

# A menorah plaque from the center of Sardis

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Roman Sardis, like other cities of W Asia Minor, reflects the distinctive cultures of different peoples who had long lived in its vicinity. Of these varied populations, the Jewish community seems to have been especially notable. Written sources cited by Josephus<sup>1</sup> establish the presence of diaspora Jews in Lydia and Phrygia by the end of the 3rd c. B.C., when Antiochus III relocated 2000 families here from Babylon and Mesopotamia. By the Late Republic, their descendants at Sardis and other regional centers are known to have acquired civic privileges and rights. The local prominence of the Jewish community at Sardis was dramatically confirmed in the 1960s by the discovery in the city's NW region of a large assembly hall, along with inscriptions, menorahs and other artifacts that clearly establish its use as a synagogue in the 4th-6th c.<sup>2</sup> Further evidence of Jewish life has been noted during excavation of nearby houses, shops and streets in this peripheral quarter. The recent discovery of a marble relief plaque depicting a menorah and other symbols near the center is an important addition to the material culture of ancient Judaism in Asia Minor.

After years of exploration in the W part of the site, the Harvard-Cornell expedition has been turning its attention to central Sardis and several large public monuments that occupied the lower slopes of the acropolis: the hillside theater and stadium, the large temple located in Wadi B, and the supporting terrace known as Field 55.<sup>3</sup> Construction of these and other buildings in the area began around the mid-1st c., following the great earthquake of A.D. 17. The temple and its surrounding portico were apparently destroyed by further earthquakes in the later 2nd/3rd c. Some of their remains were built into several massive walls built projecting east of the terrace. By the late 4th c., smaller residential or commercial buildings had appeared across the temple precinct and nearby slopes.<sup>4</sup> Another earthquake in the 5th c. led to increased erosion and landslides, which continued into mediaeval and modern times.

The relief plaque was recovered in the E part of Field 55, during excavation of lower levels of fill deposited east of the terrace and overlying the late walls built against its face. A coin of Constantine X Ducas (A.D. 1059-67) in the same stratum shows that the plaque was out of context in mediaeval fill. In its present form the plaque is a squarish slab of medium-grained white marble with dark veins, 0.495 m tall x 0.450 m wide and 0.070 m thick (fig. 1).<sup>5</sup> The top, which is unevenly trimmed, presents a broad, raised gable with a circular *phiale* or *patera* at the center and faint traces of an acroterion to one side. The chamfered border continues along both sides of the plaque to enclose a flat, recessed field. The bottom edge does not appear haphazardly broken but curves gently downward to either side. The

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1 *AntJ* 12.148-53 and 259-61; P. R. Trebilco, *Jewish communities in Asia Minor* (Cambridge 1991) 5-19; P. Herz, "Juden in Gesellschaft und Wirtschaft des oberen Maiandros-Tales," in id. and J. Kobes (edd.), *Ethnische und religiöse Minderheiten in Kleinasien* (Wiesbaden 1998) 1-26.

2 A. R. Seager, "The Synagogue and the Jewish community: the building," in G. M. A. Hanfmann, *Sardis from prehistoric to Roman times* (Cambridge, MA 1983) 168-78.

3 Recent work in the center of Sardis is reported annually by N. D. Cahill in *Kazı Sonuçları Toplantısı*.

4 For a recent overview, see M. Rautman, "Sardis in late antiquity," in O. Dally and C. Ratté (edd.), *Archaeology and the cities of Asia Minor in late antiquity* (Ann Arbor, MI 2011) 5-7.

5 Both the relief (S14.3:13805) and the coin (2014.23) were excavated in June 2014.