Introduction

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In the year 2012, a remarkable building was discovered in an excavation in Limyra.¹ Limyra was a city in eastern Lycia close to the south coast of today's Turkey. Next to other finds, the excavator, Martin Seyer, discovered remnants of two chancel screens with depictions of three menorot at the floor of this building. Although only a small part of the building's north-east area could be brought to light so far, a few elements, like the three menorah depictions, suggest that the edifice was used as a public building for the Jewish community of Limyra. The excavator, Martin Seyer, is even considering if the building in question was the city's synagogue.²

To discuss this important find in a broad context with archaeologists, historians and specialists in Jewish studies, the Institute for Jewish Studies and the Austrian Archaeological Institute organized an international workshop in January 2014. The organizers and editors would like to thank all participants of the workshop, whose presentations and lively discussions contributed considerably to the success of this event and to the understanding of the finds from Limyra. For financial support, we would like to express our gratitude to the Cultural Department of the City of Vienna, the Faculty of Historical and Cultural Studies of Vienna University, the Gertnergroup, and Vienna University's Institute for Jewish Studies.

During the workshop, the archaeological evidence discovered in Limyra was presented, discussed and compared with the well-known ancient synagogues of Priene and Sardis as well as with archaeological remains of other Jewish communities from Asia Minor. Special consideration was given to the slabs with the depictions of the three menorot and their contextualization in Jewish art history. Especially important was the question if the Limyra building could have been a synagogue. In addition to the material and visual cultures of Asia Minor, the workshop discussed therefore also the history of Jews in Asia Minor as well as Roman legislation about Jews and their representation in Byzantine literature. The present theme issue of *JAJ* represents the proceedings of the 2014 Vienna workshop. Regrettably, we were not able to include the presentation of Claudia Rapp ("The Image of Jews in Byzantine Literary Texts").

1 The excavation in Limyra was started by J. Borchhardt in 1969 on behalf of the German Archaeological Institute. In succession, it was continued as an Austrian project by the Institute of Classical Archaeology of Vienna University in the years 1984–2001. Since 2002, it has been an enterprise of the Austrian Archaeological Institute.

2 Cf. M. Seyer and H. Lotz, "A Synagogue in Limyra? Preliminary Report on a Byzantine Building with Jewish Elements," *JAJ* 4 (2013): 133–48.

The contributions to the first part of this theme issue (*Part I The Menorot of Limyra in their Archaeological Context*) represent a preliminary excavation report. The authors discuss the new findings from Limyra in their immediate and wider archaeological contexts. Martin Seyer and Helmut Lotz ("A Building with Jewish Elements in Limyra/Turkey – A Synagogue?") give a preliminary excavation report about the Limyra building and the finds which were made in it. In its north-east corner – the only part excavated so far – one room was equipped with a marble wall revetment and windows with glass of at least four different colors. Inside, a square water basin was supplied by collected rainwater which was channeled through a terracotta pipe into the basin. Some elements suggest that the basin was used for bathing. The entry to the building led from the main street into a vestibule, which was originally partially open at the front. At a later period, its floor was raised to its current level by means of two stone slabs and two pillars in secondary use. The two slabs are remnants of chancel screens decorated with three menorah images. One of these images displays also a *shofar* and the other a *lulav*. The combination of these features suggests that the building was connected with the Jewish community of Limyra. The chancel screens indicate that a synagogue was once located in the immediate vicinity. It is therefore not improbable that the building itself was this synagogue.

Two responses discuss the preliminary excavation report of Seyer and Lotz critically. Zeev Weiss ("Was It a Synagogue? Preliminary Thoughts on the New Finds from Limyra") discusses the location of the Limyra building within the city as well as its building constructions and its raw materials. Weiss compares the Limyra building with diaspora synagogues with regard to its architectural layout and orientation as well as with regard to the functionality of its excavated rooms and its water basin. Weiss discusses also the chancel screens with the menorah depictions and the date of the structure in Limyra. He emphasizes: "As in other Diaspora synagogues, the location of the building, its construction on an earlier structure, the use of *spolia*, a water installation, and an ornate *bima* with a decorated chancel screen are the major elements supporting an argument for" an identification of the Limyra building as a synagogue but only further excavations could warrant a clear identification (p. 153).

The response of Andreas Pülz ("Some Remarks on the So-Called Synagogue in Limyra") offers a short overview of the history and architecture of Limyra in late antique and Byzantine times with a special focus on early Christian monuments. Pülz regards the time from the 5th through the 6th cent. as a more likely date for the phase in which Seyer and Lotz situate the use of the Limyra building as a synagogue and asks whether the water basin could not point to a Christian church instead of a synagogue.

The contributions of Seyer and Lotz, Weiss and Pülz demonstrate thus that an interpretation of the Limyra building as a synagogue is possible but remains inconclusive as other possibilities exist as well.

The second part of the present theme issue (*Archaeological Spotlights on the Jews of Asia Minor*) discusses select archaeological remains of the Jews of Asia

Minor from antiquity and late antiquity and puts the menorot from Limyra into the contexts of ancient Jewish art history and visual culture. Nadin Burkhardt studies in her paper the synagogues of Priene and Sardis (“Uncomparable Buildings: The Synagogues in Priene and Sardis”). Her article is based in part on three excavation campaigns in Priene. Despite the difference in size, the synagogues of Sardis and Priene “share common features in chronology, development, position, surroundings, architecture, furnishings, and in their approach to using spolia. Both have a courtyard, accentuated entrances, water installations, a place for the Torah shrine, benches, pavements, and several illustrations of menorahs. Both were visibly part of the Jewish community to anyone who might pass or enter their space” (p. 203). In the opinion of the editors, Burkhardt’s paper makes the identification of the Limyra building as a synagogue possible.

Mark. R. Fairchild (“The Jewish Communities in Eastern Rough Cilicia”) discusses Jewish communities and their material remains in Eastern Rough Cilicia mainly during the Hellenistic and Roman Periods. After mentioning some written sources about the Jewish presence in western Anatolia, Fairchild emphasizes the general paucity of testimonies about Jewish communities in central and eastern Anatolia. This lack of evidence might be due to the fact, that both areas are not as well explored and researched as Western Anatolia. Fairchild focuses his attention on the eastern most region of Rough Cilicia and discusses rock inscriptions, rock carvings, and (decorated) architectural remains which bear witness to a strong Jewish presence in many cities of this region. Fairchild’s contribution demonstrates that many Jewish communities thrived even in regions of Asia Minor for which no significant documentation exists in non-archaeological sources. This leaves a similar option open for Limyra and Lycia. Like for Cilicia, until very recently, almost no evidence for a Jewish presence was known for Limyra and Lycia.

Steven Fine describes in his contribution (“The Menorahs of Limyra in Jewish Art and Visual Culture”) first the discovery and identification of Jewish buildings and artifacts in Asia Minor. Subsequently he addresses the classification of the Limyra menorah-slabs. Fine furthermore asks for a possible origin of the menorah plaques in another building and lists iconographic parallels for them. While in Fine’s opinion the excavated building might not have been a synagogue, his contribution opens the possibility that such a synagogue was located in a nearby location probably in a neighboring building.

The third part of this theme issue (*Part III Literary Spotlights on the Jews of Asia Minor*) illuminates the history of Jews and Judaism in Asia Minor and their role in ancient legal and Rabbinic texts. Armin Lange (“Jews in Ancient and Late Ancient Asia Minor between Acceptance and Rejection”) surveys the evidence for and history of Jews and Judaism in Asia Minor. Lange puts a special focus on the denigration and persecution of Jews by pagans and Christians in Asia Minor. He demonstrates that Jews thrived in this part of the Roman empire from the Hellenistic period until the Arab conquest and lived

both in urban and rural settings in most parts of Asia Minor. Despite their flourishing, Jews had to deal with anti-Semitic slander, denigration, and attacks from pagans and Christians. The situation worsened with the rise of Christianity to the official religion of the Roman Empire. In the 7th–8th cent., increased anti-Semitism led to a decline of Judaism in Asia Minor. Lange's contribution shows that despite legal and other persecutions Jews emphasized and practiced their Judaism and that despite a prohibition to the contrary Jews build new synagogues even in the century before the Arab conquest. Anti-Semitism in Asia Minor would thus not have blocked the construction of a synagogue in Limyra in this period.

Eva Synek pursues in her article ("The Legal Contexts of Findings of Limyra") the legal situation of Jews in Asia Minor according to imperial law and ecclesiastical canon law until the 8th cent. C.E. She emphasizes that Judaism was recognized as a *religio licita* and that Jews were thus protected by Roman law. But with the rise of Christianity, Roman imperial legislation disadvantaged Jews increasingly. Nevertheless Jews retained certain rights and a limited protection by the Roman state. Synek's contribution shows that real conditions could favor Jews in Asia Minor more than the legal theory of Roman law codes. That Roman law codes prohibited synagogue building is one example for this general assumption as proven by the synagogue of Sardis and maybe now by a possible synagogue in Limyra.

Gerhard Langer ("Rabbinic References to Asia Minor") surveys references to Asia Minor in Rabbinic sources and concludes that there is little evidence preserved in Rabbinic literature. Most references are vague or even legendary and cannot be connected with real places. In addition, only few Rabbis came from Asia Minor or visited this part of the late ancient world. Langer nevertheless emphasizes that Jewish communities in Asia Minor were bound to Jewish tradition and practiced it. In the opinion of the editors, this commitment to Jewish tradition expressed itself among other things also in the erection of synagogues in opposition to Roman law.

In light of all contributions to this theme issue, it is evident that Judaism flourished in Asia Minor despite legal and other disadvantages and even persecutions. Jews participated in the material and visual cultures of their (late) ancient environment. Jews were proud to emphasize their cultural and religious identity and to practice their Judaism in synagogues and elsewhere. While only further excavations will allow for a final identification of the character of the Limyra building it seems more than likely to the editors that either the excavated structure or a close by building represented once a synagogue.

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