGUE AFTER RESTORATION—FROM THE WEST. THIS LINKS WITH THE VIEW SEEN IN FIG. 3.



FIG. 15 THE ARCHITRAVES RELIEF IN DETAIL: SHOWING THE MENORAH WITH (BELOW, L. TO R.) THE PALM-BRANCH (LULAB), CITRON (ETROG), AND SHOFAR (RAM'S HORN).

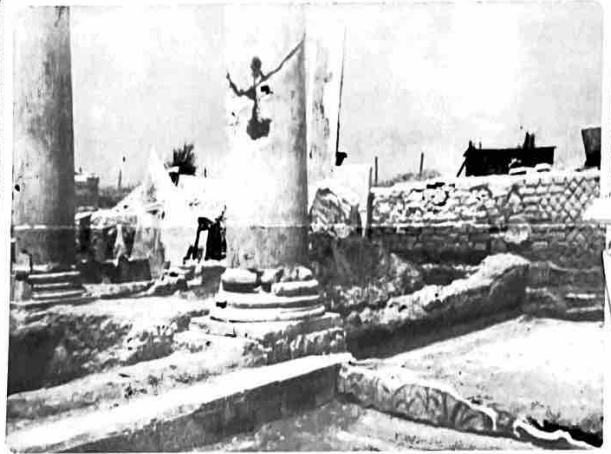


FIG. 16 AFTER A MOSAIC HAD BEEN LIFTED, A PAINTED WALL (RIGHT FOREGROUND) OF THE EARLIER SYNAGOGUE WAS REVEALED.

Continued.] synagogue. As for the dedication *Pro salute Augusti*—for the health of the Emperor—this is not unique because we know also from the literary sources that in the synagogues, especially in those of the Diaspora, there were columns, *clipea* and also crowns dedicated to the emperors, especially if they had favoured the Jews. We shall now have to try and establish which emperor it was for whose health the inscription was placed, and we shall have to see to which reconstruction or alteration of the synagogue it is to be referred. Perhaps future excavations will provide fresh evidence. So far it is sufficient to be able to establish as a fact the uninterrupted life of the synagogue, and therefore of the Jewish community, from the 1st to the 5th century A.D. And furthermore the size and decorum of the edifice even in the 1st century show that the Jewish community of Ostia must have already been established in the city for

some time, and must have reached considerable prosperity to be able to build a synagogue of such proportions. The later alterations, enlargements and reconstruction in the early 4th century prove that also in this period the community was large and flourishing and rich. Besides being of local interest, that is to say in connection with the history of the town in which it rose, the synagogue of Ostia has a particular interest of its own because in its planimetry as well it differs from nearly all the synagogue buildings known to us to-day. In fact, although it presents certain characteristics that connect it with some of them, it also has a very particular physiognomy of its own. It may, indeed, be similar to synagogues that are lost to us to-day, but so far we can say it is a unique example. And up to the present it has the singular privilege of being the most ancient synagogue known to us from the monumental remains.