

THE EARLY DAYS

Ancient Synagogues



Photograph of the mosaic in the ancient synagogue of Bet Alpha. Excavations of the Hebrew University, 1929.

The study of ancient synagogues was a main focus of archaeological activity in the University, and its finds occupy an important place in the Collection. Following Heinrich Kohl and Carl Watzinger's study of synagogues in the early twentieth century, the Hebrew University conducted a comprehensive survey of ancient synagogues in the Galilee in the 1920s and 1930s, headed by Eleazar Lipa Sukenik, and excavated these buildings in Bet Alpha and Hammat Gader. The plan of the synagogue building in the Land of Israel and its decorative program combine local building traditions and foreign influences. Synagogue decorations include stone reliefs, mosaic pavements, and architectural elements such as chancel screens, columns, and capitals. These are decorated with floral patterns, figural images of humans and animals, biblical themes, and symbols depicting the Temple implements: the menorah, shofar, lulav, ethrog, incense shovel, and Torah shrine. Pagan motifs such as the zodiac were also used at times in synagogue decorations and acquired a new interpretation. The Collection contains architectural elements from various synagogues in the Land of Israel and the Diaspora.

The Hammat Tiberias synagogue was excavated in 1921 by Nahum Slouschz on behalf of the Jewish Palestine Exploration Society.

Chancel screen decorated with a floral pattern and pomegranates, Hammat Tiberias, Marble, 6th c. CE



Photo: Gabi Laron

Tile decorated with three pomegranates.

Clay, 3rd c. CE



Photo: Gabi Laron

In 1932, an expedition from Yale University uncovered a 3rd-century CE synagogue in Dura Europos in the Syrian Desert. The sensational discovery of its well-preserved wall paintings of biblical themes led Eleazar Lipa Sukenik to visit the excavation and co-author its publication.

The excavation yielded, among its other finds, 234 painted ceiling tiles, three of which were given to the museum as a gift. Their decorations include motifs of mythological creatures, animals, fruit, human figures, and dedicatory inscriptions.