ANCIENT SYNAGOGUES REVEALED

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The Herodian Triclinia — A Prototype for the "Galilean-Type" Synagogue

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One of the many problems raised by the "Galilean" synagogue is the question of the origin of its plan. H. Kohl and C. Watzinger offered the suggestion that the Roman triclinia might have served as a prototype, but they then rejected the idea.[1] However, an analysis of triclinia built by Herod and his descendants indicates that the subject should be reconsidered, especially following recent discoveries at Jericho. Here, in Herod's elaborate winter palace, built on both sides of Wadi Qelt, a huge triclinium (29 × 19 m.) was exposed.[2] This hall had three rows of columns around the inside, parallel to three of its walls, and a wide entrance (5.5 m.) in the center of the southern wall. This door afforded a "picture-window" view of the landscape.

Nearby, another triclinium, nearly identical in plan but little more than half the size of the first (18.5 × 12.6 m.), was found in 1951 by J.B. Pritchard.[3] It formed part of a complex which was interpreted by the excavator as a gymnasium, but was no doubt Herod's earlier winter palace. This triclinium was oriented towards a central courtyard, the "picture window" entrance giving a view of the courtyard, undoubtedly full of greenery.

Larger and even more luxurious triclinia probably existed in Herod's central palace in Jerusalem. There is great similarity between the two halls in Jerusalem, as described by Josephus, and the two triclinia uncovered in Jericho. The halls in Jerusalem were paved with colored stones: "... the variety of the stones (for species rare in every other country were here collected in abundance)" (*War* V, 177–183); at Jericho we have evidence of imported marble incorporated into the opus sectile floor. Josephus mentions large ceiling beams in the Jerusalem palace: "... ceilings wonderful both for the length of the beams and the splendor of their surface decoration" (*ibid.*); in the building in Jericho the large span between the two rows of columns (13.5 m.) is a testimony to the use of huge beams here. One of the two buildings in Jericho was oriented towards the open landscape, and the other towards a central court.

The Herodian hall at Jericho looking south, with Wadi Qelt in the background

[1] *Antike Synagogen in Galiläa* (Leipzig, 1916), pp. 176-178.

[2] See E. Netzer, "The Hasmonean and Herodian Winter Palaces at Jericho," *IEJ*, 25 (1975), 94-95; *idem*, "The Winter Palaces of the Judean Kings at Jericho at the End of the Second Temple," *BASOR*, 228 (1977), 8–10.

[3] "The Excavation at Herodian Jericho 1951," *AASOR*, 32-33 (1958), 6–7, 56–58, room 33, misinterpreted by Pritchard as a courtyard.

In Jerusalem, although the palace was encircled by walls, it included "open courts all of greensward; there were groves of various trees ..." (*ibid.*) We assume that the triclinia enjoyed views of the courts. The two buildings in Jerusalem were named for Caesar Augustus and Marcus Agrippa. This in itself testifies to the importance of the buildings. The palace in Jericho is barely mentioned by Josephus, but he does tell us that it was also named for Caesar and Agrippa: "At Jericho... the king constructed new buildings, finer and more commodious for the reception of guests, and named them after the same friends" (*War* I, 407). Taking all of the above into consideration, we have no doubt that the triclinium excavated in Jericho was named after one of these Roman rulers.

The two Herodian triclinia of Jericho were separated by an interval of 15–20 years, and were located in two separate palaces built in totally different architectural styles. The first one was a rectangular structure, built around a central courtyard, with no direct view to the surrounding countryside. In contrast, the second one was a complex of buildings generally open to the landscape. Both palaces included a triclinium built on the same plan, indicative of the popularity of this plan during the period. We assume, therefore, that triclinia with a similar plan also existed in other palaces, including the one at Jerusalem.

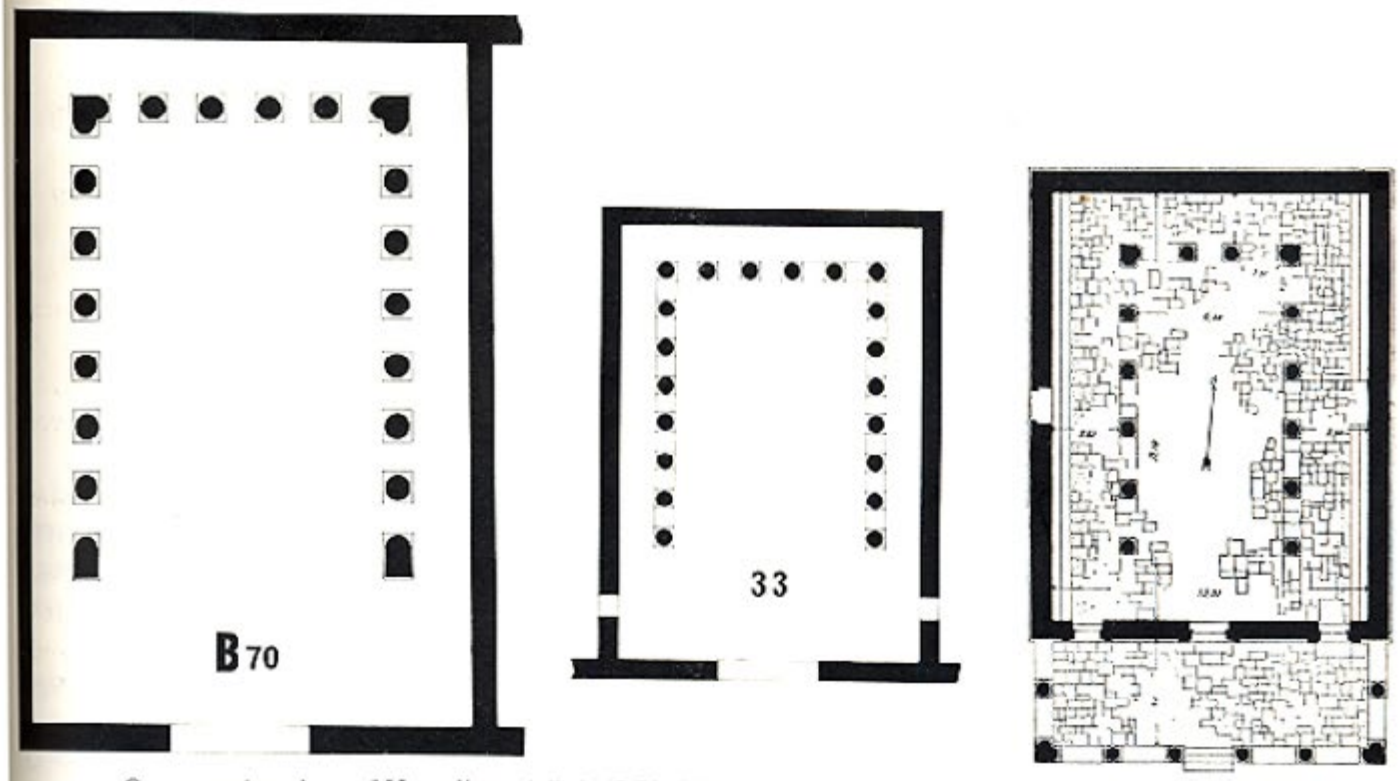
An important architectural feature of the two halls in Jericho is their orientation towards a focal point outside the buildings themselves. Both lack an interior focal point such as a niche or an altar, as existed in the Roman basilica or the large triclinia (for example, the Domus Augustana in the Palatine), halls which many scholars interpret as prototypes for the early churches.[4] A vivid demonstration of the function of the entrance door serving as a "picture window," with the architectural focal point outside, is given in Josephus' description of an event concerning a triclinium built by Agrippa II in Jerusalem, shortly before the destruction of the Second Temple: "About this time King Agrippa bu a chamber of unusual size in his palace Jerusalem .... The palace ... afforded a m delightful view to any who chose to survey t city from it. The King was enamored of t view and used to gaze, as he reclined at me there, on everything that went on in t Temple" (*Ant.* XX, 189–190). Here we can s that the tradition of Herod's triclinia co tinued in the days of his descendants.

The huge triclinia built by Herod we among the major achievements of his buildi program. We have no doubt that their fa spread far and wide in those days. It important to note here that many of Hero palaces were still standing nearly intact, till t destruction of the Second Temple, such those at Masada and Herodium, where have archeological proof, and the palace Jerusalem, about which we learn fr Josephus (*War* V, 178–183). The impressi they made probably lasted for many years.

This brings us to the question of t "Galilean-type" synagogue. The similarity plan and architectural conception betwe these triclinia (as known to us principally fr Jericho) and that of most of the "Galilea synagogues is striking, and probably accidental. In both cases they served assembly halls for the people: the one entertainment, the other for scriptural re ings and prayer. In both cases the orientati of the hall is toward the outside, rather th toward a focal point inside the building. T triclinia were oriented towards a real la scape, and the synagogue towards a spirit landscape — i.e., towards Jerusalem. T orientation towards Jerusalem may have h symbolic meaning, but it may also have b practical, enabling prayer (at least in p with the doors open while facing the holy ci

This resemblance indicates that the chitects who built the large synagogues m have seen Herod's triclinia. An import point to be considered is the size of buildings. The larger triclinium in Jerich bigger than any of the known "Galilean-ty synagogues, and the triclinia in Jerusalem m have been even larger.

[4] See J.B. Ward-Perkins, "Constantine and the Origin of the Christian Basilica," *PBSR*, 22 (1954), 69–89.



Comparative plans of Herodian triclinia (B70, 33) and the "Galilean-type" sunagogue at Bar'am

How do the synagogues found in Masada and Herodium fit into this picture? It is true that in the case of Herodium the synagogue was actually built into a triclinium, but this was probably accidental, the triclinium simply meeting the needs of the revolutionaries. The adaptation represents an improvisation, not an intentional architectural concept. The location of the hall's entrance on the east could have been the reason for its choice, but may be a coincidence. On the other hand, the hall at Herodium was not oriented toward Jerusalem.

At Masada we have another case in which an existing hall was converted into a synagogue. It is an open question whether this building served as a synagogue in Herod's time. So far there is no proof for any synagogue being included in Herod's building projects. The building at Masada could have originally served a totally different purpose, such as a stable.[5] But even if the building at Masada was originally a synagogue, it is quite different from the "Galilean" type. It is a broadhouse, with a kind of entrance hall, and was not orientated toward Jerusalem. Its later phase, as a synagogue built by the Sicarii, reflects an improvisation, as the case in Herodium. The most significant feature of the synagogues at Herodium and Masada is the benches, enabling the community to gather together in the halls. Such benches were not needed in Herod's triclinia, but became a frequent feature in the later synagogues.

It is true that there is a chronological gap between the date of Herod's triclinia and the building of the earliest "Galilean-type" synagogues. As Kohl and Watzinger have already suggested, we may assume that synagogues were built during this hiatus which would predate those built in Galilee, and which represent the architectural tradition followed by the "Galilean" ones. As yet, however, no synagogue dated to this time has been found, even though a large Jewish community existed in the country throughout these years. Hopefully synagogues of this period will be uncovered and will provide the missing link between the "Galilean-type" synagogue and their proposed prototype, the Herodian triclinia.

[5] If orientation toward the east were an important consideration for the builders, they could easily have found another building to serve their purpose, for example the western palace. The orientation toward Jerusalem may well be accidental. In any case, we must not forget that since these synagogues were built before the destruction of the Temple, the orientation of the building was probably unimportant.