

THE ANCIENT SYNAGOGUE OF BETH ALPHA



**GORGAS CLASSIC ARCHAEOLOGICAL
REPRINTS**

The Ancient Synagogue of Beth Alpha

**An Account of the Excavations Conducted On Behalf of the
Hebrew University, Jerusalem**

ELEAZAR LIPA SUKENIK



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Centre of Mosaic Floor: The Chariot of the Sun

INTRODUCTION TO THE REPRINT

E. L. SUKENIK, ANCIENT SYNAGOGUES, AND THE BIRTH OF “JEWISH ARCHAEOLOGY”

“The important work that lies before me is the creation of Jewish Archaeology”

—E. L. Sukenik, Personal Journal, July, 1928.¹

Anyone who wishes to sense the unique culture of Jewish Jerusalem’s academic elite during the years near the founding of the Jewish state would do well to visit Jerusalem’s Sanhedria cemetery. This modern necropolis is situated near what was then Jewish Jerusalem’s northeastern frontier with Jordan, close to a significant and well-known array of first-century monumental tombs [picture 1]. Since medieval times, this complex has been called the “Tombs of the Sanhedrin,” and it is said that members of the ancient Sanhedrin were interned there.² The modern Sanhedria cemetery contains a cluster of graves belonging to many of the greatest of Jerusalem’s academic culture during its age of giants—from biblicist Umberto Cassuto (d. 1951) through talmudist Jacob Nahum Epstein (d. 1952) and archaeologist E. L. Sukenik (d. 1953) [picture 2]. The grave markers at Sanhedria are generally simple rectangular constructions made of limestone, bearing the name of the deceased, and his dates. There is no visual continuity between the ancient tombs of Sanhedria and the modern ones, save for two monuments—those of Sukenik and of his wife Hasia. The base of Sukenik’s monument is modeled upon Herodian ashlars, and the carvings on the sides are drawn from first century ossuaries. The script of the Hebrew inscription is drawn from that of the Dead Sea Scrolls.³ The inscription on Sukenik’s tomb translates:

“Eleazar Lipa Sukenik, discoverer and interpreter of Jewish antiquities (*megaleh ve-haker qadmonot Yisrael*.)”

It is likely that Sukenik was the first Jew whose tomb was decorated with Second Temple period motifs in almost 2000 years! This unique monument memorializes the life of a scholar who spent his entire adult life establishing the discipline of “Jewish Archaeology.”⁴ From his studies of ancient synagogues, Biblical archaeology, the archaeology of Jerusalem and, in his later years, the Dead Sea Scrolls, Sukenik almost single-handedly (and certainly single-mindedly) made archaeology a central pillar of the academic Judaic Studies curriculum. At the very center of Sukenik’s project was the study of the ancient synagogue.

Born in Bialystok, Poland, in 1889, Sukenik spent four years as a student of the Slobodka Yeshiva, one of the leading *yeshivot* of his day. He came to Palestine in 1912. Early on Sukenik set out to be the “Jewish archaeologist” par excellence. During the early 1920’s he spent a year studying archaeology at the University of Berlin. A profound influence upon Sukenik’s scholarship was the American scholar, the father of “Biblical Archaeology,” William Foxwell Albright. Where Albright was dedicated to creating “Biblical Archaeology,” Sukenik was focused upon discovering the Jewish archaeological legacy—from Biblical through Talmudic

¹ Cited by N. Silberman, *A Prophet Amongst You: The Life of Yigael Yadin: Soldier, Scholar and Mythmaker of Modern Israel* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1993), 23.

² Z. Vilnay, “Tombs of the Sanhedrin,” *Encyclopedia Ariel* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1979), 6475-6479, Hebrew.

³ Dan Barag has conjectured (in conversation in May, 2001) that the markers were probably designed by Sukenik’s student Nahman Avigad, together with Hasia. One wonders whether son Yigael Yadin, who throughout his life was concerned with Sukenik’s legacy, wasn’t involved as well.

⁴ This essay is part of a broader discussion of the origins of “Jewish archaeology” that will appear in my *Jewish Archaeology: Art and Judaism During the Greco-Roman Period*, forthcoming.

times, in Palestine and in the Diaspora. Like many of his contemporaries, Sukenik hoped to prove that Jews, like all “real” nations, had an ancient and venerable artistic tradition.⁵ This approach was called “Jewish Archaeology,” borrowing this terminology from the Catholic discipline known as “Christian Archaeology.”

Sukenik’s career was promoted by another American: Hebrew University president Judah L. Magnes. Magnes conceived the need for the new university to develop a program in “Jewish Archaeology” as part of his broader vision for modern Jewish culture and particularly for cultural Zionism. In supporting Sukenik, Magnes was out of step with the developing faculty of his own university, which was strongly text-focused and which kept Sukenik at bay and outside of the Institute for Jewish Studies. Magnes’ approach was well in tune, however, with the approach to Jewish culture that had developed among the German Jewish elite of America since the turn of the century, and particularly its interests in the ancient synagogue.⁶ American Jewry did not found Jewish Archaeology as a field in America, as some had hoped it would.⁷ Rather, America’s vision of an ancient yet renewed Jewish culture facilitated “Jewish Archaeology” in Palestine. Magnes’ personal relationships were essential to this support. It should be remembered that Magnes was previously assistant rabbi of New York’s prestigious Congregation Emanuel, and that Mrs. Magnes was the sister of the prominent American Louis Marshall, for a time president of Congregation Emanuel.⁸

Reading the correspondence between Sukenik, Magnes, and others at the university from the mid-twenties onward, now preserved in the archives of the Hebrew University, one is struck with the excitement with which Sukenik set about creating “Jewish Archaeology.” Sukenik’s reports contain electrifying descriptions of his most recent discoveries and organizational triumphs. I translate from the Hebrew one particularly colorful example, written to the management of the Institute for Jewish Studies on “13 Adar II 5687” (March 17, 1927):⁹

● On Sunday this week I visited the ruins of Arbel (*Hornat Arbel*) [picture 3]. As I later understood, it is easier to arrive to this site by way of Kefar Hittin. The view from the site of the synagogue is fantastic (*ne’bedar*). From the east the Hermon may be seen in all its glory and the plain of Ginnosar in all its breadth. To the north stand the mountains of the upper Galilee and to the west spreads forth the valley of Hittin—or as it was once called, the Valley of Arbel. Potsherds are scattered all around and show the community that was here. In the synagogue and its surroundings we prepared approximately ten photographs. There are few remains. Only one of the lintels and a corner column are still *in situ*. There are other fragments of pavement, though, I am sorry to say that we could not photograph them due to the numerous wild plants that today cover the site. Excavation of the site will certainly reveal more elements of the synagogue...¹⁰

Magnes’ and Sukenik’s shared vision called for the creation of a center for the study of “Jewish Archaeology” at the Hebrew University. Sukenik set about to collect objects of Jewish antiquity (including facsimiles),¹¹ either through purchase or excavation, to publish them in a scholarly manner. They were to be the basis for a national museum to be built on the Hebrew University’s Mt. Scopus campus. This project was intended to reach beyond Palestine, to include the Jewish diaspora as well. Magnes and Sukenik began work to acquire ancient synagogue sites in the Galilee—Chorazin, Baram, Gush Halav, Nabratein, Khirbet Shema and Arbel. Congregation Emanuel, Cincinnati’s Hebrew Union College (Magnes’ alma mater) under president Julian Morgenstern, and Stephen S. Wise’s Free Synagogue in New York were all enlisted to adopt ancient synagogues and thus support the Hebrew University’s project to “redeem” ancient synagogues. The goal was to excavate and reconstruct these synagogues, creating what can only be called Zionist archaeological parks, parallel to the Franciscan park at Capernaum. These Zionist sites were to assert ancient Jewish culture in the old-new land, just as the new Zionist settlements accomplished modern Jewish colonization.¹²

⁵ ● On this imperative, see K. Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); M. ●lin, *The Nation Without Art: Examining Modern Discourses on Jewish Art* (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press, 2002); Fine, “Jewish Archaeology”: *Art and Judaism During the Greco-Roman Period*, part 1.

⁶ See my “Building an Ancient Synagogue on the Delaware: Philadelphia’s Henry S. Frank Memorial Synagogue,” *Journal of the American Jewish Archives*, forthcoming.

⁷ See L. Blau, “Early Christian Archaeology from the Jewish Point of View,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 3 (1926), 157–215.

⁸ ● On Magnes, see: W. M. Brinner & M. Rischin, eds. *Like All the Nations? The Life and Legacy of Judah L. Magnes* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).

⁹ Hebrew University Archives, “Institute of Archaeology,” file 144.

¹⁰ ● For the history of excavation of the Arbel synagogue, see Z. Ilan & A. Izdarechet, “Arbel,” *New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, ed. E. Stern (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society & Carta, 1993), 1: 87–89.

¹¹ Letters to Magnes from Sukenik, received December 12, 1926 and August 14, 1927.

¹² See my “The Redemption of Ancient Synagogues: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, American Jewry and the Creation of Jewish Archaeology,” *Archaeology and Religion in Modern Israel*, eds. Z. Shiloni & M. Feige. (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, forthcoming), Hebrew.

Magnes went so far as to offer Marshall the stone of a Galilean synagogue to serve as the cornerstone of Congregation Emanuel's new building at Fifth Avenue and 65th streets in Manhattan!¹³ This flare for the dramatic was a hallmark of his presidency of the Hebrew University. A historically significant stone was in fact set as the cornerstone of the Hebrew University's "Museum of Jewish Antiquities" [pictures 4 & 5]. Opened in 1941, this Bauhaus-style building was literally "built on a corner stone taken from the Third Wall of Jerusalem (begun by Agrippa I about A.D. 40)."¹⁴ The discovery of the Third Wall of Second Temple period Jerusalem was among Sukenik's crowning achievements. Through careful scholarship, and good luck, he and L. A. Mayer located the wall in 1925-1927 in a place that other scholars rejected.¹⁵ A carved ashlar from the Third Wall was indeed set as the cornerstone of the "Museum of Jewish Antiquities". Visible in early photographs, this well dressed stone was buried beneath planting soil and forgotten. The ashlar was rediscovered by Prof. Dan Barag and the author on May 29, 2001. This use of ancient Jewish masonry to draw a direct connection between the ancient Jewish presence in Palestine and the Zionist endeavor goes a long way toward explaining the ideological background of Sukenik's project. Beyond his academic achievements, Sukenik provided the nascent state with an archaeological heritage that well suited Zionism's self-perception as an old-new national movement. His academic pursuits served a far broader program of nation building.

Utilizing his personal connections in America to the fullest, Magnes sent Sukenik to Philadelphia's Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning, to complete his doctoral studies. E. L. Sukenik received his doctorate there in 1926. The minutes of a 1926 faculty meeting contain a detailed "Report on the Thesis of Mr. E. L. Sukenik".¹⁶ The entry commences:

The thesis presented by Mr. E. L. Sukenik on the ancient synagogues of Palestine consists of eighty pages in Hebrew, with the chapter on Naaran being translated into English on thirty-three pages. The whole is accompanied by an album of photographs and reproductions. The first four chapters (pages 1-11), given here only in summary, are to be enlarged in the future. Chapter 1 deals with the history of discovery and research, chapter 2 with the architectural plan of the structures, 3 with the orientation and 4 with the ornamental decorations. Mr. Sukenik then treats in all the ruins of the synagogue at Capernaum, of the court and terrace about the synagogue and of the inscriptional material [sic.]. The other synagogues described, are those of Chorazin [picture 6], Meron, Keft Birim and Naaran. In dealing with Naaran, the author treats most minutely of the inscriptional material.

Na'aran, just north of Jericho, was investigated by British archaeologists and excavated by French archaeologists of the École Biblique in Jerusalem in 1919.¹⁷ Sukenik was the first to publish the results of the excavation. The Dropsie report was written and signed by noted Biblicist, Semiticist and avid Zionist Max L. Margolis, and approved by historian Abraham Neuman and by Solomon L. Scoss (or, Skoss), an expert in Judeo-Arabic philology. This dissertation was directly the result of Sukenik's work at the Hebrew University under Magnes' direction. It was clearly the basis for the first part of Sukenik's 1934 volume, *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece*.¹⁸

Sukenik consciously fashioned himself as more than "just" a Palestinian archaeologist. He intended to be the world-renowned scholar of all Jewish antiquities. In 1928 Sukenik set out for Greece, his trip financed by the Hebrew University.¹⁹ There he participated in the excavation of a synagogue mosaic on the island of Aegina [picture 7]. While in Athens, Sukenik frequented the library of the German Archaeological Institute. With great excitement, he wrote to Magnes that he had "discovered" the synagogue at Priene in Asia Minor

¹³ See Hebrew University Archives, "Institute of Archaeology," file 144. This suggestion was not acted upon. On Congregation Emanu-El, see R. Wischnitzer, *Synagogue Architecture in America*, (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1955) 125-130.

¹⁴ "Jewish Antiquities Museum to be Opened Today," *Jerusalem Post*, April 3, 1941.

¹⁵ E. L. Sukenik & L. A. Mayer, *The Third Wall of Jerusalem. An Account of Excavations* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University & London: Oxford University Press, 1930).

¹⁶ *Dropsie College Faculty Minutes* (1926), 321-322. Seth Jerchow of the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies Library of the University of Pennsylvania informed me that, "E. L. Sukenik received his Ph. D. from Dropsie College in 1926 (the information is found both in the *Dropsie College Register* for 1926-27, as well as in the *Dropsie College Faculty Minutes*)."

¹⁷ On this synagogue, see M. Avi-Yonah, "Na'aran," *New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, ed. E. Stern (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society & Carta, 1993), 3:1075-1076.

¹⁸ E. L. Sukenik, *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934). Silberman, *A Prophet Among You*, 23, calls this work a "modest dissertation," writing that "For this he was awarded a quick—not to say unprecedented—doctor of philosophy degree." There is no suggestion of such a negative value judgment in the Dropsie records. At any rate, the dissertation has been lost by the Dropsie library. An unfortunate and pernicious rumor in some scholarly circles suggests that since Dropsie no longer possesses Sukenik's dissertation, it was never written.

¹⁹ Letter from Sukenik to Magnes, received January 29, 1928.

while in this library.²⁰ His discovery came when Sukenik opened the final report of the German excavations published in 1904 (unavailable to him in Palestine), and found an early synagogue described as a *hauskirche*, a “house church.” The fact that the large menorah plaque from Priene was found in the Byzantine church blinded the scholars to the synagogue remains, which they asserted to be Christian. Sukenik was indeed the first to identify the Priene synagogue as a synagogue, as he was the first in so many other areas of Jewish Archaeology. The excitement with which he describes this synagogue in *Synagogues in Palestine and Greece*,²¹ together with his gentle chiding of the excavators, can only be understood in terms of Sukenik’s earlier correspondence with Magnes.

Sukenik’s towering achievement during this period was the result of a chance discovery. In late 1928 the digging of an irrigation canal at the new Kibbutz Heftziba in the Jezreel Valley had revealed a beautiful floor mosaic. Sukenik excavated the synagogue in early 1929. The synagogue of Beth Alpha [pictures 8 & 9] became a sensation throughout Jewish Palestine, and around the world. The Beth Alpha synagogue established Sukenik’s credibility even within the Hebrew University.²² Sukenik’s report, published in Hebrew as well as English, was financed by Congregation Emanuel, through the agency of its late president, Marshall.

Sukenik’s interpretative approach, following Albright, assumed continuity between sacred texts and archaeological discovery. This textual interest built upon his own traditionalist upbringing, though it should be emphasized that Sukenik saw himself first and foremost as an archaeologist. Until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, he did not engage in textual scholarship (other than inscriptions). Sukenik actively worked to bridge the gap between his work and the text scholars of the Institute of Jewish Studies—with varying degrees of success.

The discoveries at Beth Alpha did much to raise the status of archaeology within Zionist academic contexts, though archaeology was not accepted among the disciplines of the Institute for Jewish Studies of the Hebrew University, and Sukenik’s academic status was left unresolved through much of his career. A summary presentation of Sukenik’s scholarly odyssey, *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece* was presented orally as the highly prestigious Schweich lectures of the British Academy in 1930. This volume capped the first part of his career and established Sukenik as the preeminent “Jewish archaeologist” he had hoped to be.

Sukenik’s sense of accomplishment is evident in the conclusion to his Schweich Lectures:²³

New discoveries are constantly being made, in Palestine as well as in the centres of the Diaspora, which will undoubtedly add new details to our conception of the early synagogues. But even now we may safely predict that these details will not change the conception as a whole.

No sooner had he spoken these words than our author’s smugness was overtaken by new discoveries—which he immediately embraced. In an appendix to *Ancient Synagogues* that belies his own conclusion, Sukenik discussed finds made between the close of the lectures and their publication in 1934. These include: the synagogue at Stobi, discovered in 1931, the first report of which was published in Serbia in 1932; The Hammath Gader synagogue, which Sukenik excavated in 1932; the Dura Europos synagogue, discovered in 1929 and visited by Sukenik in 1933; and the Huseifa synagogue, first uncovered in 1933. Reflecting back upon his comment in 1949 with the maturity of age, Sukenik writes that, “in some ways my assumption was justified, but, as is usual with predictions (and to my great satisfaction in this case), fate dealt otherwise.”²⁴

Dura Europos was by far the most spectacular of these “new” finds. Sukenik took up the challenge of this monument with great vigor, producing a monograph on the Dura Europos synagogue. Publication of *The Dura Europos Synagogue and its Pictures* (in Hebrew) was delayed until 1947, due to the war. This is the work of a mature scholar.²⁵ Our author presents a careful analysis of each painting in terms of ancient Jewish literature, particularly Rabbinic literature. Unlike other interpreters, he made full use of inscriptions, and of the Dura Jewish liturgical parchment. Throughout his oeuvre, Sukenik’s interpretations are marked by their lack of tendentious meta-theories. He provides a cautious and measured statement of the synagogue in light of extant parallel artifacts and literature. Sukenik’s Dura volume is generally ignored outside of Israel, mainly because it is written in Hebrew and was not translated into a European language. His analysis was not superseded,

²⁰ Letter from Sukenik to Magnes, February 29, 1928.

²¹ Sukenik, *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece*, 42-43.

²² See the comments of A. Elon, “Politics and Archaeology,” *The Archaeology of Israel: Constructing the Past, Interpreting the Present*, eds. N. A. Silberman & D. Small. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 34-47; Silberman, *A Prophet Among You*, 26-27; E. M. Meyers, “Ancient Synagogues: An Archaeological Introduction,” *Sacred Realm: The Emergence of the Synagogue in the Ancient World*, ed. S. Fine (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 3-6.

²³ Sukenik, *Ancient Synagogues in Palestine and Greece*, 78.

²⁴ E. L. Sukenik, “The Present State of Synagogue Studies,” *Louis M. Rabinowitz Fund for the Exploration of Ancient Synagogues* 1 (1949), 12-13.

²⁵ E. L. Sukenik, *Beit ha-keneset shel Dura-Europos ve-Tsiyurav* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1947). See also his “The Mosaic Inscriptions in the Synagogue at Apamea on the Orontes,” *HUCA* 23, part 2 (1950/51), 541-551.

however, by C. Kraeling's final report of the Dura synagogue. In 1949, with Israel's independence secured, Sukenik inaugurated the *Louis M. Rabinowitz Fund for the Exploration of Ancient Synagogues*, dedicated to synagogue studies and financed by the noted American Jewish philanthropist Louis M. Rabinowitz.²⁶

This brief survey of Sukenik's life as a scholar of synagogues is nothing less than the history of a scholarly discipline. Sukenik's overwhelming significance for synagogue studies is expressed in the fact that in 1979 A. T. Kraabel titled his own comprehensive survey of diaspora synagogues, "The Diaspora Synagogue: Archaeological and Epigraphic Evidence since Sukenik."²⁷ Fifty years since Sukenik's demise, and generations since their original publication, Sukenik's studies of ancient synagogues retain much of their original interest—even as our knowledge has grown exponentially, conceptualizations have developed and theories of dating have changed. The freshness of Sukenik's prose, the excitement that is expressed on almost every page, his clear vision, moderation and careful interpretations are still necessary and exciting reading for all who care about the archaeology and culture of the ancient synagogue. Reading his writings has inspired more than one young student, the present author included, to dream of ancient synagogues, and to build careers studying this fascinating institution. The fact that both the Hebrew and English versions of Sukenik's *Beth Alpha* are being reprinted together is reason to celebrate. These parallel texts provide rich sources for the development of archaeological terminology in modern Hebrew. This Gorgias Press edition, issued in commemoration the fiftieth anniversary of Sukenik's demise, is testimony to the abiding value of Sukenik's "Jewish Archaeology." May the memory of E. L. Sukenik ז"ל, "discoverer and interpreter of Jewish antiquities," be a blessing for all of us.

Steven Fine,
Jewish Foundation Professor of Judaic Studies,
University of Cincinnati
Rosh Hashanah, 5764
September 26, 2003

²⁶ It is not without significance that Sukenik's post-World War II synagogue investigation and Kraeling's Dura volume were both financed by one individual, Louis M. Rabinowitz. Rabinowitz also founded an institute for research in Rabbinics at the Jewish Theological Seminary.

²⁷ A. T. Kraabel, "The Diaspora Synagogue: Archaeological and Epigraphic Evidence since Sukenik," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* 19.1. (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1979), 479-510.

