

“Jewish Archaeology”: Between 'Erusin and Qiddushin

The romantic view of biblical archaeology imagines the biblical archaeologist exploring the hills and valleys of the Holy Land, a spade in one hand and a Bible in the other. This heroic image seldom adhered to the Talmudic archaeologist. Imagine, for a moment, the stereotypical Talmud scholar turned archaeologist exploring the very same hills and valleys. In one hand, a spade. In his backpack the six orders of the Mishnah, the Tosefta, all of the Tannaitic, Classical and post-Classical *Midrashim*, the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds, Aramaic *Targumim*, liturgy, Josephus, Roman law, Patristics, and myriad Cairo Genizah fragments stuffed into every pocket. In the age before CD's, this would have been quite a sight. Our beleaguered text scholar turned archaeologist would surely be in no position to discover very much!

Kidding aside, this library, and more, is at the disposal of interpreters of Jewish archaeological remains from the Land of Israel. Unlike the archaeologists of the

biblical period, who have but one major literary text at their disposal (and lots of supporting documents) in order to study over a millennium

through the early Islamic period (c. 70-c. 700 C.E.).

The marriage between Talmud and archaeology developed as a scholarly discipline during the latter nineteenth century. It was of particular interest to two students of the legendary *Wissenschaft* scholar from Budapest, David Kaufmann (1852-1899), who among other things, was the first Jewish art historian.¹ Ludwig Blau (1861-1936) and Samuel Krauss (1866-1948), both of whom were scholars of rabbinic literature, shared a profound interest in setting Jewish sources within the broadest possible context. Blau and Krauss were among the first to interpret archaeological evidence in full light of their immense knowledge of rabbinic literature.

Krauss asserted absolute continuity between archaeological discoveries and literary sources. Krauss' *Talmudische*

*Archäologie*² is a classic of modern scholarship in rabbinic literature. An “arm-chair archaeologist,” Krauss' research was based upon published materials and not upon first-hand observation of artifacts or excavation. Krauss' “Talmudic



Mosaic Pavement from the Sephoris Synagogue

of creativity, the scholar interested in the intersection of archaeology and Jewish literary sources of Roman and Byzantine Palestine has a concentrated corpus of materials to use to interpret a shorter period: from the destruction of the Temple

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Archaeology" is the foundational work for a small but influential group of Talmudists who continue to deal with archaeological issues. Refined methodologically since Krauss, in 1981 Saul Lieberman described the purpose of this work: "In recent times the number of books dealing with realia, in the physical context as expressed in rabbinic literature, has increased." He continues that "it is impossible to explain correctly neither the Halakhah nor the Aggadah without understanding the form of the millstone [the subject of his article], its history, development and use."³ Replacing "Talmudic Archaeology," the subfield of Talmudic "realia" sees a close relationship between rabbinic sources and archaeological discoveries, particularly those pertaining to daily life issues.

Important work over the last half-decade include Joshua Brand's *Ceramics in Talmudic Literature*,⁴ Yaakov Sussman's monograph-length essay on the Rehov synagogue inscription, a 29 line text of rabbinic literature discovered in the narthex of a sixth century synagogue,⁵ and most prominently commentaries on various issues of "realia" by Daniel Sperber and his students.⁶ An important exhibition at Haaretz Museum in Tel Aviv in 1978, *Form and Function in the Talmudic Era*, presented the results of this type of study to the general public, neatly paralleling rabbinic and

archaeological sources on various topics of daily life,⁷ and the present author prepared a similar exhibition on a smaller scale called *The Tangible Talmud: Text and Artifact in the Greco-Roman Period* based upon the collection of the University of Southern California Archaeological Research Collection in 1987.⁸



Eleazar L. Sukenik

Archaeologists have generally stayed close to this approach, focusing upon the interpretation of individual artifacts and sites, and not on larger historiographic issues. The principle investigator in the early days was Eleazar L. Sukenik, justifiably considered the father of "Jewish archaeology."⁹ This academic discipline was slowly accepted by the "Jerusalem School" of Zionist scholars, who maintained the text-centeredness of their European training. Sukenik was primarily an archaeologist, trained by the founder of "Biblical Archaeology," William F. Albright.

The influence of this American scholar was profound for the development of "Jewish archaeology" throughout the twentieth century. Placing artifacts rather than texts at the center of his research, Sukenik (following Albright, and in consort with his traditional upbringing, Zionist ideology and the institutional

framework at the Hebrew University), assumed a basic continuity between rabbinic texts and "Jewish" artifacts of the "Talmudic" period. Israeli archeologists over the past half century, mainly students of Sukenik, of fellow Jerusalemite Michael Avi-Yonah, and of Sukenik's son Yigael Yadin, have generally assumed this continuity as well.

Blau's primary model was

"Christian Archaeology," a discipline with roots in Catholic Counter-Reformation scholarship that looked favorably upon Jewish artifacts as precursors to the art of the Church. Blau agreed with Krauss that archaeology and rabbinics profoundly inform one another. With considerable historiographic sensitivity, however, he held out the possibility that archaeology might reflect Jews who were beyond the rabbinic pale, in turn rereading the rabbinic corpus hoping to find them. The modern search for "extra-rabbinic Judaism" in rabbinic literature and in Jewish archaeological remains was begun

by Ludwig Blau, though his profound significance is generally forgotten. In an article published, appropriately, in the *Hebrew Union College Annual*, Blau, like Sukenik, described his approach as "Jewish archaeology."

In that article, Ludwig Blau advocated the development of a Jewish archaeological institute to actively excavate, study, and exhibit Jewish artifacts. In the midst of Hungary's post-World War I depression, he looked to American Jewry to carry the torch.¹⁰ His plea was not far fetched. American Jews not only supported the Jewish Theological Seminary of Budapest and four other central European seminaries in modest ways during the postwar years, but were the major supporters of Sukenik's excavation and publication program throughout the 1920s and immediately after World War II.

An approach far more radical than Blau's caught the American imagination through the second half of the century. E. R. Goodenough, a former Methodist minister turned "historian of religion" had been suckled on the premise of Jewish artlessness that was basic to Protestant (particularly German) scholarship. Knowing, however, that Jews of this period did do art—witness Sukenik's discoveries, the synagogue at Dura Europos and the Beth She'arim catacombs, Goodenough asserted that only the Rabbis were artless iconophobes. In his thirteen-volume *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, Goodenough used models drawn

from Jungian psychology, he then constructed a Jewish mystical religion that was itself artful. Goodenough saw his counter-history as a corollary to Gershom Scholem's "discovery" of *Kabbalah* and its all pervasive influence.¹¹



Carol and Eric Meyers, "Finders of the Lost Ark," Courtesy of Eric Meyers

Jewish Symbols brought Jewish archaeological sources to the attention of a broader audience than ever before, and to the forefront of scholarship on ancient Judaism.

Goodenough's approach to religion was of particular interest to former Episcopalian priest Morton Smith, and subsequently to many of Smith's students at Columbia University. Holding a doctorate from the Hebrew University, Smith was far more in tune with Judaic studies than the senior Goodenough. He refined

Goodenough's model, dropping its mystical and psychological aspects. What was left was a focus upon extra-rabbinic aspects of ancient Judaism (parallel to Walther Bauer's interest in *Heresy and Orthodoxy in Earliest Christianity*).¹² Smith's

approach was adopted and adapted by many of his students, a large number of whom were Conservative Rabbi-doctoral students of ancient Judaism. Each of these scholars focused his research upon the status of the Sages—an issue of particular relevance to transitions from a staunchly Talmudic focus to a more "pluralistic" liberal one that was in process at the Jewish Theological Seminary at the time—and often cited archaeology in support of their approach. Lee I. Levine and to a lesser extent Jacob Neusner saw archaeology as the key to uncovering "non-rabbinic Judaism" (for Neusner, "Judaisms").¹³ The focus upon "diversity" and more recently rabbinic "ambiguity" and "uncertainty" by other members of this school

has continued to frame and color much of the American discussion of relationships between Judaism and archaeology.¹⁴

Goodenough's thirteen massive volumes challenged Talmudists to rethink, or at least to defend, the "Talmudic archaeology" paradigm. E. E. Urbach, the Breslau-trained doyen of Israeli Talmudists, wrote an essay on art and idolatry that has taken on canonical status in some circles.¹⁵ He argued that rabbinic literature fully expresses the span of Jewish attitudes in antiquity, and

there is no seam dividing Jewish literary and archaeological remains. American rabbinics scholars Gerald Blidstein, then of Yeshiva University¹⁶ and Joseph Baumgarten,¹⁷ a student of Albright's, took an intermediate approach, reassessing rabbinic sources against the archaeological record. They discovered that the sources are far more nuanced than either Urbach or Goodenough thought, without the overstatements that sometimes emanated from the Smith school.

The most significant American archaeologist of ancient Jewish remains—Eric M. Meyers—organized major excavations of synagogues in the upper Galilee (Meron, Gush alav, Nabratein) and more recently excavations at Sepphoris. Highly influenced by both Goodenough and the Albright school of archeology as exemplified in his teacher George Ernest Wright, Meyers did not accept the more extreme elements of Goodenough's

construction of Judaism as a religion—though his concern for religion and for “regionalism” reflect a blending of the concerns of the Albright school, more recent archaeological methods and Goodenough's interest in diversity.

Recent years have seen renewed interest in the relationship between rabbinic sources and archaeology. American scholarship has generally been dominated both by the Smith school's assertive focus upon non-rabbinicism, and the Israeli academy by the solid parallels discerned by scholars of Talmudic realia. I use the term “Jewish archaeology” to describe my own work.¹⁸ No longer “Talmudic archaeology,” I use “Jewish archaeology” to highlight both the ambiguities that have become apparent over the last half century and at the same time to strenuously assert the existence of a strong religious and ethnic Jewish core culture in antiquity (a “Common Judaism” or “Jewish *koinē*”). I

employ “Jewish archaeology” to give title and history to a historiographic approach that is rooted in the research of Blau and Sukenik. To return to the marriage metaphor raised by Ziony Zevit in his provocative article, “Jewish archaeology” is indeed “engaged” (*'erusin*) to rabbinic literature. It is a marriage (*qiddushin*), however, that is never consummated in a simple way.

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