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The Inscriptions of the Etz Hayyim Synagogue

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The Etz Hayyim Synagogue in Hania, the only surviving monument of the Jewish communities in Crete, has been lovingly and painstakingly restored. The precincts of the synagogue contain a number of Hebrew inscriptions. Some of these have never been published, while others have become easier to read after cleaning. The following is a record of all the inscriptions, as they appear at present. I should like to acknowledge with gratitude the kindness and assistance of the director of the restoration project, Nikos Stavroulakis, during visits to Hania in the summer of 1999, and to Professor Raphael Loewe for helpful advice and for kindly converting the dates. The photographs were kindly supplied by Ole Petscheleit.

The inscriptions are essentially of two kinds. The first category (numbers 1-3) are dedicatory inscriptions, set permanently in the gates and walls of the synagogue, and intended to be read by those entering as a reminder of the beneficence of those individuals or groups of people who have contributed to the construction, repair or embellishment of the synagogue in the past. The second category (numbers 4-7) are funerary inscriptions, commemorating those who have recently passed away and drawing attention to their virtues and achievements. Not all of the individuals named on these inscriptions are buried

in the synagogue precinct. Some of the stones were originally in the Jewish cemetery which formerly stood near the seashore outside the town wall to the west. 'Regrettably, that area, now fully built up, contains no trace of Hebrew epigraphy,' as the Jewish historian Zvi Ankori stated, addressing a conference in Hania in April of 1966 (Ankori, 'Jews', p. 320).

The existence of a number of graves in the rear courtyard of the Etz Hayyim synagogue invites some comment, as it is not a common Jewish custom. Rabbi Abraham Evlagon (1846-1933), who ministered to the Jewish community in Crete from 1875 onwards, compiled in the later years of his life an account of the island and its Jewish communities. He writes:

'Within the courtyard of the synagogue surrounded by a wall on all four sides is the resting place of the town rabbi Rabbi Joseph Shalom; there is no stone upon his grave. The reason that he rests there is that on account of the deplorable conditions of wartime the gate had been shut to prevent entry or egress. Subsequently his brother, Rabbi Baruch ben Shalom, passed away on the 4th of Adar 5601; he had given instructions before his death that he should be buried beside his brother, and his wishes were respected. Rabbi Abraham Ibn Habib of Gallipoli who came to serve in the sanctuary and died in 5618 [1858] is buried there too, and there is an oral tradition that the pious cabbalist Rabbi Hillel Ashkenazi, who came to minister in the sanctuary in the year 5470 [1710], is also buried there.' [Evlagon. p. 133]

Rabbi Evlagon's account, which has been published from his original manuscript by Bracha Rivlin, is an invaluable testimony to the Jewish

monuments of Crete, and records the wording of some of the inscriptions in extenso. It is referred to at several points below, as are two important articles by Zvi Ankori. More recently, the late Judith Humphrey, who devoted herself to the study of the Jews of Crete (and who is commemorated in the little garden in the forecourt of the synagogue), also wrote about Hebrew inscriptions in Chania. Details of these publications are given in the bibliography at the end.

In an appendix I have listed some other Hebrew inscriptions of Chania, either preserved outside the synagogue or (apparently) lost.

In the inscriptions, square brackets indicate missing text, and a hollow dot above a letter indicates an uncertain reading.

Dedicatory inscriptions

Inscription la

In the pediment above the gate leading into the forecourtyard of the synagogue, and visible from the street.



Height 16 cm.; width 135 cm.

שנת הרמז ז' לאייר

את הפתח הקדשתי ובניתי

אני אליינו קורטישי

י"ל לכופר נפשי ולחיי

בני וניני י"ל

(In the) year 5247, 7th of Iyyar I, Eliano Cortese, may he live for ever, dedicated and built the entrance for the ransom of his soul and for the lives of my children and grandchildren, may they live for ever.

Notes

Described by Evlagon (p. 132) and discussed by Humphrey. Eliano Cortese, evidently an eminent personality, is not attested elsewhere. The name Eliano is most unusual in Hebrew contexts, and the surname Cortese does not figure in the annals of the Jews of Venetian Crete so far as I am aware.

The date corresponds to 1 May 1487 (Julian calendar).

אח There is a mark at the beginning of the second line that might be read as a letter ו or ז. זאת Evlagon, followed by Humphrey .

,אליה Humphrey

אליהו: אליינו Evlagon

Cortese or Cortesi?

Evlagon, Humphrey.

קורטישי: קורטישי

נפשי for the expression see No. 2 below

לכופר: לכופר Evlagon, Humphrey

יחיה/ יחיו לעולם או יחיה/

יחיו לעד: י"ל

Inscription 1b

On the lintel, immediately beneath 1a.

Height 17 cm.; width 167 cm.

זה השער ליהוה צדיקים יבואו בו

פתחו שערים ויבוא גוי צדיק שא

This is the gate of the Lord: into which the righteous shall enter [Psalm 118:20].

Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation which keepeth the truth

may enter in [Isaiah 26:2].

Notes

Mentioned by Ankori, 'Jews', p. 318, Evlagon p. 132, Humphrey p. 37 (photograph p. 39).

שומר אמנים: שא

Inscription 2

On the outer wall of the forecourt. facing the entrance from the street.



Height 43 cm.; width 36 cm.

מזכרת [...] נים

ולסגני הכהנים

ראשונים ואחרונים

תערכת השכנים

בשלש ... נים

צרות הגונים

ניכנה בנאמנים

A memorial to the ? priests and deputies of the priests, both the former

and the latter ones,...of the residents, in three ?years, decent in ?troubles,

?named among the faithful ones.

Notes

This rhymed inscriptions pays tribute to a group of people, but it no longer seems possible to discover who they were or why they were being honoured. Evlagon and Ankori were unable to read any of the inscription because of a coat of whitewash that had been laid over it. Ankori ('Jews ', p. 319) was of the opinion that 'the stone had originally been used as lintel of the inner entrance into the synagogue hall proper, until replaced by a later inscription'.

1 Perhaps לזקנים or לכהנים

4 תערכה. This is not a Hebrew word. תערכה could conceivably mean a throng. תערכה ('display'), תערוכת ('guarantee'), and מערכה ('phalanx') are all inherently possible. שכנים are dwellers or neighbours.

5 ...?

Inscription 3

Above the front entrance to the prayer hall.



Height 33 cm.; width 141 cm.

לקי

כי אתה תאיר נרי ה' אלהי יגיה חשכ[י]

[ש ה] רפא משה בר מכאל ינייטי

For thou wilt light my candle: the Lord my God
will enlighten

my darkness [Psalm 18:29 (28)].

(In the) year 5281. Moses son of Michael Yeniati.

Notes

Missing text supplied from Evlagon. NB date could be read as 'the physician'. Ankori, 'Inscriptions' n.112, remarks that the date contains a pun on the phrase 'to be healed'.

The year corresponds to CE 1520/21.

אלהי אל the אל is written as a ligature, with a dot over it.

לישועתך קוייתי 4: לק

ב. 'Evlagon בר

Yeniati: so written by Humphrey. Nothing else is known of him. We hear of an Abraham Yeniati in Canea (Chania) in the 16th century; his married daughter Esther died in the terrible plague of 1592. h later, another Moses Yeniati was gabbai of the Priests' synagogue in Candia in 1654.

Funerary inscriptions

Inscription 4

A plaque of white marble now situated on the east wall of the rear courtyard. Total area: height 40 cm. max; width 39 cm.

Inscribed area: height 36.5 cm.; width 25.5 cm.

ציון מצבת הנבון

ומעולה כהר אבא

דאלמידיגו נע: נפטר

לב"ע שלושה ימים לח'

כסלו שנת התקע"ב

ליצירה תנצב"ה:

5572

Indicating the tombstone of the wise and distinguished Abba Delmedigo, may he repose in Eden.

Departed to his eternal home on the third day of the month Kislev of the year 5572 of the Creation. May his soul be bound up in the bundle of life.

Notes

The date corresponds to 7 November 1881 Julian (19 November Gregorian). Mentioned by Ankori, 'Jews' p. 320 ('in private hands now').

נוחו עדן: נע

The Delmedigo family was one of the most famous Jewish families in Crete. Abba ('Abbdaki') Delmedigo of Chania was a member of the General Assembly of Crete in 1875, and Ankori ('Jews') speculates that he may have been the grandson of his name sake who is commemorated in this inscription.

Inscription 5

Slab of white marble placed against the wall of the rear courtyard.

Height 122 cm.; width 66 cm.

זאת מצבת קברת אשת חיל עטרת

יום עברה היום ההוא יום לקברות

הובלה ונעדרה ועזבה בית נכאתה

ושכנה מדבר שמם חורי עפר

וכיפים: וחלתה בדירי מר ירשה

עד יצאה נשמתה בנפש מרה

ושמה נאה לה רחל סטמאטה ביום

שבת קדש שנים עשר להחדש תשרי שנת

וכמוו נקטף בקצור שנים | הוא הברוך

חמשת אלפים וחמש מאות ושלושה ותשעים

ונעים רפאל אברהם קושטאנטין נפטר

ליצירה: נפשה תנוח בגן עדן עם שרה

יום שק י' אדר א שנת התקכ"א ימך

רבקה רחל ולא

...voice ...bitter ...say 'woe' and I shall cry out in lamentations;

תנצב"ה

therefore shall I break down the walls ...sons ...a heap of stones.

This monument marks the grave of a virtuous wife, a crown [sc. To her husband, cf. Proverbs 12:4]. That day is a day of wrath [Zechariah 1:15], the day she was taken to the graves and departed and left the house of her ... and inhabited a ? desolate wilderness, in caves of earth and in the rocks [Job 30:6]. She fell ill and ... until her spirit departed with a bitter soul [cf. Job 21:25]. Her name becomes her:

He is still as though cut off ...and

as if cut down in his prime

(lit, shortness of years). He is the blessed and pleasant

Rachel Stamata. She died on the holy Sabbath day, the twelfth of the month of Tishri in the year five thousand five hundred and ninety-three

Raphael Abraham Kostantin, (who)

died on the holy Sabbath day,

10 of 1 Adar in the year 5521 [1761].

of the Creation. May her soul repose in the Garden of Eden together with Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah. May her soul be bound up in the bundle of life.

May his resting-place be respected.

Notes

Notes

The date corresponds to 24 September 1832 Julian (6 October Gregorian).

This rhymed elegy is very hard to read, as the stone is badly weathered. The date corresponds to 3 February 1761 Julian (14 February Gregorian).

Job 30:6 עפר וכיפים חורי

רפאל אל ligature

Inscription 6

The surname Kostantin or al-Kostantin is found in various Jewish documents from Crete. For example, Abba, the son of Abraham al-Kostantin the physician, died together with his wife Esther and their son Abraham in the great plague of 1592. Moses, son of Menahem al-Kostantin, was a communal rabbi in Candia in the latter part of the 17th century.

Slab of marble placed against the wall of the rear courtyard.

Height 121 cm.; width 73 cm.

נתעם קול ומספר מר חסר מר

ימך יהי משכבו כבוד: Cf. Isaiah 11:10,

אמרו אח ואצריה בקינים | לכן

והיחה מנוחתו כבוד.

אקרקר קיר לבני ברקום נסול בנים

גל אבנים | עודנו כאלו נקצץ כליא

Inscription 7

Slab of marble, broken and incomplete. The seven surviving pieces have been laid in the rear courtyard.

Height 142 cm.; width 89.5 cm.



מ' הן

כל עובר ש[אן] קינה מרה

בכו [ב]כיה תחת רננה

האי[?] שופר את בלי בעפר

פתע פתאום אבד חנינה

פי[...] ושקדן בתורה

... קיל פנינה

[ח חש והכן עצור

החסיד כמוהר ברוך בכר

שלמה ז"ל נתבקש בשיבה

שלמעלה ביום ד]

אדר ש התר"א ליצירה

Every passer-by raise a bitter lament;

Weep tears instead of rejoicing.

...horn ... the dust

In an instant the ? Merciful one

Has perished;

...and assiduous student of Torah,

...? Pearl.

...??

our pious Rabbi Barukh son of

Rabbi Solomon of blessed memory.

He was summoned to the academy on high on the fourth day of Adar in the year 5601 [1841] of the Creation.

Notes

The date corresponds to Thursday, 13 February 1841 Julian (25 February Gregorian).

The remains of this tombstone have been laid within a brick enclosure with space for four graves. On the circumstances of the burial see the quotation from Evlagon given above.

] Evlagon read the 7, as the date, although there is room for another letter, so that it might be taken as the day of the week (Wednesday). However as Evlagon will have read the stone when it was whole he is probably to be rely on.

Inscription 8

A loose fragment of masonry.



בא[ורך נראה אור: בלצא

In thy light shall we see light [Psalm 36: 10 (9)].
Balaza

of the Lord as a ransom for my own life and my
forefathers and my

Notes

brother R. David Kazuro. In the month of Tebeth in
the year 5210.

Awkward though it is to have a surname beginning
a sentence it seems that we have here the name
Balaza, which is well attested in Venetian Canea,
particularly in the 16th century.

I have built thee an house to dwell in, a settled
place for thee to abide in

for ever [1 Kings 8: 13].

Inscription 9

Notes

A loose fragment of masonry, with some carving
beneath.

Text recorded by Evlagon. Translated in Humphrey,
pp. 36-7.

בנא

סזודו is an emendation by Humphrey (p. 37). סזודו
Rivlin.

Appendix

For the sake of completeness I take the opportunity
to give here the texts of some other Hebrew
inscriptions that have been seen in Chania.

Two inscriptions in the Shalom Synagogue are
mentioned by G. Kalaisakis, 'Μεσαιωνικαί
Αρχαιοτήτες Χανίων εξαφανιζόμενα', 'Ερευνα
(Chania) 1/22 (6 Nov. 1899). It is possible that
these are to be identified with numbers *1 and *2.

הקכץ: This is a curious way to write the year 5210
[1450], if that is the intention. Rivlin prints it in
this form without comment. Humphrey, translating
Rivlin's text, writes 5192, tacitly emending to הקבץ.
She does not discuss the date. The emendation
would be more convincing if there were an obvious
reference to a biblical verse, but the word הקבץ
("gather") does not occur in this form in the Bible.
In the absence of such an allusion we would expect
5192 to be written הקצב.

*1. Formerly on the gate of the Shalom
Synagogue...

*2. Inscribed on a lintel. Seen in the ruins of
Shalom Synagogue in 1963 by Zvi Ankori; present
location unknown.

מכאל הכהן ב שבתי תנצבה הוספתי מביתי

ש וחי לעולם לפרט הקדשתי אני אליה לגו

ונתתי לבה לכפר נפשי ואבתי

בן מכאל יל היכל הקדש זה לכפר נפשי

ואחי ר דוד כזורו חדש טבה ש הקכץ בניתי

(In the) year 'And he shall live forever' (i.e. 5/94
[/433/4]) of the

בית זבל לך מל עולמים

I, Michael Ha-Kohen

(Jewish) Era, I, Elijah Lago. the son of Michael,
may he live forever,

son of Shabbetai, may his soul

dedicated this holy shrine for the ransom of my
own life.

be bound up in the

bundle of life, have added from my house and have
given to the house

Notes

Ankori, 'Inscriptions', pp. 65-84 (photograph, pp. 67, 80). Cf. Ankori, 'Jews', p. 318.

The chronogram, as restored by Ankori, is taken from Genesis 3:22. That verse also contains a mention of the 'tree of life', which gives its name to the extant Chania synagogue (Etz Hayyim).

*3. A tombstone, currently in private hands in Chania.

מצבת קבורת איש חיל

ירא ה וסר מרע נודע

שמו בשער הה הישיש

גביר נכון ומעולה כהר יעקב

ליאון זל הנפטר להעהב

ביום ד לה אילול משנת

התפד ליצידה מכנע ועל

משכבו יהיה שלום ימך

The funerary monument

of a valiant man,

who revered the Lord and eschewed evil. His name was known

in the gate. The elderly,

respectable and distinguished

gentleman Jacob

Leon, may his memory be

for a blessing.

He departed to the life of the

Coming Age on the 5th

of the month Elul of the year

5484 [1724] of the Creation. ????????? and upon

his resting place may there be peace. May his rest be honoured.

Notes

Text copied from the photograph in BJGS 10 (Summer 1992), p. 29.

'Jacob Leon may have been the father of Samuel Leon, who is mentioned in the French consular correspondence for 1745-6 as the English vice-consul in the town' (Judith Humphrey, *ibid.*).

*4. Ankori also saw 'an undated fragment of a Hebrew marble epitaph... in the store-room of the local Archaeological Museum. It can, in my opinion, confidently be assigned to the eighteenth century' (Ankori, 'Jews', p. 320).

References

Zvi Ankori, 'The Living and the Dead: The Story of Hebrew Inscriptions in Crete (Part 1: The Lost Record)', *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 38-39 (1970-71), 1-100. (Ankori, 'Inscriptions']

Id., 'Jews and the Jewish Community in the History of Medieval Crete', in *Proceedings of the Second International Congress of Cretan Studies*, vol. 3 (Athens, 1968), pp. 312-367. (Ankori, 'Jews']

Abraham Eblagon, (Description of Crete and its Jewish Communities], ed. B. Rivlin, 'R. Abraham Eblagon and his Composition on Crete and the Jews of Crete' {Hebrew), *Pe'amim* 37 (1988), 113-139.

Judith Humphrey, 'An unpublished inscription from Chania', *BJGS* 17 (Winter 1995), 35-39.