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The Menorah as a Symbol of Jewish Identity in the Diaspora and an Expression of Aspiration for Renewing the Jerusalem Temple

Abstract

The Jewish relation to representational art is determined mostly by the Second Commandment, which states: "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them..." (Ex 20:4) As science has observed, the commandment has not always been honoured to the letter and its understanding has been changing depending on the actual circumstances a community is facing. At times of political crises and religious pressures, resistance to figural representations grew. A period from the late 1st to the 7th century CE, particularly from the 3rd to the first half of the 7th century is an exception. Actually, when coming into contact with Greco-Roman civilisation and under the influence of cultural and religious syncretism, quite characteristic for the period of Late Antiquity, the Jewish culture became more open to representational arts. On the walls in synagogues and catacombs there are figural images, of which the most representational ones are the scenes from the Old Testament, discovered in the Dura-Europos synagogue. However, many more non-figural objects have been preserved, mostly architectural structures and religious objects resembling the Jerusalem Temple. A repeated image of the menorah stands out, occurring on grave stones, synagogue mosaic floors, catacomb walls, lamps and objects of applied art found not only in Palestine but all over the Jewish diaspora. The seven-branched lampstand is designed according to the God's instructions for the service in the Tabernacle or King Solomon's Temple. When the menorah was taken to Rome after the destruction of the Second Temple, it became an expression of an aspiration for a renewal of the Jerusalem Temple and a symbol of Jewish identity.

The paper examines and analyzes a motif that evolved from a Divine prototype to an image of an object which stands in the Jerusalem temple, to representation that becomes not only a substitute for the Temple, but also a common symbol of a nation in the diaspora. We will try to connect the evolution of the motif with the migration of the Jews, after the fall of the Second Temple and to show that the occurrence of the motif in different parts of the Mediterranean and/or the Balkans confirms the presence of a Jewish community.

Key words: menorah, lampstand, Jerusalem Temple, diaspora, late Antiquity

The Jewish relation to representational art is determined mostly by the Second Commandment, which states:

You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My Commandments.¹

As science has observed, the commandment has not always been honoured to the letter and its understanding has been changing depending on the actual circumstances a community is facing. In times of political crises and religious pressures, resistance to figural representations grew. A period from the late 1st to the 7th century CE, particularly from the 3rd to the first half of the 7th century is an exception. Actually with Greco-Roman civilisation and under the influence of cultural and religious syncretism, quite characteristic for the period of Late Antiquity, the Jewish culture became more open to representational arts. On the walls in synagogues and catacombs there are figural images, of which the most representational ones are the scenes from the Old Testament, discovered in the Dura-Europos synagogue.² However, many more non-figural objects have been preserved, mostly architectural structures and religious objects resembling the Jerusalem Temple. A repeated image of the menorah stands out, occurring on grave stones, synagogue mosaic floors, catacomb walls, lamps and objects of applied art found not only in Palestine but all over the Jewish diaspora³ (fig. 1).

The menorah, the seven-branched lampstand was designed according to God's instructions for the service in the Tabernacle or King Solomon's Temple. Today the menorah is often represented as a seven-branched candlestick. However, there is a host of recorded and material evidence that testify that the original menorah was a stand for oil lamps.⁴ The oldest

1 Ex 20:4-5.

2 K. Weitzmann, *The Late Roman World*, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 35/2 (1977), 1-100, 59; B. Narkiss, *The Jewish Realm*, in: *Age of Spirituality: Late Antique and Early Christian Art, Third to Seventh Century*, ed. K. Weitzmann, New York 1979, 366-389; J. Elsner, *Archaeologies and Agendas: Reflections on Late Ancient Jewish Art and Early Christian Art*, *The Journal of Roman Studies* 93 (2003), 114-128; id., *Late Antiquity: A Period of Cultural Interaction*, in: *Transition to Christianity: art of Late Antiquity, 3rd-7th century AD*, ed. A. Lazaridou, New York 2012, 26-32.

3 B. Narkiss, *The Jewish Realm*, 370-371; J. Elsner, *Late Antiquity*, 28.

4 Besides descriptions in the Old Testament, there are numerous texts and also a huge number of

evidence is, certainly, a description of menorah in the Old Testament. How the menorah looked in the Tabernacle of the Covenant was described in the Second Book of Moses:

You shall also make a lampstand of pure gold; the lampstand shall be of hammered work. Its shaft, its branches, its bowls, its ornamental knobs, and flowers shall be of one piece. And six branches shall come out of its sides: three branches of the lampstand out of one side, and three branches of the lampstand out of the other side... Their knobs and their branches shall be of one piece; all of it shall be one hammered piece of pure gold. You shall make seven lamps for it, and they shall arrange its lamps so that they give light in front of it. And its wick-trimmers and their trays shall be of pure gold. It shall be made of a talent of pure gold, with all these utensils. And see to it that you make them according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain.⁵

A lot of effort has been put into an attempt to recreate the look of the oldest of the menorahs, but it is still in the domain of speculation and arbitrary reconstructions.⁶ The fact is that because representations were forbidden, the oldest menorah images date back to Herod's time, and even then they were rather stylised and simplified (fig. 2).

In her book *The Menorah, the Ancient Seven-armed Candelabrum: Origin, Form, and Significance* from 2001, Rachel Hachlili gives a detailed overview of the subject in an attempt to cover all the known menorah presentations. But more recent research and a host of material leave some of the questions open, which the author herself points out in her Introduction.⁷ Among the menorah representations that have not found their place in the book are some examples from the Balkans.

In short, a story of the menorah starts when God gives instructions to Moses that in the Tabernacle, beside the Ark of the Covenant, there should always be a lampstand. And there should always be light burning, symbolising

visual representations. It has been a frequent subject in literature, see: R. Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Land of Israel*, Leiden 1988; R. Hachlili, *The Menorah, the Ancient Seven-armed Candelabrum: Origin, Form, and Significance*, Leiden 2001; S. Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World: Toward a New Jewish Archaeology*, New York 2005.

5 Ex 25:31-40.

6 R. Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology*, 236-255; id., Adam, Aaron, and the Garden Sanctuary, *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* XXII/4 (2013), 5-12.

7 R. Hachlili, *The Menorah, the Ancient Seven-armed Candelabrum*, 1-4.

the presence of the invisible God.⁸ In the world of pagan Antiquity, where gods used to be materialised in various forms of statues and idols, they had to find a physical confirmation of the presence of the invisible God, Jehovah. The light and the fire, as common attributes of deities in various civilisations were the most logical choice.⁹ And this practice, established in the Tabernacle, is present today as well, in synagogues through Eternal Light – Ner Tamid, as well as in the Christian temples.¹⁰

The menorah was probably a part of the ritual artefacts that the Jewish priests brought to Jerusalem and placed in the Temple when it was built.¹¹ The first thing that is unknown is the fate of the menorah in the period of the Babylonian captivity. It is not mentioned as a part of the loot that Nebuchadnezzar took to Babylon,¹² but still some sources (Jeremiah the Prophet, Flavius Josephus, etc) mention a menorah or menorahs in Babylon.¹³

The return of the Jews to Jerusalem and the renewal of the Temple implied the existence of the menorah, but it is unknown whether the menorah was among the objects that were returned from the exile or perhaps a new one was made, recreating the old one.¹⁴ This menorah, as part of the loot, was taken by Antiochus Epiphanes.¹⁵ When in 168 BC Judah Maccabee took

8 Ex 27: 20-21; Lev 24:1-3.

9 А. Д. Охочимский, *Образ-парадигма Божественного огня в Библии и в христианской традиции*, in: *Иеротопия огня и света в культуре византийского мира*, ed. А. М. Лидов, Moscow 2013, 45-81; В. В. Иванов, *Огонь, Солнце и Свет в языках и культурах древней и средневековой Евразии*, in: *Иеротопия огня и света в культуре византийского мира*, ed. А. М. Лидов, Moscow 2013, 20-36; С. С. Хоружий, *Свет Платинов и свет Фавора: мистика света в неоплатонизме и исихазме*, in: *Иеротопия огня и света в культуре византийского мира*, ed. А. М. Лидов, Moscow 2013, 37-44.

10 Although the symbolism of light in Christianity was partly adopted from Judaism, from the understanding of a Christian temple as an image of the Tabernacle, i.e. the Temple of Solomon, the menorah image in Christianity was used in a limited framework. Adopting a visual representation of the menorah in Late Antiquity can be interpreted as a consequence of interlacing the Christian and Jewish iconography. Thus, in this process, the image of the menorah is taken over (gravestones, monuments, lamps, vessels), but not its universal meaning. J. Elsner, *Archaeologies and Agendas*, 115-118; S. Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World*, 156-157; S. Fine, *The Menorah and the Cross: Historiographical Reflections on a Recent Discovery from Laodicea on the Lycus*, in: *New Perspectives on Jewish-Christian Relations*, ed. E. Carlebach et al., Leiden 2012, 46-47.

11 1Kgs 8:4. Here, menorah is not mentioned explicitly, but all the sacred objects in the Sacred Tent.

12 2 Kgs 25:13-16.

13 Jer 52:19; Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews* 10.8.5, *The Works of Flavius Josephus*. trans. William Whiston, A. M. Auburn and Buffalo, 1895. <http://sacred-texts.com/jud/josephus/> accessed 15.12.2016.

14 R. Hachlili, *The Menorah, the Ancient Seven-armed Candelabrum*, 7; R. S. Boustan, *The Spoils of the Jerusalem Temple at Rome and Constantinople Jewish Counter-Geography in a Christianizing Empire*, in: *Antiquity in Antiquity: Jewish and Christian Pasts in the Greco-Roman World*, ed. G. Gardner et al., Tübingen 2008, 330-331.

15 1 Macc 1:21.

over the city, restored and consecrated the Temple once again, he had a new menorah made.¹⁶ It was not made of gold but from the metal weapons. Later on, the Maccabees made another one, most probably of gold, as well as the completely new temple equipment. Also, there was a change in the ritual practice when the table and the vessels on it were moved from the sanctuary to the temple nave¹⁷ (fig. 3). The menorah remained in the Temple until the year 70 CE, when it was demolished. Then the sacred vessels along with the seven-armed lampstand were taken to Rome. They were carried in a procession of Titus's Triumph and were represented on the Arch of Titus in the Roman Forum.¹⁸ In a way, this very menorah, represented on a Roman Triumphal Arch has become a remarkable symbol of Jewish identity, as it clearly and unequivocally pointed to the origin of the spoils the Romans were bringing. After those events, the fate of the menorah was unclear. According to Procopius, the menorah was taken from Rome to Carthage by the Visigoths, only to become part of the spoils of Justinian's general Belisarius, and as a part of his Triumphal Procession was carried through the streets of Constantinople.¹⁹ This information stands in contradiction to another account from Procopius, where he claims that the Temple treasures, along with the menorah, were taken from Rome by Alaric. When Alaric died in Cosenza, the treasures were either buried with him or the Goths took them to Gaul.²⁰

Similar to the vague fate of the object, the look of the menorah was also an uncertainty by the end of the Hasmonean period when evidence built up of a menorah as a seven-arms lampstand. One of the oldest preserved representations dates exactly from the period of the last Hasmonean king Mattathias Antigonus. In a conflict between King Herod, who would be supported by Octavian August and Mattathias Antigonus, the latter asserted his priesthood and legitimate heritage by presenting the Temple vessels.²¹ A menorah

16 1 Macc 4:48-50.

17 R. Hachlili, *The Menorah, the Ancient Seven-armed Candelabrum*, 8.

18 Flavius Josephus, *The Wars Of The Jews* 7.5.5; *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, trans. William Whiston, A.M. Auburn and Buffalo <http://sacred-texts.com/jud/josephus/> accessed 15.12.2016.

19 Procopius, *History of the Wars*, 4.9.1-9, *Procopius*, ed. H. B. Dewing, Harvard 1923, [2005 eBook #16765], <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16765/16765.txt> accessed 17.12.2016.

20 *Ibid.*, 5.12.41-2; the reference to the Temple objects and the menorah as late as in the time of Justinian can be interpreted as part of a general interest in Jerusalem and the Temple of Solomon, induced by translating the Jewish religious topography into the Christian one in Jerusalem, and further from Jerusalem to Constantinople and other Christian cities. R. S. Boustan, *The Spoils of the Jerusalem Temple*, 356-362; J. Ердељан, *Изабрана места. Конструисање Нових Јерусалима код православних Словена*, Београд 2013, 83-94.

21 R. Hachlili, *The Menorah, the Ancient Seven-armed Candelabrum*, 23.

representation on Antigonus's coins is a rather simplified one, lacking the burner cups detail.²² There are a number of menorah representations dating from the 1st century CE. An engraved drawing in a plaster wall of a house in Jerusalem, the Jerusalem's Jewish Quarter, is the oldest preserved representation of a decorated menorah with burner cups. The Roman invasion and the influences of the Greco-Roman culture among the Jews resulted in the frequent occurrence of visual representations of the menorah. It is present on houses, on everyday objects, in tombs, on synagogue walls and floors.²³

This period is marked with a change in its meaning. As Rachel Hachlili states, there was a transformation from a motif into a symbol. As one of the most frequent motifs in Jewish art, the menorah was a part of the Temple objects, signifying, "the priestly offices and their duties".²⁴ Only after the destruction of the Second Temple, was the image of the menorah transformed, "from a limited official emblem into a well-recognized Jewish symbol".²⁵ The reasons for that seem to be obvious and there is no need to go into details. The vents speak for themselves: when the Holy of Holies was lost, followed by the exodus of Jews from Jerusalem, the Jewish community, that in the Holy Land as well as that in diaspora, was forced to defend its religious identity.²⁶ The most evident change is the Torah Shrine, which was from that time on placed in synagogues "on the Jerusalem-oriented wall—with its assumed similarity to the Jerusalem Temple façade design" in order to preserve the memory of the Temple.²⁷ Also numerous motifs were introduced, having the same role, the most important one being an image of the Tora Shrine, but also "the menorah, *shofar*, incense shovel, *etrog* (a fruit used on the festival of Sukkot), the ark for the scrolls and a spiral conch shell that initially appears as a decorative motif, evolving into a symbolic motif representing the Torah Shrine. These symbols acquired prominence only after the destruction of the Temple; they preserve a memory of the Temple and its ceremonies."²⁸ Besides this obvious threat to Jews from the Roman invaders, that is the period of the emergence of Christianity, its rise and triumph as a new religion

22 Ibid., 41-2.

23 Ibid., 24.

24 Ibid., 2.

25 Ibid., 2.

26 E. Assis, Family and Community as Substitutes for the Temple after Its Destruction: New Readings in Psalms 127 and 133, *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 85/1 (2009), 55.

27 R. Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art*, 161-2; id., Synagogues: Before and After the Roman Destruction of the Temple, *Biblical Archaeology Review* 41 (2015), <http://cojs.org/synagogues-before-and-after-the-roman-destruction-of-the-temple> accessed 17.12.2016.

28 Ibid.

that emerged from Judaism and was still linked to it in religious and cultural terms. Unlike the previous religious conflicts, now it was not enough just to abstain from making idols, since Christianity also respected the commandment.²⁹ It was necessary to find symbols that would express the identity of a Jewish community in a clear and unequivocal manner, as an equivalent to the cross, the Christogram. The menorah, an ancient object from as early as the time of Moses, stands out in its characteristic and readily recognisable form among other visual motifs that, as already mentioned, preserve the memory of the Temple.³⁰ A more or less decorated lampstand, consisting of one central shaft and six branches, which, as Flavius Josephus said, differs from that used in everyday life,³¹ now becomes a symbol of the Temple where it once stood, a keeper of a community identity and an expression of an aspiration for the restoration of the Jerusalem Temple.³² Comparatively, the greatest number of visual representations is preserved from the period of Antiquity, although up to the present day the menorah has remained an outstanding symbol of the Jewish identity.

As a confirmation of this transformation from a motif to a symbol, we can provide an overview of the menorah representations in the Balkan region. The existence of the Jewish communities in the Balkans in the period of late Antiquity has been documented in written, epigraphic and archaeological sources. Also, synagogues have been confirmed in Philippi, Stobi, Plovdiv, Saranda, Mursa, Thessaloniki, Athens, Corinth, etc.³³ All over the Balkans numerous menorah representations have been found on everyday

29 R. Hachlili, *Ancient Synagogues - Archaeology and Art: New Discoveries and Current Research*, Leiden 2013, 285.

30 Multilayer symbolism of the menorah is reflected in its understanding, whose light is a metaphor for the presence of God and its 7 arms suggest the 7 days of Creation. The menorah is also recognized as an object made according to an archetype given by God for the service in the Temple, expressing a wish for the Temple renewal and the coming of the Messiah, thus becoming an eschatological symbol. All this produced a great number of representations of the menorah and the ability to recognize it as a Jewish symbol even outside the Jewish minority. Ibid., 312-3; S. Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World*, 154-5; H. Young, Markers of Jewish Identity in Ancient Rome, *Hirundo: The McGill Journal of Classical Studies* 10 (2011-2012), 78-80.

31 Flavius Josephus, *The Wars Of The Jews* 7.5.5.

32 H. Young, Markers of Jewish Identity, 79.

33 Acts 17:1; Acts 17:17; Acts 18:2-4; A. Panayotov, The Jews in the Balkan Provinces of the Roman Empire: the Evidence from Bulgaria, in: *Negotiating Diaspora: Jewish Strategies in the Roman Empire*, ed. J.M.G. Barclay, London 2004, 63-4; A. Panayotov, The First Jewish Communities in the Balkans and the Aegean, in: *Сборник в памет на професор Велизар Велков*, ed. H. Popov et al., Sofia 2009, 480-2; A. Panayotov, Jews and Jewish communities in the Balkans and the Aegean until the twelfth century, in: *The Jewish-Greek Tradition in Antiquity and the Byzantine Empire*, ed. J. K. Aitken et al., New York 2014, 55-75; L. V. Rutgers, *The Hidden Heritage of Diaspora Judaism*, Leuven 1998, 101-2.

objects, in graves, on a number of epitaphs, lead seals and other objects,³⁴ which is usually taken as evidence of an existing Jewish community in the region.³⁵ A Jewish diaspora in the Balkans, as well as in other parts of the Empire, usually dates to the second half of the 1st and the 2nd centuries CE, i.e. the Titus's campaign to Jerusalem, when the Temple was destroyed, and Hadrian's response to the Bar Kokhba Revolt, when Jerusalem itself was razed to the ground. Prior to this period, there had probably been slaves of Jewish origin, but only a few organised communities.³⁶

Like most of the immigrants from the east, the Jews settle in major city centres. The existence of synagogues, as places of religious and social gatherings, is clear evidence of a Jewish community in an area. In places where there are no synagogues or none have been discovered, symbols, cults and inscriptions are analysed.³⁷ And as already stated, the presence of menorah is viewed as a reliable sign and a confirmation of a Jewish community in a certain territory.³⁸

In the ancient Salona, a Jewish community had been notable, which has been confirmed in epigraphic material and the menorah representations as well³⁹ (fig. 4). The most outstanding is the one on a sarcophagus fragment. The sarcophagus was found in a cemetery dated to the third or early fourth century.⁴⁰ The sarcophagi of the period were commonly produced in the same workshops for different religious communities.⁴¹ The iconography is an expression of religious syncretism, and the themes and motifs

34 A. Panayotov, Jews and Jewish communities in the Balkans and the Aegean, 55-75; L. V. Rutgers, *The Hidden Heritage*, 84, 115-6; R. Hachlili, *The Menorah, the Ancient Seven-armed Candelabrum* 41-82.

35 A specific shape of the menorah, which could be easily reduced to its basic form and still remain recognizable, and the unbreakable link with the Temple of Solomon made the menorah a symbol which the Jews used most frequently to mark their „visual space“. S. Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World*, 154.

36 A. Panayotov, *The First Jewish Communities in the Balkans*, 480-1.

37 *Ibid.*, 480-92.

38 Although the menorah is sometimes found in a Christian context, mostly on objects of applied art, it seems that there are always some iconographic inconsistencies: the number of the menorah arms can vary, instead of the usual Jewish symbols, it is flanked with crosses, etc. In a way, it could be said that it was about taking over a motif in one period, but eventually, the understanding of the menorah as a decidedly Jewish symbol was predominant. S. Fine, *Art and Judaism in the Greco-Roman World*, 155; S. Fine, *The Menorah and the Cross*, 47-50.

39 A. Panayotov, Jews and Jewish communities in the Balkans and the Aegean, 55; B. Gabričević, Židovska vjerska općina u Saloni, in: *Studije i članci o religijama i kultovima antičkog svijeta*, ed. B. Gabričević, Split 1987, 234-42; F. Bulić, Jevrejski spomenici u rimskoj Dalmaciji i jevrejsko grobište u Solinu, *Vjesnik za arheologiju i historiju dalmatinsku* 49 (1926-27), 116-24.

40 *Ibid.*, 120-1.

41 L.V. Rutgers, Archaeological Evidence for the Interaction of Jews and Non-Jews in Late Antiquity, *American Journal of Archaeology* 96 (1992), 101-118, 104.

are taken from various cults. So the recognisable symbols, like the menorah, indicated a confessional affiliation of the customers. The Salona sarcophagus is severely damaged, but there is one example from Rome with a distinct pagan theme, where only a menorah in a clypeus held by two female figures indicates a religious identity of the customers.⁴² There is an image of a menorah in a glass medallion,⁴³ as well as on a ceramic lamp from Salona,⁴⁴ confirming the representation of a religious identity symbol in a private environment and at home⁴⁵ (fig. 5).

In the territory of the Roman Praevalitana in Doclea, a grave was discovered with painted Jewish symbols, a menorah among them. A seven armed lampstand is shown as the central motif on the north wall, flanked by garlands and birds.⁴⁶ In a mixed necropolis, where the dead of various religious affiliations were buried, once again the menorah is a marker of identity.⁴⁷

In the territory of the present-day Serbia, in the regions that are geographically in the Balkans, no menorah representations have been found. However, in the north of Serbia, in Čelarevo, the Ciglana site of an Avar necropolis, drawings of a menorah have been found on bricks pertaining to a funerary context. The cemetery is dated to the 8th century.⁴⁸ That is not the only find of the menorah in the Roman Pannonia, but it stands out because of the context it was found in. While some researchers, rather arbitrarily, argue that such a find confirms conversion of some Asian peoples (the Khazars) to Judaism, others interpret the brick with the menorah as a spolia from earlier times, reused in the Avar grave. There are some opinions that the bricks with the menorahs were used on a huge, mixed necropolis to mark the graves of those belonging to the Jewish community, thus

42 Ibid., 104-5.

43 Such medallions had an apotropaic role. F. Bulić, *Jevrejski spomenici u rimskoj Dalmaciji*, 118-19.

44 Ibid., 119.

45 Particularly interesting are the menorah graffiti chiselled on the walls of Diocletian's Palace, which some authors view as testimony that a part of the Salona Jewish community found refuge in the present-day Split, fleeing from the Avar invasion. <http://www.zost.hr/selected.php?id=2&jezik=EN> accessed 16.12.2016.

46 A simple and stylized representation of the menorah, without the burner cups, was made by engraving and is more of a relief in style than a fresco drawing. A. Cermanović-Kuzmanović, D. Srejović, *Jevrejska grobnica u Duklji, Jevrejski almanah* (1963-64), 57-59.

47 A. Cermanović-Kuzmanović, D. Srejović, *Jevrejska grobnica*, 61-63; A. Panayotov, *Jews and Jewish communities in the Balkans and the Aegean*, 55.

48 P. Wexler, *The Balkan Substratum of Yiddish: A Reassessment of the Unique Romance and Greek Components*, Wiesbaden 1992, 32; *Naučni skup Menore iz Čelareva*, transcript, ed. J. Kovačević et al., Beograd 1983; R. Bunardžić, *Čelarevo, Risultat delle ricerche nelle necropoli dell'alto medioevo*, Roma 1985.

making the symbol a marker of identity⁴⁹ (fig. 6, fig. 6a).

In the Roman Upper Moesia, the existence of the Jewish communities has been confirmed in epigraphic terms – in Gigen, Bulgaria, and there is a fragmented inscription with a menorah drawing.⁵⁰ Analogous to the neighbouring provinces, investigations of the large necropolises along the Roman cities in Upper Moesia could, in the future, provide some more representations of the menorah.

Unlike Upper Moesia, where there is little evidence of Jewish communities and very few menorah representations, in the neighbouring Thrace and Macedonia the picture is quite different. Furthermore, it is to be expected as all the major trade, military and migration roads from the East run through those regions. Here we shall draw attention to Plovdiv, the ancient Philippopolis and Stobi where the existence of synagogues has been confirmed.

The first synagogue in Stobi was built in the 2nd century CE and it was renovated in the 4th century. There is a menorah graffiti preserved from that period, chiselled in the wall plaster.⁵¹ In the synagogue a lead seal was found with a menorah and an inscription, today kept in the National Museum in Belgrade.⁵² With an inscription on a column dating from the 2nd century, which mentions the construction of a synagogue, those finds of the menorah enabled a certain identification of the structure in a multilayer site, having several construction phases when at some point the synagogue was replaced with an early Christian church.⁵³

In ancient Philippopolis, an important administrative, military and trade centre leading to the East, a synagogue was discovered, built in the first half of the 3rd century. The east section of the building is lavishly decorated and on the mosaic floor there is a partially preserved panel with a menorah representation and some festive palm branches, the lulav. A monumental golden menorah, made in yellow and ochre hues, has elaborate

49 As the archaeologists estimated, it was a necropolis of 800 graves. In the hitherto investigated graves, 83 brick fragments were found with a menorah image chiselled in, so it could be said that it was a funerary practice obviously associated with Judaism. *Naučni skup Menore iz Čelareva*, 24-5; *ibid.*, 54-5.

50 A. Panayotov, *The Jews in the Balkan Provinces of the Roman Empire*, 56-7; *id.*, *Jews and Jewish communities in the Balkans and the Aegean*, 55-6.

51 A. Panayotov, *Jews and Jewish communities in the Balkans and the Aegean*, 56; *id.*, *The First Jewish Communities in the Balkans*, 485-6; S. Fine, *The Menorah and the Cross*, 34; R. Kolarik, *Synagogue floors from the Balkans religious and historical implications*, *Niš and Byzantium* 12 (2014), 118.

52 L.B. Popović et al., *Antička bronza u Jugoslaviji*, Beograd 1969, 158, cat. no. 343.

53 S. Fine, *The Menorah and the Cross*, 34.

ornamentation and indicates a Biblical description of the Temple Menorah.⁵⁴ It is shown with lit oil lamps on top. Several researchers are of the opinion that it was made by an artist from the east, someone who was well aware of the Jewish iconography⁵⁵ (fig. 7).

From the times of Alexander the Great's campaigns and the spread of the Hellenistic culture in the east, the Jews were facing a dilemma of how to successfully interact with others whilst preserving their own heritage.⁵⁶ The links seem to have been the strongest in late Antiquity, a completely different picture from isolated communities in the Middle Ages. When the objects of material culture and visual representations are considered, the Jews in the diaspora adopt a visual language of pagan Antiquity. In this context we have recognisable symbols like the menorah, playing a key role in marking an object created as part of a mass production in a workshop, or of a grave in a mixed cemetery, or of objects expressing personal piety, used in a private cult. Therefore, the Balkan finds (just) make the picture complete.



Fig 1: Dura Europos Synagogue, Torah Niche, National Museum of Damascus, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dura_Synagogue_ciborium.jpg

54 R. Kolarik, Synagogue floors from the Balkans, 121-2; R. Hachlili, *The Menorah, the Ancient Seven-armed Candelabrum* 78,357; A. Panayotov, The Jews in the Balkan Provinces of the Roman Empire, 64-5.

55 R. Kolarik, Synagogue floors from the Balkans, 121.

56 L.V. Rutgers, *Archaeological Evidence for the Interaction*, 102.



*Fig 2: Prutah of Mattathias Antigonus and the Temple Menorah (40–37 BCE).
Photo © Israel Museum, Jerusalem*



Fig 3: Arch of Titus, Spoils from Solomon Temple "Rome: The Arch of Titus - detail of the interior," 3000 Slides Project: Codename "Shalosh Eleph", accessed December 23, 2016, <https://www.lrc.lsa.umich.edu/eliav/shalosh-eleph/items/show/5326>.



Fig 4: Salona sarcophagus (fragment), photo Živko Bačić, Photo © Židovska općina Split



Fig 5: Salona medallion, photo Živko Bačić, Photo © Židovska općina Split



Fig 6: Menorah bricks from Čelarevo, Photo © City Museum of Novi Sad / Muzej grada Novog Sada



Fig 6a: Menorah bricks from Čelarevo, Photo © City Museum of Novi Sad / Muzej grada Novog Sada



Fig 7: Plovdiv, Synagogue mosaic detail, Regional Archaeological Museum in Plovdiv, photo after Kolarik "Synagogue Floors from the Balkans: Religious and Historical Implications," Niš and Byzantium, 12 (Niš 2014), 115-128, figure 7