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The Etz Hayyim Rimonim

Date: November 9, 2001

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In the course of the initial work carried out in the south courtyard of the synagogue in 1996 we were not surprised to find that little if anything of significance was found. This was expected though not quite to the degree that we encountered. This area had been severely ravaged during and after the Occupation by the Nazis.



The rimonim found buried in the backyard of the synagogue during restoration works.

In 1941 a direct hit had destroyed the principal mehitzah. Fortunately Rabbi Abraham Evlagon had noted in the memoir that he wrote shortly before his death in 1933, its existence.

He described it somewhat succinctly as having a dome but did not go into any detail. It appears that most of the rubble from the bombing was cleared away between the years 1941 and 1944 when the Community was arrested which accounted for there being nothing found save fragments of pottery and

dishes all datable to the period when squatters had lived in the synagogue between the years 1945-55.

We were, however, able to measure the rough foundation support and found that it formed an exact square (give or take a few centimeters). We also found the lower three stone steps of the stairway that led up to the first floor from which the interior of the synagogue could be made out through the grilled (at that time) gothic arch of the S/E bay. The upper portion of the stairway had been reduced to make way for a toilet that had been installed by the squatters and also, alas, was responsible for destroying one of the drainpipes from the mikveh.

It was on the basis of this that we were able to determine approximately where the three rabbinical burials alluded to by Evlagon were to be found.

A central trench was sunk in a North South direction from the foundation of the mehitzah and one by one the three grave sites were found. What we did not find, however, was a fourth and quite special grave that Evlagon mentions – that belonging to the ‘hasid and tzaddik’ Rabbi Hillel Eskenazi who had died in 1710.

He specifically noted that it had ‘vanished’. This especially excited my curiosity as graves do vanish. But where had it been?

Another point of interest was that two of the graves that had been discovered were of a comparatively late type that once were in the old Jewish cemetery. These consisted of a low stone plinth about 20 cms, high on which the proper tombstone was laid

flat. The third, the oldest and dating to 1821 was of a quite different shape. It was a simple humped mound of beaten earth measuring about 2 ms. by 50 cms. in length and 30 cms. In height. Over this a layer of plaster had been applied and the entire surface was then white washed.

There was no sign of a place for a dedication stone though this may have been due to the fact that the western end of the tomb had been damaged when the toilet was built. It is most likely that the dedication stone had been imbedded in an up-right position at the western end not unlike the oldest Jewish burials at Halkis and, interestingly enough, reminiscent of Jewish burials in Tunis and Libya.

In removing the toilet we began to work around the remaining section of the Southern wall of the old mehitzah. In the course of this the a low support was found which appears to have been the remains of the stairway but under this several large stones had been placed – much like paving stones and in removing these we found that loosely packed earth covered a mound identical to that which we had found covering the site of the grave of R. Shalom.

It was obvious that this was the grave of R. Hillel that had ‘vanished’ according to R. Evlagon. Most likely at some point in the 18th cent. the question of the propriety of such a burial (despite the placing of an eruv around it) in such close proximity to the synagogue proper arose. The decision was simply to mask it over. In any case as this was the women’s section and entered from the street by a separate door there was no question of a Cohen inadvertently being in contact with it.

In cleaning the site we took great care as early in the work of removing earth we found a number of fragments of bone that were found to be human. These were all that remained of the rabbis whose two tombs had been broken open by looters – either in 1944 or shortly after the War ended. These were carefully collected and buried at the head of the furthest tomb and covered with a white stone slab.

An interesting deep clay covered pit was also found though this was empty save for dirt, scorpions and bits of rubble. If anything had been in it nothing remained. It was an intriguing areas, however, and

I began to spend much time in carefully removing layers of earth that could be distinguished due to consistency and fragmented material found in them.

After removing about 12 cms of earth, fragments of gilt tinsel were found. Initially these were almost indistinguishable from the earth but as work continued they became larger and some were still connected to threads that proved to be the remains of viridian green silk atlas (Ottoman satin) with vestiges of gilt copper decoration. Working further down a heavily patina’d copper slightly tapering tube was found and at the narrow end was a 12 cm. length of wood heavily carved in a foliate design. Beneath this was another though complete ensemble of the same sort.

These two objects were obviously rimonim – decorative finials for a Sepher Torah. What was also obvious was that they had been buried at some point along with the green satin which was probably a me’il or covering for a Sepher Torah.

But a few cms. from these artifacts miniscule fragments of paper were also found. Most bore minute Hebrew print of several sizes and types. Since the discovery of this small cache was found in what was essentially rubble and slightly below the level of the plinths of the tombs it seemed natural to assume that they had found their way in this area prior to 1944 when the community was arrested. As all of the contents of the synagogue were looted initially by the Nazis it may be that both the rimonim and me’il as well as remains of books had been deliberately buried at a much earlier time either in the now empty pit that had been broken open or, as was the custom in disposing of artifacts having a sacred association, buried in what had become virtually as small cemetery.

The rimonim are of a considerable age and still bear the remnants of viridian green tempera paint as well as gold leaf.

Stylistically they are what could be designated as ‘Florentine baroque’ and resemble nothing that remains of wood carving from the 17th cent. in

Crete despite the heavy influence of Venetian and Italianate art still active at this time.

It is most likely that they are imports from either Italy of Venice and if this is the case they would have had to have arrived prior to 1635 when Hania fell to the Ottomans. Roughly oval in shape they have a band running about the center that separates the upper half from the lower half – both are carved in deep foliate Florentine design. The band of each is pierced by 12 small holes which must have been the points where the chains for bells were attached. None of the bells (there would have been 24) and which would have probably been of silver), was found.

(At a later date an addenda to the above article concerning two tikkim (cases for Siphrei Torah) traces other wooden artifacts that appear to have been imported into Candia (Herakleion) roughly at this time confirming the date of the rimonim.)



The new rimonim

As we did not have any rimonim in the synagogue to decorate the Torah Scrolls we were fortunate in finding an excellent wood-carver in Hania. He is normally contracted to do the intricate wooden carvings from traditional designs that are incorporated into iconostasis, the ornate rood screens found in Orthodox churches that separate the sanctuary from the nave. Exact duplicates of the rimonim – but including silver bells – have been made and are shown in the accompanying photographs.