

Isometric plan of the synagogue at Ostia. The arrow points to the entrance.

THE SYNAGOGUE AT OSTIA

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The synagogue at Ostia after excavation but before restoration.

THE RECENT DISCOVERY of a synagogue at Ostia, the prosperous port of ancient Rome, fills a gap that has been noticed by every student who has concerned himself with the history and archaeology of the site.

It was nothing short of astonishing that no record had ever been found of the presence of Jews in a town that was not only a busy commercial port but was so closely bound to Rome with its long and well attested tradition of a Jewish community. Both Classical and Hebrew sources are completely silent on the matter, and archaeology was equally so—or, to put it more accurately, the archaeological evidence was so scarce and incomplete as to be very dubious. The entire evidence for the existence of a Jewish community at Ostia rested on a Latin tomb inscription of the *gerusiarch** Caius Iulius Iustus, found at Castel Porziano, and on a group of tomb inscriptions in Greek which were formerly at the Bishop's Palace in

* Chief of the council of the Jewish community.

Porto. The first is inconclusive because, owing to a break in the stone, we lack the name of the place in which Iustus' congregation was located; and the other inscriptions may very well have come from Rome. But now the discovery of a synagogue proves beyond question the presence of a flourishing Jewish community at Ostia and at the same time lends new validity to the evidence of these inscriptions.

The synagogue was discovered by accident during work on the expressway to the new international airport, Leonardo da Vinci, at Fiumicino. The building stood near the shore at the edge of the town—such a location seems to have been common among the synagogues of the Diaspora—and was aligned with a series of buildings, as yet only partly excavated, between the sea and the Via Severiana.

During the first season of excavation (1961) the Department of Antiquities of Ancient Ostia brought to light the main hall of the synagogue and some of

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The aedicula of the Torah restored, and adjoining columns and architraves replaced in their original position.

Synagogue continued

the rooms connected with it, and carried out some restoration of the excavated area, including the re-erection of fallen columns. During the second season (1962) the whole building was completely excavated, the mosaics and part of the floor, done in *opus sectile*, were taken up and repaired and strengthened, and one of the walls of the main hall, which had fallen in, was re-erected—a delicate and difficult operation. The removal of the floor permitted the taking of soundings, which could throw light on various phases of the building's history.

From the masonry and the style of the mosaics and reliefs, it was apparent that the building, in its most important phase, was unquestionably of the fourth century A.D. However, it was clear that this building stood upon an earlier one whose masonry, in *opus reticulatum*, pointed to a date in the first century A.D. The problem was to decide whether this, too, had been a synagogue or whether, as elsewhere (e.g., at Dura Europos and Delos), it had originally served another purpose and was turned into a synagogue only in the fourth century.

FIRST OF ALL, let us examine the appearance of the fourth-century edifice. The synagogue, together with its subsidiary rooms, occupies a rectangular space

36.60 x 23.50 m. (119 x 76½ feet). The front faces east-southeast, that is, toward Jerusalem. The main entrance to the whole complex is near its eastern corner in the long northeast wall; it opened on the Via Severiana. The doorway was flanked by two pilasters of which only the bases, covered with marble veneer, still remain. Passing through this entrance and down two steps, one enters a sort of narrow vestibule. At the foot of the steps is a well over which was found a marble well-head carved with a wave pattern. Along the southeast wall of the vestibule was a series of small chambers, now unfortunately almost completely destroyed. The wall on the opposite side of the vestibule has five openings: three are doors to the synagogue proper, two to a good-sized room in which an oven was uncovered.

The synagogue itself is oblong (24.90 x 12.50 m., 81 x 40½ feet) and is divided laterally into three parts: at the front an area with a mosaic floor set a little lower than the rest of the synagogue; then an imposing inner gateway formed of four columns in gray marble with Corinthian capitals and bases of white marble, and approached by two steps set between the first pair of columns of the gateway; finally the large innermost area, floored in *opus sectile*.

To close off this innermost area from the forepart of the synagogue, screen walls were erected between

the side walls of the building and the inner pair of columns up to the height of their capitals. In the screen wall which ran to the northeast wall was a doorway fitted with a metal grating, as we can tell from traces in the column that served as doorpost. The screen wall which joined the southwest wall was no longer in place in the structure's last phase—it had been removed to make way for the erection of an aedicula to receive the Ark of the Covenant; we made some soundings in the podium that supported this aedicula and discovered unmistakable remains of the wall that originally stood there. So we can conclude that originally this inner area had three entrances, corresponding not only in number but also in size to the three openings in the entrance wall that divided the front section of the synagogue from the vestibule. Then, later, one was blocked up by the aedicula, for the Torah shrine.

The aedicula is a typical structure, though its position, standing free and by itself, is thus far unparalleled. Made in *opus vittatum* (regular courses of bricks and small tufa blocks), it is set on a podium lofty enough to require an approach of four steps; and it has an apse. In front of the ends of the apse stand two colonnettes of marble with composite capitals; the colonnettes were partially incorporated in the podium when, in the course of time, this was expanded by the addition of a projecting front face

decorated with little niches veneered with polychrome marble. Into the ends of the apse were fixed the ends of two architraves which run out to rest on the capitals of the colonnettes. The architraves end in corbels on which are carved, in relief so low as to be almost incision, the well known symbols found so often on monuments of Jewish art: the *menorah* (seven-branched candlestick) flanked by the *shofar* (ram's horn) on the right and, on the left, by the *lulav* (palm branch) and *etrog* (citron). Here the candelabrum is shown standing on three small, plain feet and decorated with incised designs in imitation of gems. The outer sides of the two architraves have simple cornices. Each of the inner sides, which are carelessly worked, has a deep cutting to receive a transverse member which served either to connect the two or to support the pediment that must have crowned the ensemble. The reliefs themselves preserve traces of gilding.

It has been mentioned that a free-standing aedicula such as this one has not been found in other synagogues. However, its external aspect—colonnettes, apse, small staircase in front—is reminiscent of the niche cut into the wall of the synagogue at Dura Europos and of the Ark as it appears on certain Jewish gold glasses, on mosaics in late synagogues and on reliefs (e.g., the one in Pekiin and particularly the one in the catacombs of Beth She'arim).

Closer view of the aedicula with its colonnettes and architraves ending in corbels.





The menorah, or seven-branched candlestick—a relief on the corbel of the architrave of the aedicula.

Synagogue continued

In regard to the shape of the aedicula, an inscription connected with the synagogue at Side, in Asia Minor, is of interest. In this document a certain Isakis records that he contributed the floor of the synagogue between the *ambon* and the *simma* (= *sigma*). Now, the *ambon* that he mentions must refer to the *bema*, or pulpit, from which the Law was read. What meaning the other term has is less clear. However, considering the similarity between the form of the lunate sigma (which looks like a Roman C) and the plan of the Torah shrine at Ostia, there is a possibility that *simma* refers to some such structure. Moreover, in the Ostia synagogue, set against the slightly curved back wall of the inner hall is a kind of podium reached by a set of steps extending toward the center, and this podium, in my opinion, served as the *bema*. (In this innermost part of the hall were found two fallen columns of white marble, whose height and material differ from the four columns of the inner propylaeum. The foundation of the one which is still *in situ* shows that they were not aligned with the other columns.)

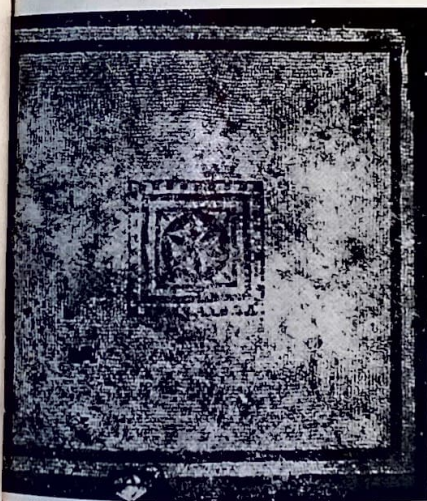
The part of the synagogue that lay between the gateway and the vestibule was divided longitudinally into three aisles. The partitions, whose method of construction reveals a late date, could have been no

higher than balustrades, as we can tell from a portion preserved between the left and middle aisles.

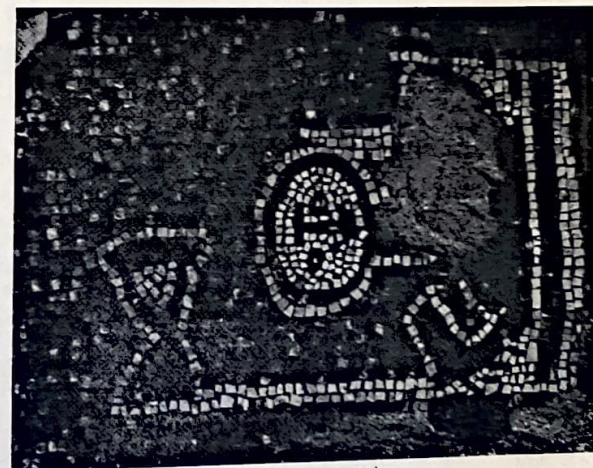
Each of the three aisles was served by one of the entrances leading off the vestibule, and each had a black and white mosaic floor with its own squared border and decorative motif. The floor in the right-hand aisle had a central decoration consisting of a square enclosing a rosette inscribed in a hexagon, a type well known in Jewish art; near the doorway was a shallow basin, probably for ablutions (the door itself opened directly on to the basin and must therefore have been, for all practical purposes, of very little use). In the center aisle the mosaic pavement is, unfortunately, in a ruinous state; only alongside the main entrance are there remains—traces of a panel crudely decorated with a chalice and some circular object which may be a loaf or a stylized crown. The left-hand aisle, whose floor was set on the higher level of the inner hall, had a mosaic of plain white with a black border. Communication between this aisle and the inner hall was effectively blocked by the aedicula housing the Ark. The right side of this aisle was formed by the balustrade mentioned above, and the left by a wall in late *opus vittatum*, which originally must have reached up to the roof of the edifice. There were two small doorways in the left-hand wall; one led to the room with the oven for cooking, the other to a short corridor from which one



Podium set against the back wall of the synagogue hall, which served as the *bema*.



Mosaic floor in one aisle of the forepart of the synagogue, with a geometric design.



Mosaic near the main entrance, with representation of a chalice and a loaf (?).

Synagogue continued

entered a large room parallel to the main hall of the synagogue. This room has the remains of a mosaic floor decorated with a stylized braid motif. Along two of its sides there ran a rather wide bench. I have so far been unable to determine the purpose of this room; it may have been for meetings or for the school where the Law was taught, or—a thought prompted by the exceptionally wide bench which calls to mind the benches the ancients reclined on—a hostel for pilgrims. Such hostels were a part of many synagogues; the one at Jerusalem mentioned in the inscription of a certain Theodotus is a case in point.

In its final phase the chamber with the oven had a rough floor of earth, ash and fragments of marble and terracotta, which may have been connected with the foundation of the cooking area itself or with the erection of a marble-topped table found here, which was perhaps used for kneading unleavened bread. In removing this floor, we found some lamps decorated with the *menorah* and uncovered a fine floor in white and black mosaic with a variety of decorative motifs: a large square with a meander and rosettes, and various arrangements of squares and of checkerboard patterns. The style and level of these mosaics show that they are connected with those described above. Evidently, in some later stage of the synagogue's existence were added the oven, the table and the supporting pillar, of which traces remain near the middle of the room. The transformation also included sinking into the floor a series of large jars connected to each other by low plinths covered with large tiles. This last is rather strange equipment, but the jars could have served for the storing of wine, olive oil and other commodities.

Such was the appearance of the synagogue and the rooms connected with it from the beginning of the fourth century until the time it was abandoned in the course of the fifth century, when the city was declining. For we know that at the beginning of the fourth century Ostia was separated administratively from its ports and, consequently, began to lose its commercial importance. It probably served for a while as a residential center, and then its inhabitants gradually abandoned it when barbarian invasions, depopulation of the countryside and consequent unhealthiness of the area made life insecure.

LET US TURN NOW to the earlier structure—as best we can describe it from the evidence of masonry re-used in the later structure and from the soundings both in the forepart of the synagogue and in the

room with the oven, which were extended deep enough to reach virgin soil.

This earlier building, as is shown by the walls in *opus reticulatum* preserved throughout the whole synagogue and in the "cooking room," was limited to the space occupied by these two areas. Under the mosaic pavements of the room with the oven and the forepart of the synagogue was found a floor of *cocciopesto*—"pounded pottery." In this area, too, there were big benches fully 1.93 m. wide (6¼ feet), forming a curve along the southwest wall. We have observed no traces of dividing walls in this first phase; it would seem that the area covered by the *coccio-*

pesto pavement constituted at this time a single room in front of the large chamber for prayer. Its shape recalls the vestibule of the fourth-century synagogue, and, with the benches, the room that adjoined the later synagogue. Therefore we are probably justified in supposing that when this chamber was transformed, the vestibule and the room with the benches were constructed to serve as replacements.

In an intermediate phase, between the synagogue of the first century A.D. and that of the fourth, some subdivisions were made in this chamber by means of light walls covered with painted stucco; we have found traces of such walls under the balustrade walls which

were put up in the fourth century (see page 198).

The two doors of the "cooking room" and the larger door that formed the main entrance from the vestibule to the synagogue go back to the earliest period. On the other hand, the two smaller doors to the synagogue were made at some later time. Two large doors in the northeast side of the building were closed up in the fourth century A.D.

The four columns of the inner propylaeum belong to the first-century building, for their foundations seem to be contemporary with the building in *opus reticulatum*. Clearly, however, the columns have undergone some slight rearrangement, perhaps when



View of the room with the oven for cooking. Note the remains of mosaic floors with geometric patterns.



The foundations of the columns of the central gateway, belonging to the first-century building.



The room with benches—perhaps a hostel—parallel to the main hall.



The well of the earlier period, with the square stuccoed basin adjoining it.

Synagogue continued

the edifice was rebuilt.

It seems unlikely, at least so far as our present knowledge goes, that the original plan envisioned the great hall with benches and the vestibule with rooms attached on its southeast side. On the other hand, the well very likely goes back to the original period, although it was then outside the building and not inside, as in the fourth century. In fact, the marble well-head with a wave pattern that we found just inside the vestibule entrance stands on top of an older well in *opus reticulatum* with an exterior wall stuccoed in red and with a small square stuccoed basin attached to it.

There is yet more proof that the building of the first century was a synagogue: when we removed the late *opus sectile* floor of the large inner hall, we found traces of seats running along the side and rear walls, very much like those in the synagogues of Galilee. This, plus the similarity in plan between the original and the later structure, in my opinion, proves that from the outset the building was intended to serve as a synagogue.

Finally, a fortunate discovery has made it possible to reinforce this conclusion. We found, among the material re-used for repairs to the floor of the hall at a late date, an almost complete inscription of the late second century or the beginning of the third. In it a

certain Mindis Faustos states that "for the Emperor's well-being" (these words alone—*pro salute Augusti*—are in Latin; the rest of the inscription is in Greek) he arranged to have built and put in place a "container for the sacred law." There can be no doubt, I think, that he was referring to the Ark of the Covenant. This inscription thus reveals that in the second and third centuries the building was also a synagogue, and furnishes proof of the continuity of use between the original edifice and the enlarged and rebuilt version of the fourth century.

Though some points still need clarification, we can now affirm that the Jewish community of Ostia had its own synagogue from the first century A.D. on. This, to be sure, is not in any way startling news, since that was when Ostia was at the peak of its prosperity. However, it should be noted that the community must still have been rich and flourishing in the fourth century, if at this time it was able to restore, enlarge and decorate its house of prayer with some elegance.

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