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## The New Archaeological Definition of the Earliest Synagogues in Judaea and Galilee Applied to the Site of Khirbet Qumran

### Abstract

Following the discovery of numerous synagogues in Judea and Galilee in recent years, a new archaeological definition of early synagogues (before the third century CE) is emerging. The confrontation of the criteria with a case study, the site of Khirbet Qumran, allows us to evaluate the basis for this new definition. Some criteria seem to be abandoned and others to be integrated. After this archaeological and literary study, the definition is established as a large multifunctional building following the regional Hellenistic architectural model. As a result, several excavated sites become eligible, including two sectors of Khirbet Qumran.

**Keywords:** Synagogue, Qumran, Judaism, Architecture

It is not useful here to recall the discovery of the Qumran scrolls since the modalities and even the details are known to most people.<sup>1</sup> I would like to focus on a little-known episode of the discovery because it already connects the Qumran Scrolls with the synagogue.

The discovery of a few pieces of leather at the bottom of a cave was not unusual for the Bedouins of the Ta'amireh tribe, who were used to visiting the caves of the Judean desert as their flocks grazed, as one of the shepherds, Muhammad Edh-Dhib,<sup>2</sup> would later tell us. On the one hand, the illiteracy of the Bedouins meant that the discovery was a discovery of material, leather, and not the identification of manuscripts because they had not seen any before. However, the discovery of intact jars in the cave seemed to catch their attention at first, because they immediately saw new containers. Thus, the

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1 For example, see VanderKam 2010, 1–46; Cross 1995, 19–53; Fields 2009.

2 Trever 1977, 191–194. The shepherds' account varied over time, so their narrative must be taken with caution.



first three scrolls came out of the cave in a second step.<sup>3</sup> Edh-Dhib's cousin Jum'a brought them to the tribe's camp southeast of Bethlehem. The scrolls remained in a bag for several weeks and were shown to other members of the tribe. The discovery did not arouse much excitement among them. However, the letters visible on the leather and the good preservation of the scrolls had aroused interest in their potential monetary value. Some members of the tribe had participated in archaeological excavations some years before. They had explored some caves under the guidance of the French prehistorian René Neuville.<sup>4</sup> The Ta'amireh tribe used to sell their finds and buy supplies in Bethlehem. In March 1947, a carpenter and antiquarian named Judah Ibrahim 'Ijha was visited by Jum'a and Khalil Musa, another cousin. They brought the three scrolls and two jars. The merchant promised to try to sell them. Several weeks passed but no one wanted to buy them. In early April, Jum'a took the scrolls back, as 'Ijha did not value them and no one would buy them. In the meantime, another Bethlehem merchant, Faidi Salahi, looked at them and thought they were stolen from a synagogue. History did not record this episode, but the following month, in April 1947, the scrolls were presented to another merchant named Khalil Iskander Shahin, known as Kando, a shoe salesman, grocer, shoemaker and carpenter, among other activities. It is remarkable that a Bethlehem merchant, Faidi Salahi, spontaneously thought of Bedouin larceny in a synagogue.<sup>5</sup> There is no doubt that he recognised the square Hebrew or Aramaic script on the leather and that he had already seen, in real life or in photographs, Hebrew Bible scrolls belonging to a synagogue. Indeed, the identification of the scrolls on display with the synagogue reputed to hold such scrolls for Christian or Muslim merchants in Bethlehem is logical. Thus, the first interpretation of the scrolls was in connection with the synagogue. Then, as we know, research on the material held by Kando and others moved on to other interpretations until the still ongoing debates about the provenance of the scrolls or the reasons for their deposition in the Judean caves, for example.<sup>6</sup>

I would like to return to the supposed link between Khirbet Qumran and the synagogue. It is not a question of trying to resurrect this old interpretation because it is unfounded, but of seeing if the hypothesis of a link between the architecture of the first synagogues at the end of the Second Temple period and the archaeological site of Qumran is possible. If I may

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3 Trever 1977, 96–100.

4 Cross 1995, 21. See the history of the tribe in Couroyer 1951, 75–91.

5 Trever 1977, 100.

6 Fidanzio 2017; Hamidović 2020, 293–321.

formulate this hypothesis more directly: can we see in Khirbet Qumran the architectural criteria defining a synagogue at the turn of the Christian era?

## 1 The Hypothesis of Khirbet Qumran as a Synagogue

The hypothesis is not recent, but it has received renewed interest in recent years following a reconfiguration of the criteria defining the first synagogues in Galilee and Judea at the turn of the Christian era.

Travellers in the nineteenth century noticed the site of Qumran, but it was not until the discovery of manuscripts in a cave soon to be called Cave 1 that archaeological excavations were undertaken at the site. Delayed by the context of the first Arab-Israeli war and a tense diplomatic situation, it was the Dominican Father Roland de Vaux of the *École biblique et archéologique française* in Jerusalem and the Brit Gerald Lankester Harding, Director of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan, who were sent to the Judean desert to excavate the cave in February–March 1949. They took the opportunity to take soundings at Khirbet Qumran and even exhumed two tombs.<sup>7</sup> But at first, they found no connection with the discovered manuscripts. So, they concluded that the site was a Roman fort dating from the third or fourth century CE;<sup>8</sup> in other words, they confirmed what travellers of the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries had thought first-hand. In view of the burning questions raised by the manuscripts, the first excavation campaign began two years later, from 24 November to 12 December 1951. This was followed by four other excavation campaigns in the Khirbet: from 9 February to 24 April 1953, from 13 February to 14 April 1954, from 2 February to 6 April 1955 and from 18 February to 28 March 1956. De Vaux left behind only preliminary reports<sup>9</sup> and an essay on historical synthesis, which was published in French and then reworked by him for the English version of the Schweich Lectures at the Academy in London shortly before his death.<sup>10</sup>

During the first season of excavations in 1951, de Vaux and Harding unearthed three rooms in the south-east corner of the main building: loci 1, 2 and 4.<sup>11</sup> The first two rooms are covered with a cobblestone floor that continues under the dividing wall, which means that at an earlier period the two rooms were one. There were also cupboards or niches on both sides of

7 De Vaux 1949a; de Vaux 1949b; de Vaux 1953a; de Vaux 1953b.

8 Magness 2002, 27.

9 De Vaux 1953a; de Vaux 1954; de Vaux 1956.

10 De Vaux 1961; de Vaux 1973.

11 Humbert and Chambon 1994, 291–293.



Fig. 1: Photograph (131) of locus 4 with a bench (courtesy of the École biblique et archéologique française).

the partition wall between locus 2 and locus 4. The latter locus has not been modified. It has no cobblestone floor but a plastered floor; it also has plastered benches about 10 cm high according to de Vaux, which is confirmed by photographs taken on site.<sup>12</sup> The archaeologist Jodi Magness suggests a height of 20 cm, but the current floor level is lower than the archaeological layer in which the structure was found.<sup>13</sup>

The excavator also found several oil lamps and a lot of pottery including a jug ‘between the top of the bench and the floor’.<sup>14</sup> Returning to the room in March 1953, de Vaux noted that the walls were also plastered up to 50 cm high and that few objects were unearthed between the floor and the bench. He also saw a feature that he described as a ‘cupboard’ or a ‘water reservoir’;<sup>15</sup> he clearly opted for the second identification as he reported a small channel running through the wall to feed what he described as a ‘basin’ measuring 50 cm on each side. In March 1955, he removed the plastered floor and saw another plastered floor that had only the southern bench.<sup>16</sup> The installation comes from levels Ib and II, which are now agreed not to be separated and to date from the beginning of the first century BCE to the

<sup>12</sup> Humbert and Chambon 1994, 65–67; photographs 131, 133, 134, 135, 136.

<sup>13</sup> Magness 2002, 51; Hirschfeld 2004, 98, speaks about ‘bench-like surfaces’; Weiss 2020, 29, makes the same remark for the benches of Khirbet Diab.

<sup>14</sup> Humbert and Chambon 1994, 293.

<sup>15</sup> Humbert and Chambon 1994, 293.

<sup>16</sup> Humbert and Chambon 1994, 293.

middle of the first century CE.<sup>17</sup> Two coins from the year 2 of the first Jewish revolt, i. e., around 68, found in the layer after locus 4, together with the floor and the plastered benches, make it possible to date the end of the use of the room's facilities. The objects found in the earlier layers are bowls, plates, jugs, a bowl, dishes, so-called Herodian lamps and some iron arrowheads. The installation, especially the benches, led Roland de Vaux to write in 1961 that locus 4 was the 'council room' that ran the community.<sup>18</sup> Jodi Magness concurs with that idea, but she is more general about the function: she speaks of an 'assembly room'.<sup>19</sup> The dimensions of locus 4, 8 × 4m, therefore give about 18 linear meters of bench space by removing the space needed for the two entrances and subtracting one space at each corner. It can thus be estimated that about 18 people could sit on the bench at the same time.<sup>20</sup> In the sense of this hypothesis, it is not known whether Roland de Vaux had in mind the passage from the Community Rule in IQS 8:1: 'In the council of the community, (there shall be) twelve men and three priests, perfect in everything that has been revealed from the whole Torah.' But if the number of fifteen, twelve plus three, corresponds to a group leading the community as John J. Collins thinks, 'an elite group' to use his expression,<sup>21</sup> it theoretically had room to meet in locus 4.

Later, in 2001, Yehudah Rapuano published an article in which he compared locus 4 as a 'council chamber'<sup>22</sup> to the Jericho synagogue of the Hasmonean period as designated by archaeologist Ehud Netzer.<sup>23</sup> He locates a synagogue in Jericho near the winter palace complex in the time of the Hasmoneans and Herod the Great. In the eastern part, south of a large hall, is a ritual pool or *miqweh* with two adjoining rooms. One of these, adjoining the western part of the hall, has U-shaped benches. Therefore, Ehud Netzer thought of a 'triclinium'.<sup>24</sup> According to him, the *miqweh* and

17 Magness 2002, 66–69; Magness 1995.

18 De Vaux 1961, 85; de Vaux 1973, 7: 'assembly room', 26: 'small assembly-room', 32, III: 'council chamber'.

19 Magness 2002, 51.

20 It is possible to experiment with seating more people on the site today, but the promiscuity is not suitable for a meeting. On the other hand, there is nothing to prevent people from sitting on the floor. The hypothesis of a jar storage in locus 4, supported by Hirschfeld 2004, 100–101, is not based on solid arguments.

21 Collins 2009, 69; Wernberg-Møller 1957, 122–125; Berg 2007; Alexander and Vermès 1998, 106, suggest an exegesis of Isa 28:16. Gillihan 2011, 415–416, hypothesises a *halakhah* based on priestly rights in the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur.

22 Rapuano 2001. The expression is quoted in commas from the work of de Vaux 1973, 32 and III.

23 Netzer, in collaboration with Kaiman and Laureys 1999, 203–221.

24 Netzer, in collaboration with Kaiman and Laureys 1999, 205–217.

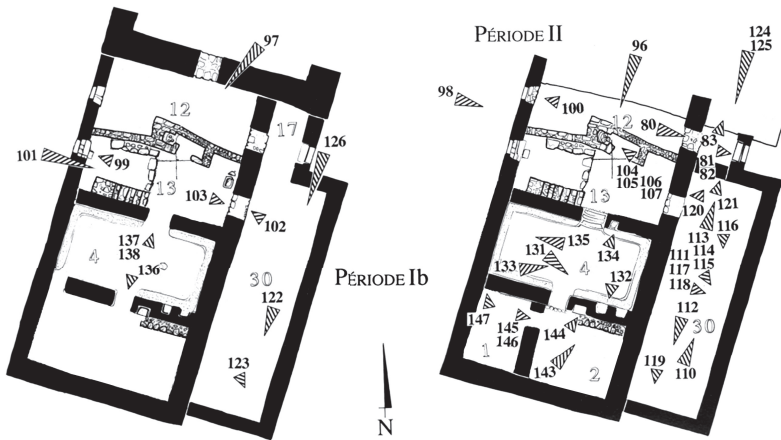


Fig. 2: South-western sector of Khirbet Qumran, in Humbert and Chambon 1994, 48. Numbers in black correspond to photographs published in the volume and numbers in white designate the loci.

its rooms, including the one with the U-shaped benches, belong to a later extension.<sup>25</sup>

Rapuano justifies the comparison of locus 4 at Khirbet Qumran with this benched room in the so-called Jericho synagogue by (1) geographical proximity: the two structures are about 10 km apart;<sup>26</sup> (2) the two facilities are contemporary: between the first century BCE and the beginning of the first century CE;<sup>27</sup> (3) the two structures have a rather similar orientation: north-south for the building in Jericho and north-east to south-west for the site in Qumran;<sup>28</sup> (4) the two buildings are of the same size: 20.2 × 10.6 meters at Jericho and 20.2 × 10.1 meters for the building identified by Rapuano comprising locus 4 and loci 1, 2 in the south and loci 12 and 13 in the north;<sup>29</sup> (5) a comparable area and architectural structure.<sup>30</sup> But the number and location of the entrances to the two structures differ (6), says Rapuano:<sup>31</sup> one in the centre of the south wall and then two new entrances in the east wall for the Jericho building, while the locus 4 area would have had five

<sup>25</sup> Netzer, in collaboration with Kaiman and Laureys 1999, 207–213.

<sup>26</sup> Rapuano 2001, 50.

<sup>27</sup> Rapuano 2001, 51.

<sup>28</sup> Rapuano 2001, 51.

<sup>29</sup> Rapuano 2001, 51.

<sup>30</sup> Rapuano 2001, 51 and 53.

<sup>31</sup> Rapuano 2001, 53.



Fig. 3: View of the 'synagogue' towards the west: hall A(H)600 in the centre and the 'triclinium' AG69 in the foreground. Netzer, Laureys-Chachy and Kalman 2004, 165.

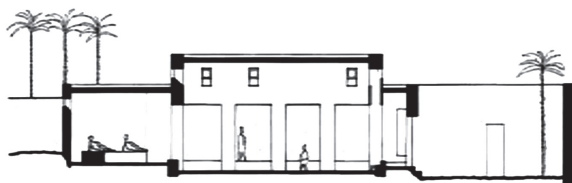


Fig. 4: Drawing of the 'synagogue' with the 'triclinium' and the *miqweh*. In Netzer, Laureys-Chachy and Kalman 2004, 186.



and then four entrances in the courtyard to the north: one in the centre of the north wall which was later walled up, two in the east wall, and two more in the west wall. (7) The plan of the two buildings presents common points such as a tripartite division;<sup>32</sup> however, some details are not found from one site to the other. For example, the dividing wall of loci 12 and 13 to the north of the building at Qumran is irregular and was heavily reworked because of the earthquake of 31 BCE, writes Rapuano on the advice of Steve Pfann,<sup>33</sup> but archaeologists after Jodie Magness agree that the earthquake had a limited impact on the structure of Khirbet Qumran,<sup>34</sup> which means a reworked wall for unknown reasons in fact;<sup>35</sup> likewise Rapuano adds that locus 13 has a staircase departure.<sup>36</sup> Rapuano reports the opinion of Netzer concerning the central sector of the building in Jericho as ‘an open courtyard’ with no internal separation,<sup>37</sup> whereas locus 4 in Qumran seems to be a covered room according to de Vaux because a print of a palm trunk was found on the floor and possibly acted as a post holding a roof terrace which was accessed by the staircase of locus 13.<sup>38</sup> But Netzer clearly thought the courtyard was roofed,<sup>39</sup> thus it is a common point with locus 4 in Qumran. Rapuano noting the structural difference between locus 4 with benches under the roof and the central courtyard of the Jericho building interpreted de Vaux’s note during the 1955 excavation of a floor under the two plastered floors as the existence of a locus 4 without benches originally, i. e., as the central courtyard of the Jericho building.<sup>40</sup> He then envisaged ‘perhaps some sort of portable seating preced[ing] the permanent benches in the room.’<sup>41</sup> Concerning the entrances, he noted, as at Jericho, that the Qumran building has a single central entrance in the north wall and two doors in the south wall, but the second entrance on the west, rather than on the east, ends the wall.<sup>42</sup> Finally, the southern part of both buildings is symmetrically divided into two rooms.<sup>43</sup> Thus, Rapuano believes that the two structures follow a similar architectural concept. Since Netzer identified the building as a syn-

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32 Rapuano 2001, 53–54.

33 Rapuano 2001, 53 n. 10.

34 Magness 2002, 67.

35 See the indications of de Vaux on this wall in Humbert and Chambon 1994, 296–297.

36 Rapuano 2001, 53, after the notes of de Vaux in Humbert and Chambon 1994, 297.

37 Rapuano 2001, 53.

38 Humbert and Chambon 1994, 293.

39 See Fig. 4 and Netzer, in collaboration with Kaiman and Laureys 1999, 220.

40 Rapuano 2001, 54.

41 Rapuano 2001, 54.

42 Rapuano 2001, 54.

43 Rapuano 2001, 54.



agogue, Rapuano suggested that the complex of rooms consisting of loci 1, 2, 4, 12, 13 at Khirbet Qumran in the Essene period is also a synagogue.<sup>44</sup> He added that Netzer suggested that the niche in the north wall of the hall at Jericho could be used as a 'geniza' and for the storage of Torah scrolls and other scrolls,<sup>45</sup> while de Vaux in the posthumous English translation of his Schweich Lectures in 1973 suggested that the niches in the south wall of locus 4 could hold scrolls.<sup>46</sup> De Vaux added that the immediate eastern locus, locus 30, which measures 14 × 4 meters, could accommodate more people at a meeting.<sup>47</sup> It should be noted that the excavator of this locus, better known as the 'scriptorium' because inkwells and stucco structures in the form of tables were found,<sup>48</sup> hesitated until the end about its function. By analogy, Rapuano deduces that the Jericho building may have functioned as he perceives the functioning of the community through locus 4 and adjacent rooms at Khirbet Qumran. He concludes that this part of the Qumran site around locus 4 and the building in Jericho that Netzer called a synagogue document the first synagogues in the first century BCE. The recognition of a synagogue at this location in Jericho is now largely refuted because Netzer based this identification on commonalities with the synagogue at Gamla.<sup>49</sup> However, there are at least as many differences as similarities, which invalidates the hypothesis. Does this mean that the building around locus 4 at Khirbet Qumran cannot be identified as a synagogue?

Lee I. Levine in a book published in 1987 thought that the study of the law and the recitation of prayers took place daily at the site of Qumran according to the discovered texts but that there was no archaeological evidence for a specific room for this purpose in Khirbet Qumran.<sup>50</sup> However, in two different publications in 2000, he suggested that locus 77, the largest room on the site (22 × 4.5m), often presented as the community's 'dining room', also served as a place of worship.<sup>51</sup> In the last article, he added<sup>52</sup> that the passage

44 Rapuano 2001, 56.

45 Netzer, in collaboration with Kaiman and Laureys 1999, 212–213.

46 De Vaux 1973, 32, mentions 'books'.

47 De Vaux 1973, 7, 26, 32, III.

48 De Vaux 1973, 29–31. See the discussion in Metzger 1959, 509–515; Greenleaf Pedley 1959–1960, 21–41; Magness 2002, 60–61. The hypothesis of a triclinium formulated by Donceel-Voûte 1992, 61–84, has been invalidated by Reich 1995, 157–160.

49 Netzer, in collaboration with Kaiman and Laureys 1999, 218–221. See the review by Maoz 1999, 120–121, and the answer of Netzer in Netzer 2000, 69–70, and Netzer, Laureys-Chachy and Kalman 2004, 159–192.

50 Levine 1987, 13.

51 Levine 2005, 65; Levine 2000, 905.

52 Levine 2000, 905 and 908.

from *CD* 11:21–12:1 shows a synagogue behind the expression *beit histahavut*, ‘the house of prostration’:

And no one enters the house of prostration, let him not enter unclean after washing. And when the trumpets of the assembly shall sound, let them anticipate or delay, but let them not interrupt the whole service, [for it is a] holy [hou]se.

The ‘house of prostration’ appears to be a place where prayers are recited as in the Babylonian Talmud in *Berakoth* 34b and *Megillah* 22b. However, according to the Mishnaic tractate *Middoth* 1:1, 2:6, it is a room in the Temple of Jerusalem where worshippers bowed during sacrifices.<sup>53</sup> It is therefore unclear whether it should be seen as a synagogue in the Essene context. In any case, Levine has, in the background of his hypothesis, the cult function of the synagogue and thus the reservation of a specific place for this activity in mind. Lawrence Schiffman had already reacted to this in the volume edited by Levine in 1987 by noting: ‘there is no evidence of the establishment of a synagogue or anything like it, in the sense of a fixed place of prayer, among the archaeological remains from Qumran’<sup>54</sup> and he added that the search for a room or a group of rooms particularly dedicated to worship was unfounded, ‘since the entire settlement was dedicated to this purpose.’<sup>55</sup>

More recently, research on synagogues has been revived for various reasons. Several scholars have attempted to see if there is a typology of synagogues in ancient Israel and the Diaspora. Among these are the works of Daniel D. Binder who describes the meeting halls of Khirbet Qumran as an example of ‘sectarian synagogues’<sup>56</sup> and of Anders Runesson who distinguishes between ‘public synagogues’ in cities or towns administered by Jews and ‘semi-public’ or ‘association synagogues’ managed by a Jewish group only.<sup>57</sup> In the latter context, he refers to the Essenes. He recognises that the early synagogues had as their core activity the reading and interpretation of the Torah and that typical association activities could be added such as communal meals. Thus, he identifies locus 77 at Khirbet Qumran.<sup>58</sup> The priority given to the associative component of synagogues according to Greco-Roman definitions in identifying Khirbet Qumran as a synagogue in Palestine remains a matter of debate.<sup>59</sup> Thus, the comparison of the Essene

53 See Runesson, Binder and Olsson 2008, 66–67.

54 Schiffman 1987, 35.

55 Schiffman 1987, 35.

56 Binder 1999, 24.

57 Runesson 2001, 395–400, 478–482; Runesson 2014, 267–270; Runesson, Binder and Olsson 2008, 72.

58 Runesson, Binder and Olsson 2008, 75.

59 Richardson 1996; Levine 2001, 90–93; Boschung 2021, 81–96.

*yahad* with the *ḥabûra* is perhaps more relevant because the term appears in the Damascus Document (CD 12:8; 14:16–17) but few written sources (literary and numismatic) around CE describe the nature and functioning of this associative mode, if at all standardised as Steeve Fraade points out.<sup>60</sup>

Although they postulate an identification of Khirbet Qumran – in whole or in part – with a synagogue, these hypotheses are of a different nature. Some of them are based on architectural observations such as de Vaux and Rapuano, while others, such as Levine and Runesson, are based on the expected functions of the synagogue. What they have in common, it seems to me, is to question the criteria for recognising a synagogue at the turn of the Christian era, before the First Jewish Revolt and the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in 70 CE.

## 2 Reflections on Current Research into the Definition of Early Synagogues

In recent years, there have been many announcements of the discovery of new synagogues in Galilee and Judea through archaeological excavations.<sup>61</sup> I have participated in this trend by responding favourably to the invitation of Mordechai Aviam of the Kinneret College of Galilee to participate with students from the University of Lausanne in the excavation of Tel Rekhesh in 2017, then in the excavation of the village of Tel Shikhin, which also includes a synagogue, in 2018, and finally by co-leading the first season of the excavation of the village of Yodfat in 2019 with Mordechai Aviam and Kate Raphael. The results of this last excavation, still unpublished, illustrate the current problematic of synagogue identification. Indeed, a debate arose within the team as to whether the building excavated at the entrance to the village was a synagogue or not. Some argued that it was a synagogue (and sometimes even before the excavation),<sup>62</sup> while others, including myself, spoke only of a public building. Indeed, we excavated the layers of the Ottoman, Mamluk, Crusader and Byzantine periods. There is a 15 × 10 meter building with the main entrance on a north-south axis and another entrance in the western wall that was reworked in the Byzantine period which is

<sup>60</sup> Fraade 2009. See also Collins 2009, 85–87.

<sup>61</sup> See The Bornblum Eretz Israel Synagogues Website hosted by Kinneret College on the Sea of Galilee: <https://synagogues.kinneret.ac.il>, last accessed 27 July 2022.

<sup>62</sup> Aviam 2019, 300.

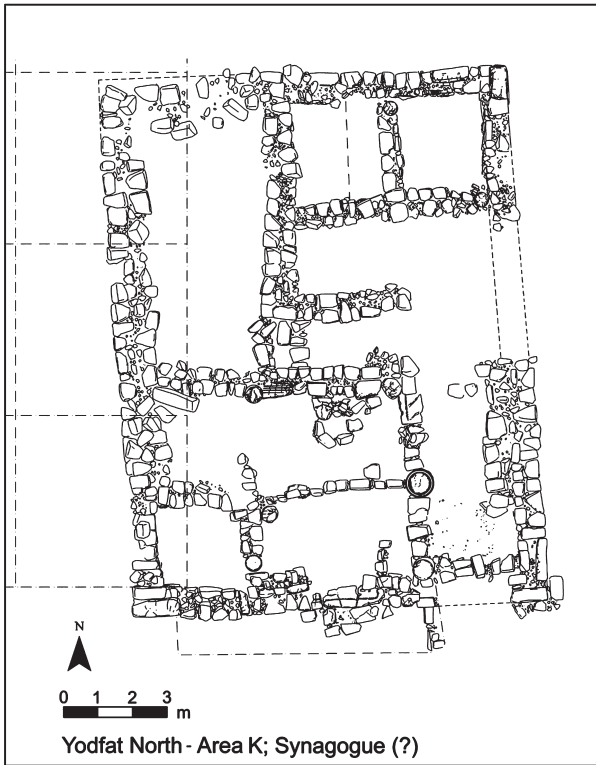


Fig. 5: Plan of area K of Yodfat site in 1919.

now blocked. Similarly, column shafts were placed at the base of the walls to create new rooms. Moreover, none of these column shafts, capitals and pedestals seem to belong to the same structure, which suggests that they were probably spolia from the hill opposite where the Jewish rebel village was located during the First Jewish Revolt in the first century CE, a hill that did not yield a synagogue.<sup>63</sup> Some fragments of pottery from this period, but found in the Byzantine stratum, also point to this hypothesis. A second season of excavations is planned soon to reach the Roman archaeological strata.

The discussion of whether this is a synagogue meets a wider debate on the actual definition of a synagogue in Galilee and Judea before the third

<sup>63</sup> Aviam 2015.

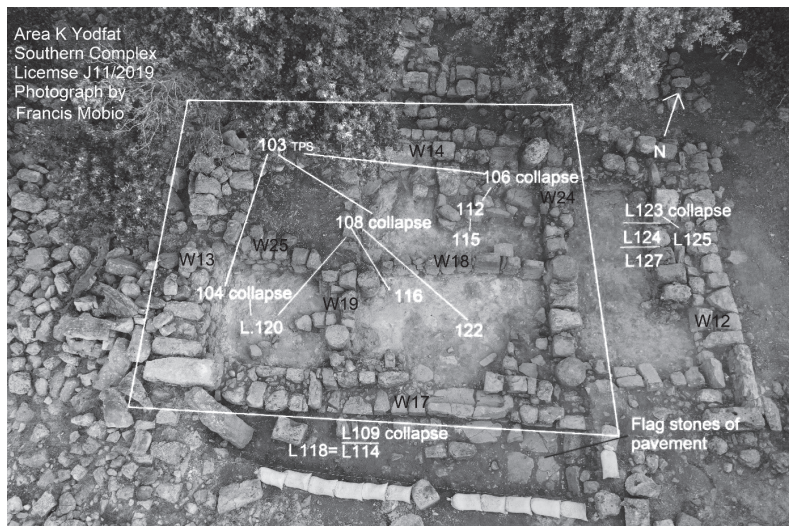


Fig. 6: Aerial photograph of area K of the Yodfat site in 2019 (photograph by Francis Mobio for the University of Lausanne).

century CE. Proponents of identifying a synagogue in this period base their argument on a comparison of several synagogues already excavated. The first criterion is architectural:<sup>64</sup> a large room, often with pillars to support an elevation, with stone benches set against three or four walls. The second criterion is the orientation of the entrance towards the city of Jerusalem. Other, more secondary, criteria are the discovery of inscriptions proving the existence of a synagogue or the discovery of a deposit of coins under the threshold or in the floor, but this last criterion does not correspond to the period before the third century. The existence of a niche or a bimah, i. e., a platform for placing the scrolls, is also attested later in the synagogues. Returning to the example of Yodfat, the excavated building does have a doorway facing Jerusalem to the south and is related to a building of a collective nature with pillars indicating a building elevation of several metres in height. However, we did not find any benches leaning against the walls, but it is possible that they are in the lower strata not yet excavated. According to the current definition of synagogues at the turn of the Christian era, it appears that the Byzantine building uncovered may be eligible for identification as a syn-

<sup>64</sup> See, e. g., Chiat 1981; Amit 1995; Magness 2001; Catto 2007; Runesson, Binder and Olsson 2008; Weiss 2020.

agogue. Does this mean that if we find benches leaning against the walls during the next excavation campaign, this will be a decisive argument for identifying a synagogue?

I am not sure. Indeed, it appears that the presence of benches is not specific to synagogues. Stone benches, often plastered, existed, for example, in the halls or *pronaoi* of the temples of Atargatis, Artemis and Tyche at Dura-Europos in the first century CE.<sup>65</sup> Likewise, in the forecourts of the Nabatean temples, in the Roman temples, in the *mithrea*, and more widely in the *triclina*, benches are part of the fixed furniture.<sup>66</sup> In the various council-house buildings, the *bouleuteria* also have benches arranged in three directions to form a U-shape in the auditorium.<sup>67</sup> They are also found in smaller public buildings and in private houses such as the *andrôn* or *andrônitidos*, which is a small room for men's communal meals, the male counterpart of the *gynaïkeion* reserved for women in the Greco-Roman household.<sup>68</sup> These meals between men were the occasion for discussions of various kinds or to welcome guests. Marylin J. Chiat rightly concludes that the benches only demonstrate that the buildings were used for 'public gatherings' and that the nature of these gatherings is not clear from the archaeological data alone.<sup>69</sup>

Furthermore, in his autobiography (*Vita* 277–278), the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus uses the terms *proseuchè*<sup>70</sup> and *boulè* (led by an *archon*) when referring to the city of Tiberias. There is mention of a meeting of the *boulè* on Sabbath morning to decide on support for Josephus as a 'general' in the first Jewish revolt. Then Josephus arrived in Tiberias a few days later and people from Tiberias met again in the *proseuchè*. The meeting began with a prayer, but the *archon* Jesus interrupted it to debate with Josephus. The text is ambiguous because it is not clear whether Josephus uses the words *proseuchè* and *boulè* as synonyms or whether they refer to two different institutions. In any case, the passage contains one of the few descriptions of early synagogues.<sup>71</sup> The *proseuchè* is described as 'the largest building (*oikèma*) and able to accommodate a large crowd' (277); the *proseuchè* here refers to a building as a meeting place. Then, in *Vita* 284, he indicates that the *proseuchè*

65 Bellinger 1932, 21–23.

66 Colledge 1977, 37 and 62, cited by Chiat 1981, 59.

67 Kockel 1995.

68 Boethius and Ward-Perkins 1970, 430, cited by Chiat 1981, 52, who sees it as a structure present in North Syria in the first century CE. See the structure of the *andrôn* in the Greco-Roman world with benches in Weir 2015, esp. 878.

69 Chiat 1981, 51.

70 See also *Vita* 280, 293 and the study of Krause 2017.

71 See *M. Nedarim* 9,2 in which the transformation of a house into a synagogue is discussed. See also Aviam and Safrai 2021.

could house the whole council (*boulè*).<sup>72</sup> Recently, Stuart Miller emphasised that the Greek term *oikèma* used by Josephus to characterise the *proseuchè* means ‘room’, ‘dwelling place’, ‘dining room’, ‘hall’ or ‘house’.<sup>73</sup> Thus, it is likely that Josephus was describing a large domestic residence and that public meetings were held there. According to Josephus’ account, it is also likely that these meetings are of a political nature, meaning that local officials may be invited. Since a time of prayer is also indicated in the account, it is also likely that political meetings in this place could incorporate liturgical elements.<sup>74</sup> Such an association should not be surprising, as the political and liturgical dimensions are inseparable in antiquity.<sup>75</sup> One is tempted to see it as the occasional choice of a city house, perhaps private, known for its large area in Tiberias. By choosing the term *proseuchè*, Josephus probably sets himself apart from civic places. He seems to be setting himself up in front of the local *archon* in order to signify his central role in the Jewish revolt. The insistence on the size of the building is intended to say that the mission conferred on Josephus exceeds that of the local institutions. This rhetorical dimension in favour of the political role of the Jewish historian is confirmed by Josephus’ curious choice of the term *proseuchè* because it is the only synagogue in Palestine mentioned in texts, including Josephus, with this word. Levine thought that there was a connection between the synagogue at Tiberias and diaspora Jews<sup>76</sup> as attested elsewhere, for example at Sepphoris, or that the Hellenistic model that served as the basis for the creation of the *polis* at Tiberias favoured the importation of this *proseuchè* model into Galilee. Miller believes, on the contrary, that it is a deliberate choice of word on the part of Josephus because he is writing in the diaspora, in Rome, and the term *proseuchè* was more common than the word *sunagogè* in the diaspora.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, Josephus uses the term *sunagogè* to name other synagogues in Palestine and Syria such as those of Caesarea, Antioch and Dora.<sup>78</sup> Thus, Josephus seems to have another criterion for designating a synagogue with the term *proseuchè*: a large domestic residence where sometimes political meetings took place.

<sup>72</sup> See the 600 members of the *boulè* in *War* 2.641.

<sup>73</sup> Miller 1998, 57. See Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 334; Xenophon, *Hellenica* 4.1.32; Plutarch, *Artaxerxes* 29; Pindar, *Olympia* 2.10; Heraclides 145b.

<sup>74</sup> See the debates on this dissociation in Hengel 1975, 32–34; Hüttenmeister 1993; Rajak 2002.

<sup>75</sup> *Contra* Horsley 1995, 222–237.

<sup>76</sup> Levine 2005, 53.

<sup>77</sup> Miller 1998, 56 n. 23, cites Fleischer 1990, 408 n. 28.

<sup>78</sup> *War* 2.285–289; 7.44; *Ant.* 19.300–305.



In this context, it is difficult to know who the owner of the building was; some thought Herod Antipas or Agrippa I, because they shaped Tiberias in its urban structure, but no proof exists. It could be that it was simply a private owner who hosted meetings in his vast house. This would be consistent with the classical view of the emergence of the synagogue in the context of private homes where the owners could afford to buy a Torah scroll as specified in the Mishna.<sup>79</sup> In any case, it is clear from Josephus' description that there are no specific architectural criteria for recognising a synagogue, other than a large area for a meeting. Moreover, if the *boulè* can meet in this place, this does not mean that Josephus confuses the *proseuchè* with the *bouleuterion*, but that the *boulè* can deviate from its usual meeting place on occasion, in this case for a political meeting of primary importance according to Josephus. However, in this case, the *proseuchè* also acts as a *bouleuterion* for the meeting in question. The architecture is not the criterion for dissociating the two buildings, but the size of the meeting space in relation to the number of invited participants. Thus, there does not seem to be a standardised, monumentalised architecture, but simply a large room (*oikèma*) for meeting, meaning a larger room than the *bouleuterion*.

This has consequences for archaeological excavations in general. It means that the discovery of a large building, without any other criteria, can be a synagogue but also a *bouleuterion* or simply a residence, because the appreciation of the size of a meeting place is subjective. It is conceivable that from one urban site to another, the perception and therefore the qualification of the capacity of the meeting place should vary. However, the lived space thus perceived says nothing about the function of this large room. Josephus' description of the *proseuchè* also suggests that the building did not have an exclusive function. Therefore, the archaeological identification of this type of place is mainly based on its larger surface area than the other houses in the local area. The nature of the meeting or, more broadly, the functions of the place do not enter into the definition of this type of place; only the possibility of bringing together a large number of people is important, with all the amplitude that the perception of size can have from one urban site to another and from one person to another. It is therefore a large multi-functional place. The same applies to the *bouleuterion*. If they are mainly used as a meeting place for the *boulè*, the auditorium can also be used as a lecture hall or music hall (*odeion*) or something else.<sup>80</sup> We are used to assigning a function to each room in modern times, but this is a very recent devel-

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<sup>79</sup> See, e.g., Hezser 1997, 214–218.

<sup>80</sup> Winter 2006, 142.

opment in the history of housing, especially in large houses.<sup>81</sup> The name of this type of place can also vary locally according to the perception that the inhabitants or the elites have of the place. The use of generic terms in Greek (*proseuchè, sunagogè*) and in Hebrew or Aramaic (*[beth] kneset*) for the meeting place is therefore consistent with this conception.<sup>82</sup>

Nevertheless, the conclusion of a vast multi-functional building does not contradict the existence of a similar plan for this type of large building often described as Hellenistic.<sup>83</sup> I will not repeat here the numerous attempts at architectural typology of synagogues, but it must be noted that the similarity of the plans of the so-called synagogues before the First Jewish Revolt (in Khirbet Umm el-'Umdan and Qiryat Sepher, near the modern city of Modin, Masada, Herodium, Gamla, Magdala/Migdal, Khirbet Qana, and probably Jerusalem according to the Theodotos inscription, Tiberias, Sephoris and Dora according to Josephus), Hellenistic covered halls in the Levant (and Greece and Asia Minor), such as *bouleuteria* or, more broadly, council-houses,<sup>84</sup> as well as Roman temples in Palestine, Northern Syria, Southern Lebanon and Transjordan, find an explanation in the multifunctional design of such places. This is not to say that *bouleuteria* and *a fortiori* Roman temples are necessarily multifunctional places that can accommodate synagogue-type meetings, but that the common architecture between these places finds an explanation with the possible multifunctionality of the built place, beyond the already noticed regional architectural variants. Furthermore, beyond the different functions possible in this type of large public building, there are common characteristics such as the dimensions of the building according to the size of the group living there and wanting to meet, a rectilinear plan with columns to support an elevation, and almost always benches for the participants of the meetings to sit on.<sup>85</sup> On the other hand, the location of the entrances at this period and *a fortiori* an axis towards Jerusalem do not seem to be criteria to be retained. Nevertheless, the few narrow entrances as to control access to the hall are frequent. Of course, nuances are to be made locally according to the size of the group and the topography of the site, but these data suggest a large building plan close to Hellenistic structures of the same size in the region. This broad definition

<sup>81</sup> See, e.g., Hanna 1991.

<sup>82</sup> See the corpus of inscriptions in Ancient Israel in Runesson, Binder and Olsson 2008, 20–117.

<sup>83</sup> Bonnie 2019, 202.

<sup>84</sup> See Yadin 1965, 78–79, and especially McDonald 1943; Kockel 1995, 29–40; Winter 2006, 141–149.

<sup>85</sup> Bonnie 2019, 202.

of the synagogue at the turn of the Christian era as a public building or a large residence that could be used as a meeting place helps to explain the difficulty of identifying a particular or even monumentalised architecture in archaeological excavations. Thus, the definition of the synagogue is considerably broadened and raises the question of whether all the vast buildings unearthed are synagogues, in the sense of a meeting place where the Torah scroll was read and commented upon. The answer is obviously no, and it shows the limits of archaeology with these architectural data alone.<sup>86</sup>

### 3 New Definition of the Synagogue at the Turn of the Christian Era in Relation to Architectural and Literary Data on Khirbet Qumran

In this context, can Khirbet Qumran, in particular the area of locus 4 and locus 77, be related to this type of building? And if so, can we speak of a synagogue? According to the criteria that we have just stated, locus 77 or locus 4 taken with loci 1, 2, 12 and 13 and especially 30 are similar to vast buildings with a rectilinear plan that can accommodate several dozen people. The capacity of locus 4 alone with benches is well suited to the community council of fifteen people if we admit a reality behind the symbolism of the numbers twelve and three presented in *IQS* 8:1. So from an architectural point of view, locus 4 in the middle of a larger structure, or even locus 77, corresponds to a large building that could serve as a meeting place. Debates about the function of these places, a 'refectory' for locus 77, a 'scriptorium' for locus 30, a meeting place for locus 4, are relegated because this type of structure can be multifunctional. Therefore, locus 4 and the adjacent rooms, as well as locus 77, are eligible for the newly redefined qualification of synagogue at the turn of the Christian era. However, they are only large buildings on the architectural model of Hellenistic structures; there is no indication of their function(s).

As Seth Schwartz<sup>87</sup> and later Rick Bonnie<sup>88</sup> have proposed, it is possible that Hasmonean rulers in the first century BCE played a direct or indirect role in the spread of the Hellenistic architectural model because the ideals and traditions they promoted among Jewish groups were so popular. It is now accepted that the Essenes were not fighting against the Hasmoneans

<sup>86</sup> With fewer synagogues from the Second Temple period when the paper was written, this was already the observation of Chiat 1981, 56, in 1981, which unfortunately has not been followed up.

<sup>87</sup> Schwartz 2001, 225.

<sup>88</sup> Bonnie 2019, 201–203.

but against the rites performed and the calendar followed in the Temple of Jerusalem by the priests on duty.<sup>89</sup> This dissemination would explain the presence of a building model in certain localities (city, village, or fortress). Thus, it seems to us that the presence of this type of building(s) in Khirbet Qumran is proven. As it is said in the Rule of the Community, in IQS 6:2–3: ‘In common they shall eat; in common they shall bless; in common they shall hold counsel’, and further in IQS 6:6–8:

Let there not be lacking in the place where they will be ten, a man who seeks in the Torah, day and night continually, each one relieving the other. Let the Many keep watch together a third of all the nights of the year to read the book, to seek the righteousness and to bless together.

It is tempting to see meetings corresponding to the life of a synagogue, although the usual terms for naming the synagogue, *sunagogè* (or *proseuchè*) or *beth kneset*, among others, are absent from the Qumran texts. It is possible that the concept corresponds to the already cited references to the *ḥabûra* in the Damascus Document (CD 12:8; 14:16–17) but the passages are not descriptive enough.

In sum, the site of Khirbet Qumran is similar to a meeting place with architectural characteristics close to Hellenistic-type buildings used to house meetings of various kinds. According to the Qumran texts, Essenes resided there and practiced the reading, study and commentary of the Torah and the Prophets in the first century BCE until the First Jewish Revolt in the middle of the first century CE. They also enacted laws as a result of this interpretative process and had a rich cultic activity. Therefore, the designation of ‘synagogue association’ coined by Anders Runesson seems to us to correspond well with these activities, but without the Greco-Roman background of the associative model it underlies. Without being institutionalised, this type of building with an associative and multifunctional purpose corresponds well to Khirbet Qumran, notably the sectors of locus 4 and locus 77 in the Essene period. Such a conclusion became possible following the expansion of the architectural definition of the synagogue at the turn of the Christian era to a large Hellenistic-type public or residential building with potentially multiple functions requiring the need to meet. The nature of these meetings is rarely indicated by archaeological data alone; it requires cross-referencing with inscriptions discovered in situ and/or texts relating to life in these places. In this respect, these written sources, in this case the Qumran texts, complement the study of the architectural data in order to envisage the activities that were held in this place.

<sup>89</sup> See CD 5:6–8; 4QMMT (4Q394–4Q399).

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