
Reconsidering the Earliest Synagogue in Yemen

ABSTRACT This article reexamines the evidence underlying the widely cited identification of a late ancient synagogue in Qanī (modern Bi'r 'Alī, Yemen), challenging its identification and the historical narrative built around it. We first assess the epigraphic, archaeological, and literary evidence used to identify a synagogue, and therefore a community of Jews, in fourth- through sixth-century Himyar. We suggest that none of the evidence can bear the weight of the identification. We then discuss the reception of this tenuous claim by a wide variety of scholars—including those who have questioned its underlying rationale—and the way that it has been used to buttress wishful claims about an early and powerful Jewish presence in South Arabia. Ultimately, the mirage of Qanī's Jews serves as a cautionary tale, illustrating how surprising conclusions that bolster exciting historical narratives can result in speedy and unanimous acceptance by scholars of interpretations deserving of skepticism.

KEYWORDS Late Antiquity, Himyar, synagogue, epigraphy

1. INTRODUCTION

The widely accepted story goes something like this. The Jews of the port city of Qanī (modern Bi'r 'Alī, Yemen) were prominent. Perhaps already in the late third century, a Yemeni Jewish community convened in a small synagogue oriented toward Jerusalem, built in large and expensive ashlar stones covered with gypsum plaster.¹ The plaster quickly attracted inscriptions in Old South Arabian, and one in Greek describing the synagogue as a “holy

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1. Jean-François Salles and Alexander Vsevolodivitch Sedov, *Qānī: Le port antique du Ḥaḍ-ramawt entre la Méditerranée, l'Afrique et l'Inde* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 120–21.

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place,” asking the everlasting God to bless a community member. The walls bore images, too, including one depicting a—and perhaps even *the*—Temple.² The community was affluent enough in the fourth or fifth century to renovate their facility, expanding it to include new rooms, a courtyard, and a ritual space boasting a finely decorated water basin for ablutions—showing their scrupulous attention to ritual purity—along with a menorah, an ornamented box for holding sacred scrolls, and a Torah shrine.³ Philostorgius reports that Jews from this or a neighboring community were powerful enough to temporarily impede the missionary activities of an Indian Christian emissary to the local governmental court, intent on evangelizing the people of Ḥaḍramawt.⁴ The Jews of ancient Qanī’ were central to the social, political, and spatial makeup of one of the Red Sea’s most important trading posts; understanding their ancient roots helps us to better understand major regional events of the early sixth century, and even to contextualize modern practices of Yemeni Jews.⁵

2. Y. G. Vinogradov and A. V. Sedov, “Греческая Надпись Из Южной Аравии,” *Вестник Древней Истории* 2 (1989): 162–69. Greek inscriptions republished in English as A. V. Sedov, “New Archaeological and Epigraphical Material from Qana (South Arabia),” *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 3, no. 2 (1992): 110–37. Further analysis in Glen W. Bowersock, “The New Greek Inscription from South Yemen,” in *To Hellenikon: Studies in Honor of Speros Vryonis, Jr.*, ed. John Springer Langdon et al., vol. 1 (New Rochelle: Artistide D. Caratzas, 1993), 3–8, republished in Salles and Sedov, *Qāni’*, 393–96; Arabic inscriptions: A. G. Ludin, “Les inscriptions et les graffiti sud-arabiques des fouilles du sit de Bir ‘Ali (Qanī’),” in Salles and Sedov, *Qāni’*, 381–82; temple depiction in A. V. Sedov, “Les fouilles du secteur 3: La synagogue,” in Salles and Sedov, *Qāni’*, 88.

3. Small finds from the synagogue in Sedov, “Les fouilles du secteur 3,” in Salles and Sedov, *Qāni’*, with further analysis in Joseph Patrich, “Review of J.-F. Salles et A.V. Sedov, *Qāni’. Le port antique du Ḥaḍramawt entre la Méditerranée, l’Afrique et l’Inde*,” *Semitica et Classica* 4 (2011): 243–49, esp. 244–46.

4. Bowersock, “New Greek Inscription,” *Qanī’*, 395–96.

5. Christian Robin, “Introduction,” in *Le judaïsme de l’Arabie antique: Actes du Colloque de Jérusalem (février 2006)*, ed. Christian Robin (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 7–11, 9; Yosef Tobi, “The Jews of Yemen in Light of the Excavation of the Jewish Synagogue in Qanī’ (poster),” *Papers from the Forty-Sixth Meeting of the Seminar for Arabian Studies Held at the British Museum, London, 13 to 15 July 2012* (2013): 349–56; Ester Muchawsky-Schnapper, “Synagogues in Yemen and Their Objects,” in *Arabian Routes in the Asian Context*, ed. P. I. Pogorel’skiĭ and M. I. Vasilenko (St. Petersburg: Kunstkamera, 2016), 296–336; Eivind Heldaas Seland, “Archaeology of Trade in the Western Indian Ocean, 300 BC–AD 700,” *Journal of Archaeological Research* 22, no. 4 (2014): 367–402, 377; Harry Munt, “‘No Two Religions’: Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Hijāz,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 78, no. 2 (2015): 249–69, 253; Steven E. Sidebotham, *Berenike and the Ancient Maritime Spice Route* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 281; Michel Mouton, Paul Sanlaville, and Joël Suire, “A New Map of Qāni’ (Yemen),” *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 19, no. 2 (2008): 198–209, 203; Pieter van der Horst, *Het joodse koninkrijk van Himyar en de christelijke martelaars van Nadjrān: Joden en christenen in Arabië in de zesde eeuw* (Amsterdam: Athenaeum–Polak & Van Gennep, 2015), 14; Valentina Grasso,

We contend that the narrative above does not withstand critical scrutiny. It is based on several pieces of faulty evidence: an incompletely transcribed inscription was misleadingly translated and interpreted resulting in the identification of an early synagogue in Qanī'. Charred remains of a box, small metal tubes, and a fragmentary water basin from a later building were shoehorned to fit the synagogue identification, and literary evidence was read superficially, without attention to questions of genre or historicity, in order to confirm the presence of Jews in late ancient Qanī'. Curiously, however, the broad contours of this account have been widely reproduced. A few scholars whose work we build on below ultimately repeat the same conclusions about Jews in ancient Ḥādrāmawt, even after calling the story's foundational evidence into question.

The mirage of Qanī's Jews serves as a cautionary tale. It illustrates how surprising conclusions that bolster exciting historical narratives can result in speedy acceptance, and suspension of the skepticism that is crucial to scholarly progress. The writing of history involves collecting fragmentary data and piecing them together into a narrative. But, we contend that another essential function of the historian's task is this: admitting when the data is inconclusive and when no reliable narrative can be constructed. There must be a lower limit of reasonable historical speculation, and we contend that the Qanī' "synagogue" is one such example. Our first proposal is to admit what we don't know. What we don't know is this: almost anything about the function of the buildings excavated in Sector Three at Qanī'.

2. FROM EXCAVATION TO PUBLICATION

In 1989, after several short excavation seasons, a Soviet-Yemeni archaeological team published their initial findings concerning a building in the port city of Qanī', on the Gulf of Aden.⁶ Numismatic and ceramic evidence places the building's three phases in the team's BA-I and II strata, with the earliest basalt foundation in use at least through the mid-first century CE, the second phase in use through the late third/fourth century CE, and the third phase sometime thereafter.⁷ There is no clear continuity of use—or even occupation—between each phase, as we discuss below.

⁶ "A Late Antique Kingdom's Conversion: Jews and Sympathizers in South Arabia," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 13 (2020): 352–82, esp. 362–63.

⁶. Vinogradov and Sedov, "Греческая Надпись Из Южной Аравии." The team's final report is Salles and Sedov, *Qāni'*.

⁷. Numismatic evidence in Salles and Sedov, *Qāni'*, 343–52.

In remains from the building's second phase, the team discovered a short Greek inscription on gypsum plaster. The letterforms are inconclusive as to date, though they could easily fit within the fourth-century horizon suggested by the stratum's small finds. Archaeologist Alexander Sedov and epigrapher Yuri Vinogradov published the inscription in two joint articles, transcribing and translating the text as follows:

[Εἰ]ς θεός ὁ βοαθῶν (sic) Κοσ[μᾶ]
 [Κ]αὶ ὁ ἅγιος τόπος τοῦ | - - -
 [σ]υνοδία γίνῃ μοι ἡ - - - - -
 [π]λοτὰ ἡ ναῖ (sic), ἀπάγητ[αι - -]
 ς [ἔ]ργα καὶ || M - - - - -

Almighty, helping Kosmas (?),

and this Holy Place is . . .

let my caravan be kept safe . . .

let it (the sea?) be safe for a ship, let him lead (?) . . .

the matters and . . . ”⁸

The inscription's use of the stock phrases εἰς θεός and ἅγιος τόπος suggested to Vinogradov that the building was some kind of ritual space, and the Greek language of the inscription, in addition to its date and place in a Red Sea trading port, suggested that it was most likely left by a Christian. Given the religious tone of the inscription, the initial publication proposed that the space was a church of some kind.

In a short article published in 1993, Glen Bowersock repeated Vinogradov's transcription and translation but offered a different interpretation of the inscription's context.⁹ He compared the formulae—above all εἰς θεός and ἅγιος τόπος—with other late ancient inscriptions and concluded that the language reflected common Jewish terminology of the period. Again connecting the language of the inscription with the use of the space, Bowersock proposed that the building must have been a synagogue. On the basis of

8. Yuri Vinogradov, “Addendum I,” in Sedov, “New Archaeological and Epigraphical Material,” 136. Compare with the French in Salles and Sedov, *Qāni*, 390. The translation of [Εἰ]ς θεός as “Almighty” is idiomatic rather than literal or standard.

9. Bowersock, “New Greek Inscription.”

this conclusion, Bowersock argued for the early presence of Jews in Ḥadramawt, along with their increasing visibility in South Arabia over the centuries which followed. Bowersock's identification has been widely cited, and in subsequent publications even the original excavators adopted the interpretation; in their 2010 final report on the excavations at Qanī', Jean-François Salles and Alexander Sedov refer to the second and third phases of the building as the "early synagogue" and "late synagogue," respectively.¹⁰

With few exceptions, Bowersock's arguments have not been subjected to close scrutiny, while his conclusions have been widely repeated and built upon. The immediate object of this article is to scrutinize the basis for identifying this inscription as Jewish, the building as a synagogue in either phase, and the use of this evidence to argue for the presence of Jews in late ancient Qanī'. Above all, our plea is for humility in the face of these materials. It is likely that we will never know what this building was used for, and the chain of logical deductions leading us from one fragmentary inscription to a Jew to a synagogue to a Jewish community is too full of holes, improbabilities, speculation, and special pleading to command even the most tentative assent. The inscription is too fragile to support the narrative that has been built upon it.

By contrast, we argue that the inscription itself is religiously indeterminate, that the connection between the inscription and identification of the space itself is based on an unlikely proposed restoration of the fragmentary text, and that it is irresponsible to assume a continuity of function between the proposed "early synagogue" phase and the radically different complex that was built over the first structure, at some uncertain later date. Finally, if the building in its second phase does not have a Jewish inscription and the third phase is not distinctively a synagogue, then reading a highly charged passage of Philostorgius, which self-consciously deploys Jews as stock characters, as evidence for a populous and powerful Jewish community in South Arabia at this time is not only unnecessary but imprudent.

3. THE INSCRIPTION: A RECONSIDERATION

We begin with the inscription found in what the excavators call the "early synagogue," which we refer to henceforth as Phase Two. The inscription is small (23 × 13 cm), the letterforms are typical of the third through fifth

10. Salles and Sedov, *Qanī'*, 87–122.

centuries, and the text is neither distinctly professional nor monumental (Figure 1).¹¹ In support of identifying the inscription as specifically Jewish, Bowersock's article focuses on two key formulae: εἰς θεὸς ὁ βοαθῶν (corrected to βοηθῶν) and ὁ ἅγιος τόπος. Though he acknowledges that these terms are found in Christian inscriptions from Late Antiquity, he argues that they are more characteristic of Jewish inscriptions in the fourth century, the apparent stratigraphic period of the building where the inscription was found. For the first formula, Bowersock simply cites Erik Peterson's 1926 book on the formula εἰς θεός, nearly a third of which is a catalogue of the uses of the phrase across a wide variety of religious traditions, including a significant section dedicated solely to cataloguing the uses of εἰς θεός ὁ βοηθῶν in particular.¹² In making his case that this phrase was a common Jewish formula, however, Bowersock cites only Peterson's chapter on Jewish uses. It is true that the Jews of Late Antiquity commonly used the phrase εἰς θεός, but framed as such the statement is misleading. Peterson's work shows that the phrase is used extensively by both Christians and by Jews across the Mediterranean and Middle East, as well as by so-called pagans during the stratigraphic period of this building, and also thereafter.¹³ In the words of Christoph Marksches, who edited and republished Peterson's monograph on the εἰς θεός formula,

11. In contrast to Price, who judges the inscription to be "a text inscribed on a plastered wall to be seen by present and subsequent generations." See Jonathan J. Price, "The Ḥimyarites at Beth She'arim," *Eretz-Israel* 34 (2021): 137. Given the small size of the inscription and its shallow letters, we should say that it would have required "present and subsequent generations" to get quite close to read its text, which was rendered in a language likely to be foreign to the community whom Price envisions reading it. Other pieces from this same plaster wall are unequivocally graffiti, according to the excavators (Salles and Sedov, *Qāni'*, 88)—there is little reason to single out this one inscription as different in kind from the doodles and short graffiti in local languages that surrounded it. Further, given the fact that the inscription was found in a pile of debris related to an apparent destruction, it is impossible to say whether the inscription was placed prominently or quite out of the way. We simply know nothing about its original placement, and as such we would encourage caution when it comes to pronouncements on the intention of the inscriber.

12. Erik Peterson, *Εἰς Θεός: Epigraphische, formgeschichtliche und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1926).

13. It is not out of the question that this is a pagan usage. We note below a conspicuous example from late ancient Sepphoris, and cite more generally the extensive epigraphic work of Stephen Mitchell, "The Cult of Theos Hypsistos between Pagans, Jews, and Christians," in *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, ed. Polymnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 81–148, expanded in "Further Thoughts on the Cult of Theos Hypsistos," in *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire*, ed. Stephen Mitchell and Peter van Nuffelen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 167–208.

Even if one and the same formula, the confession of εἰς θεὸς—or, more precisely stated: the confession of one’s own god as the εἰς θεὸς—could be deployed in so many different contexts with different meanings that one must modify such a usage further A significantly clear identification of the specific religion was not possible with the formula εἰς θεὸς; but rather, only with the addition of καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς αὐτοῦ or καὶ ὁ ἅγιον πνεῦμα.¹⁴

Or, in the words of epigrapher Leah Di Segni regarding the Palestinian evidence,

This acclamation, usually considered a certain clue of the Christian or at least Jewish-Christian character of the monuments on which it appears, is neither Jewish nor Christian in the large majority of its occurrences in Palestine. On the contrary, it often appears in a pagan context Moreover, it is most characteristic of Samaritan holy places, including the holiest of all, the temenos on Mount Gerizim.¹⁵

If one were simply to survey the known attestations from the paleographic and stratigraphic range suggested by the Qanī inscription, one would have to say that the formula is not predominantly Jewish, Christian, or pagan. It is simply common. Consider, for instance, a Christian inscription from the city walls of Aphrodisias dating to the first half of the fourth century, which reads εἰς Θεὸς ὁ μόνος ὠῶξε Κωσταντεν (one god, the singular, save Costanten).¹⁶ Similarly, in an Antiochene inscription dated to 492, we find Ⲭ [εἰς] θεὸς (καὶ) ὁ Χριστὸς αὐτοῦ . . .¹⁷ The list goes on, and in his own reassessment of the Qanī inscription, Mikhail Bukharin suggested nine more parallels “with exactly the same formula of approximately the same date” as the Qanī inscription that are explicitly Christian.¹⁸

14. Christoph Marksches, “Heis Theos—Ein Gott? Der Monotheismus und das antike Christentum,” in *Polytheismus und Monotheismus in den Religionen des vorderen Orients* (Münster: Ugarit, 2002), 209–34, 215. Translation ours.

15. Leah Di Segni, “The Samaritans in Roman-Byzantine Palestine: Some Misapprehensions,” in *Religious and Ethnic Communities in Later Roman Palestine*, ed. Hayim Lapin (Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 1998), 51–66, 55.

16. *L.Aphrodisias Late Ant.* 140.

17. *IGLS* II 382.

18. Bukharin’s proposed parallels are: Scythia Minor, *SEG* 27.420 (Sucidava, fourth to fifth century); Syria, *IGLS* II 543 (Dar Qita, 355 CE), *IGLS* II 389 (Fāfirtīn, 372 CE), *IGLS* II 561 (Bābisqa, 390 CE), Jacques Jarry, “Inscriptions arabes, syriaques et grecques du massif du Bélus en Syrie du nord,” *Annales Islamologiques* 7 (1967): 139–220, 192 no. 122 (Aršin, 392 CE), *IGLS* II 373 (Borg/El-Qās, 407 CE); Egypt, *SEG* 26.1784, 38.1778 (Monesis, fourth century), *I.Chr. Egypte* 140 (Akoris, fifth to sixth century). See Mikhail D. Bukharin, “Greeks on Socotra: Commercial

The argument that Jewish uses are earlier than Christian uses, which is implied in Bowersock's study and made explicit in Jonathan J. Price's defense of Bowersock's interpretation, further rests on an unreasonable confidence in the date of the inscriptions in question: both the "later" Christian ones, which are mostly paleographically dated to the fourth through sixth century, and the "earlier" Jewish ones, the Qanī' inscription included. The Qanī' inscription is both paleographically and stratigraphically indeterminate. The building's stratum is reasonably understood as fourth century, while the letterforms could comfortably fit anywhere between the third and the fifth. There is ultimately no satisfying way to quantify imprecisely dated sources, but as Bart Van Beek and Mark Depauw argued a decade ago, the worst way to go about it is just to split the difference: the solution proposed, which allows Bowersock, Price, and others to understand the use of these stock phrases as Jewish in an earlier period, and the later uses as Christian.¹⁹ More than enough explicitly Christian and pagan sources fit within the temporal horizon of Phase Two at Qanī' to dismiss any conclusion of this formula's distinctively Jewish use.

Bowersock's analysis additionally focuses on the supposed Jewish peculiarity of the expression ὁ ἅγιος τόπος. He cites a 1967 book by Baruch Lifshitz, suggesting that ὁ ἅγιος τόπος was the standard way of referring to synagogues, though as above in Bowersock's citation of Peterson, Lifshitz himself refers only to the meaning of the term in Jewish inscriptions.²⁰ Bowersock added that this expression appears infrequently in Christian inscriptions referring to churches before the fifth century.²¹ Again, the analysis might be more persuasive if the paleography or the archaeology supported a firm *terminus ante quem* of the turn of the fifth century for the inscription in question, but neither can support such precise dating. Even if it is true that ὁ ἅγιος τόπος appears more often in Jewish inscriptions before the fifth century and

Contacts and Early Christian Missions," in *Foreign Sailors on Socotra: The Inscriptions and Drawings from the Cave Hoq*, ed. Ingo Strauch (Bremen: Hemen Verlag, 2012), 501–39, esp. 534.

19. Bart Van Beek and Mark Depauw, "Quantifying Imprecisely Dated Sources: A New Inclusive Method for Charting Diachronic Change in Graeco-Roman Egypt," *Ancient Society* 43 (2013): 101–14.

20. Baruch Lifshitz, *Donateurs et fondateurs dans les synagogues juives: Répertoire des dédicaces grecques relatives à la construction et à la réfection des synagogues* (Paris: Gabalda, 1967), 33.

21. Bukharin, "Greeks on Socotra," 535, offers seven examples from fifth- and sixth-century Syria and Egypt in which the phrase ὁ ἅγιος τόπος refers to a Christian sanctuary. The proposed parallels are Syria: *IGLS XXI.2.6* (Jbeiha), *IGLS XXI.2.73* (Mt. Nebo, sixth century), *IGLS XXI.2.100* (Makhayyat, 535/36 CE), *IGLS XXI.2.141* (Medaba, 578/79 AD), *IGLS XXI.2.148* (Medaba, sixth century); Egypt: *I.Syringes 522* (Thebes/Syringes).

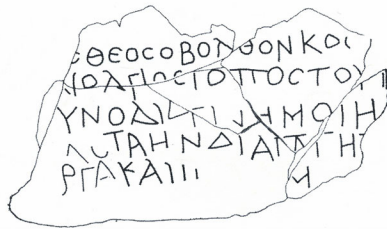


FIGURE 1. Inscription from Phase Two of Area 3 at Qanī'. Reprinted from Sedov, "New Archaeological and Epigraphical Material from Qana," 135, fig. 14, by permission of Wiley.

Christian inscriptions thereafter, we have no way of deciding on which side of this fuzzy threshold the inscription at Qanī' falls.

Given his argument for the Jewish nature of two of the inscription's stock phrases, Bowersock reexamines εἰς θεὸς ὁ βοηθῶν and notes that it, too, has parallels in a number of synagogue inscriptions, such as θεὸς βοηθός in the famous synagogue inscription at Aphrodisias, and a direct parallel (εἰς θεὸς ὁ βοειθῶν) in a synagogue inscription from the fifth or sixth century in Dmeir, Syria.²² To Bowersock, these parallels prove that "the weight of probability shifts, therefore, from a Christian to a Jewish context" for the inscription.²³ This contention holds true only if one excludes the Christian uses of the phrase, which are particularly common in inscriptions from Syria, Egypt,

22. On Aphrodisias, see Joyce Reynolds and Robert Tannenbaum, *Jews and God-Fearers at Aphrodisias: Greek Inscriptions with Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge Philological Society, 1987); Angelos Chaniotis, "The Jews of Aphrodisias: New Evidence and Old Problems," *Scripta Classica Israelica* 21 (2002): 209–42.

23. Bowersock, "New Greek Inscription," 5.

Nubia, and Cyrenaica. Even a quick search in PHI for the precise phrase εἰς θεὸς ὁ βοηθῶν renders 39 late ancient and Byzantine results, almost all from the eastern Mediterranean and Red Sea area and almost all Christian.²⁴ For the Jewish peculiarity of this formula to remain compelling, one must also exclude apparently pagan uses of the phrase, for instance in the so-called Nile Festival Building at Sepphoris, dating to the early fifth century.²⁵ A Christian inscription from Wadi al-Hasa underscores the fact that none of these expressions are peculiarly Jewish; it uses all of them.²⁶

✠ Κ(ύρι)ε ὁ θ(εὸ)ς
το(ῦ) ἁγίου [τό]που
τούτου, [βο]ήθησον
[τ]ὸ(ν) δοῦλόν [σου—

✠ Lord God of this holy place, helping [your] slave . . .

Vinogradov's translation and transcription of the Qanī' inscription is likewise imprecise. To begin with the translation: in line 2 he translates [κ]αὶ ὁ ἅγιος τόπος τοῦ [. . .] as "and this holy place is . . ."—adding a deictic (*this*) in place of the nominative definite article and supplying a verb (*is*). As discussed below, it seems that Vinogradov translated a different text than the one he transcribed, restoring τοῦ τοῦτος. A more neutral translation of the transcription would be "and the holy place of . . .," which has the added advantage of translating the genitive definite article and doing so in a way that points to the next word: likely a noun, perhaps a name.

24. The inscriptions are as follows: Arabia, Christian (*I.Pal. Tertia* Ia 197, *SEG* 28.1441, 39.1654); Arabia, probably Christian (*I.Pal. Tertia* Ia 159); probably Cyprus (provenance unknown), probably Christian (*SEG* 41.1482a, 41.1482b); Egypt and Nubia, Christian (*I.Philae* 227, *I.Portes* 101, *SB* 1.1596, 18.13641, *SEG* 17.790, 18.709, 18.720, 29.1661, 30.1731, 33.1327); Egypt and Nubia, probably Christian (*SB* 3.6179, *SEG* 18.712, 30.1734, 38.1778, Jadwiga Kubińska, *Faras IV: Inscriptions grecques chrétiennes* (Warsaw: 1974), 109 no. 48; Egypt and Nubia, unclear (*SB* 1.2038, *SEG* 41.1616, *I.Deir el-Bahari* 89); Galatia, Christian (*I.North Galatia* 160); Palaestina, Christian (*SEG* 8.278); Salamis, Christian (*I.Salamine* 227); Scythia Minor, Christian (*SEG* 27.420); Syria, Christian (*IGLS* II.405, 484, 671) Syria, probably Christian (*IGLS* II.390, 544, 605, *SEG* 1.485, 20.333); Syria, unclear (*IGLS* II 394, *SEG* 1.515, 1.519).

25. Zeev Weiss, "The Mosaics of the Nile Festival Building at Sepphoris and the Legacy of the Antiochene Tradition," in *Between Judaism and Christianity: Art Historical Essays in Honor of Elisheva (Elisabeth) Revel-Neber*, ed. Katrin Kogman-Appel and Mati Meyer (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 9–23, esp. 12.

26. *IGLS* XXI.4.104, cited in Bukharin, "Greeks on Socotra," 535–36.

In fact, we can say something about what that next word might be because, as Bukharin pointed out in a 2012 article, the editio princeps itself is incomplete. As shown by Bukharin, the plaster actually reads

[Εἰ]ς θεὸς ὁ βοαθὸν Κοσ[μα?]
 [κ]αὶ ὁ ἅγιος τόπος τοῦ Ἰ[ησοῦ?]
 [σ]υνοδία γίνη μοι ἡ - - - - -
 [π]λοτὰ ἦν δια - - γητ² - -
 [ἔ]ργα καὶ π[ράγ]μ[ατα - - - - -

O, only God, helping Kosmas,
 And the holy place of J[esus (?)]
 Let you guide me in my way, [. . . the
 Sea?] was navigable through . . .
 Interests and (state) affairs . . .²⁷

Two things will be immediately apparent. First, the initial transcription is missing at least two important letters: what appears to be an iota in line 2, and a pi in line 5. In his transcription, Vinogradov supplies vertical lines here instead of transcribing letters; he apparently intended these vertical lines to identify meaningless markings on the plaster, but in fact the markings only serve to baffle readers familiar with the Leiden conventions, who are disposed to interpret these symbols in their traditional use: indicating line breaks. We have yet to divine what Vinogradov meant, other than to attempt to depict letter traces on the plaster that he could not confidently identify.

The stroke at the end of line 2 that Bukharin identified as an iota appears after a small space. Bukharin suggested that the stroke is the first letter of a word in the genitive, as indicated by the preceding definite article τοῦ.²⁸ The word would seem to clarify for or to whom this is a “holy place.” The lower half of the letter is clearly visible both in the line drawing of the inscription as well as in the published photograph (Figure 1). In fact, while the Vinogradov transcription offers one vertical line, which Bukharin

27. Bukharin, “Greeks on Socotra,” 531.

28. We say *apparent* because only half of the letter is visible. Bukharin chose to transcribe an iota here; we would prefer to transcribe it with a dot, indicating that the reading is uncertain.

transcribed as an iota, there are actually two descenders visible on the plaster. This can be interpreted in one of two ways: either the scribe responsible for this inscription made a mistake, carving two lines when they meant to inscribe only one (this is possible, but this type of mistake is unattested elsewhere on the plaster) or the second line is part of a second character inscribed close to the first. In this latter case, which we deem significantly more probable, we have to decide what character that second letter most likely represents. The list of candidates is short, but the iota-eta directly below shows that it is at least possible that the first two letters of this genitive noun are none other than IH. On this reconstruction, the translation of line 2 should be rendered as “and the holy place of Je[sus],” strongly suggesting that the inscriber, and perhaps the space itself, were Christian.²⁹ Price rejects this suggestion on the grounds that “there was not much space left after those letters for a full name.”³⁰ The logical issue with this suggestion is clear: we have no reason to think that the inscriber kept to a single, justified right margin. Rather, this is a fragment, found broken and initially comprising a small part of a wall that included numerous other graffiti. If this were a stone with clear edges, we might be able to say with Price that there “was not much space left” for a full name, but there are no physical margins to speak of on this fragment.

There is another feasible interpretation of line 2. It is possible that the additional line just before the break on line 2 is the descender of a tau, which is simply missing its upper hasta because of the break, rendering the reading [Κ]αὶ ὁ ἅγιος τόπος τοῦτ[ος]. While they did not include this proposal in their transcription, Sedov and Vinogradov apparently opted for it, given their translation of the line as “and this Holy place is . . .”. Price recently proposed this reading of the inscription explicitly and then defended his, Vinogradov and Sedov’s, and Bowersock’s understanding of the text.³¹ There are two problems with the proposal. First, the reading requires that a space was intentionally left blank in the middle of the word τοῦτος. In other words, on this reconstruction, the transcription should read τοῦ <vac. ι> τ[ος]. It is true that the proposed reading of τοῦ Ἰ[ησοῦ²] presents a similar problem, but

29. It must be noted, however, that despite the prevalence of ἅγιος τόπος, no other inscriptions known to us render it in genitive construction with Jesus, though one inscription does refer to “the holy place of the apostles” and another to “Lord Jesus Christ and the holy place.” The former is *IGLS* XXI.2.141, the latter is *I.Syringes* 522.

30. Price, “Ἡμιyarites at Beth She’arim,” 136.

31. Price, 136.

the latter suggestion at least does not propose a purposeful *vacat* in the middle of a word. On Bukharin's reconstruction, the space sets off *Jesus*, rather than splitting the middle of a word. The second issue with this interpretation we addressed above: there are two descenders visible at the end of line 2, not just one. Again, in the transcription of the editio princeps and in Price's reading, we must understand the second descender visible on the plaster to be a scribal error. To be perfectly clear, the proposal implied by the Sedov and Vinogradov translation, and offered explicitly by Price, is that the end of line 2 has a *vacat* in the middle of a word, a tau with a broken upper hasta, and an error in which the inscriber carved a meaningless vertical line instead of an omicron. It is *possible* that the inscriber wrote an iota or some similar letter while intending an omicron, but such dramatically different letters seem difficult to mix up, to say the least. On the whole, the proposed reading "and this holy place" strains credulity. Alternatively, on Bukharin's proposed transcription, the two lines preceding the break in line 2 are meaningful and intentional: they are letters, like the rest of the lines on the fragment.

The second issue with the transcription of the editio princeps is this: the two lines at the middle of line 5, after *καὶ*, are almost certainly the two descenders of a *Π*, rather than two meaningless vertical lines, per the Vinogradov and Sedov transcription repeated by Bowersock and Price. The phrase thereby made possible, ἔργα καὶ πράγματα ("works and doings"), is attested in literary sources and makes sense in the context of this particular inscription; the inscriber appears to be enlisting the deity's help in assuring the safety of a ship and connected caravan (συνοδία).³² Not recognizing this extra letter on the plaster, and in light of what he views as the peculiarly Jewish nature of the inscription's stock phrases, Bowersock suggests a different understanding of the word συνοδία in line 3. Rather than understanding the lemma in its typical use, as a reference to a caravan or a company that travels together, Bowersock suggests that here it is used as another form of the word for religious association: σύνδοδος. It is true that σύνδοδος appears on a number of synagogue inscriptions, but in this context devoid of any other particularly Jewish usages, the attestation itself is not reason enough to understand it as referring to a synagogue.

Lastly, Bowersock's attempt to reinterpret συνοδία as referring to a religious community ignores the way that the term θεὸς ὁ βοηθῶν is used in

32. Bukharin, "Greeks on Socotra," 532–33.

parallel inscriptions and overlooks the context of this fragment. The expression generally is used to request aid, rather than as an unalloyed term of praise. Further, it appears here in an unidentified space, on the shore of the Red Sea, and refers to a ship, and apparently also to ἔργα καὶ πράγματα—“works and doings,” one must assume those of the aforementioned συνοδία. There is thus no reason to interpret the word as anything other than its typical meaning: “a caravan.”³³ The supposition is strengthened when one remembers that throughout its history, Qanī’ was a major trading port.³⁴

The archaeological context of the inscription, along with the formulae used, are tantalizing but inconclusive. If one *were* to base a finding solely on those two fact patterns, one must conclude that this inscription appears to be composed by a merchant asking protection for their company and ship. Bukharin suggests that this site may have been a *caravanserai*, and this possibility cannot be ruled out. Other inscriptions mentioning caravans from Ḥaḍramawt have also been discovered.³⁵ Churches, as well, appear in the literary record connected to caravans; it would be hardly surprising to learn that such sources reflect a practice on the ground. Perhaps this inscription was originally scratched into the wall of a simple traveler’s lodging with no religious affiliation, or perhaps this compound included a Christian ritual space along with quarters for weary traders far from home, as we see for instance at Nisibis.³⁶ Price puzzlingly suggested that this space could not have been a *caravanserai* in Phase One because “a synagogue would probably not have been built on such a profane structure.”³⁷ The suggestion is confusing because the identification of Phase Three as a synagogue is based largely on

33. Christian Robin, “Quel judaïsme en Arabie?” in Robin, *Le judaïsme de l’Arabie antique*, 15–295, 67, suggests that its location on the outskirts of the city supports the notion that it serviced merchants, though the argument is not entirely clear to us. On the use of Greek suggesting a visitor rather than a native, see Patrich, “Ancient Jewish Synagogue,” 104.

34. For evidence relating to trade at Qanī’, see Mouton et al., “New Map of Qāni’.” More generally, see George Hatke and Ronald Ruzicka, eds., *South Arabian Long-Distance Trade in Antiquity: Out of Arabia* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021).

35. Bukharin, “Greeks on Socotra,” 536; Christian Robin, “La caravane yéménite et syrienne dans une inscription de l’Arabie méridionale antique,” in *L’Orient au coeur, en l’honneur d’André Miquel*, ed. Floréal Sanagustin (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 2001), 206–17.

36. Adam Becker, *Sources for the Study of the School of Nisibis* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 65. For Jewish and Christian communities arising on trade routes, see Nathanael Andrade, *The Journey of Christianity to India in Late Antiquity: Networks and the Movement of Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), and Parvaneh Pourshariati, “New Vistas on the History of Iranian Jewry in Late Antiquity, Part I: Patterns of Jewish Settlement in Iran,” in *The Jews of Iran*, ed. Houman Sarshar (London: I. B. Tauris, 2014), 1–32.

37. Price, “Ḥimyarites at Beth She’arim,” 137.

the identification of the space as a synagogue in Phase Two—the cart has found its way before the horse, here—and also because Price doubts that a synagogue would be built on a “profane structure” like a *caravanserai*, but admits that the synagogue in Phase Three may have been built on top of a church.³⁸ It is hard to accept Price’s notion that a community of Jews would bristle at building a communal space over a hostel, but not over a church. In the end, there is no reason whatsoever to read this one inscription against the grain by suggesting that it presents a request for the aid of an association of Jews, for which this space served as their ritual and communal center.

4. THE SCHOLARLY RECEPTION OF A TENUOUS CLAIM

Despite these problems, the identification of the site as a synagogue was widely accepted following Bowersock’s article—even by Bukharin, one of the only scholars to seriously question earlier interpretations of the inscription. The excavator’s final report on Qanī was published in 2010, and it included a reprint of Bowersock’s original article. While Sedov originally identified the building as a church, he now both accepts Bowersock’s conclusion and uses it to interpret the architecture and material discovered in the building. Sedov’s final report on the building even incorporates the interpretation into its title: “Les fouilles du secteur 3: La synagogue.”³⁹

Moreover, the identification of the synagogue served as the lens through which the excavators reinterpreted small finds from the area around the “synagogue” room. Recall that the building in question had three phases: an initial basalt pediment, which yielded significant numismatic material but little else datable (Phase One); an “earlier building” constructed in fine ashlar, dated to the third to fourth century, in which the inscription was discovered (Phase Two); and a “later building” of roughly hewn stones bound with mortar, dating to the fifth or sixth century (Phase Three). Despite the three phases suggested by stratigraphic evidence, the excavators only discuss the latter two—the “earlier” and “later buildings.” And, despite a lack of

38. “Although it is just possible, of course, that in the wave of conversion to Judaism in the late 4th century, an early church was destroyed and transformed into a synagogue” (Price, “Ḥimyarites at Beth She’arim,” 137).

39. Sedov, “Les fouilles du secteur 3,” esp. 120–22, and earlier A. V. Sedov, *Temples of Ancient Ḥ adramawt* (Pisa: Pisa University Press, 2005), 165–71. None of the other chapters of the excavation report carry interpretations in their titles. They are simply “Les fouilles dans la partie sud-ouest du site, Le secteur 1” (11–64), “Les fouilles du secteur 4” (123–48), or “Les fouilles de la nécropole” (283–92), for instance.

positive evidence for continuous occupation, the inscription that had been used to identify the function of the earlier building as a synagogue came to hold the weight of the identification of the later building, as well.

The identification of Phase Two as a synagogue led the excavators to conjecturally amend the floorplan. For instance, Sedov suggests that Phase Two may have contained a niche at its center, despite the fact that blocks from the area in question were spoliated and the center of the building from Phase Two does not remain.⁴⁰ Sedov similarly reinterpreted the later building (Phase Three) through the prism of Bowersock's identification. Room 5 had a wall facing Jerusalem, which was identified as the "holy of holies," marking the direction of prayer toward Jerusalem and storing the Torah scrolls.⁴¹ To be clear, no parallel exists from Late Antiquity for this kind of synagogue architecture; Sedov appears to have imposed his understanding of the Jerusalem Temple's architecture on late ancient synagogues. Joseph Patrich, a scholar of late ancient synagogue architecture who reviewed Sedov's report, rightly notes that the small room appears more like a compartment than a site designated for prayer.⁴²

The identification of the building as a synagogue further drove Sedov to reinterpret the small finds from both phases in the final report, making the evidence say what the excavators already knew it to mean. Thus, Sedov suggests that a fragmentary graffito from Phase Two "could represent—with a little imagination—the façade of a temple."⁴³ In Phase Three, the team discovered an incense burner, a burnt box, two stone altars, a handful of small bronze cylinders, and a depression in rooms 3 and 4 that may have held a water basin. In the final report, all of these items are forcibly interpreted as the remnants of a synagogue. The burnt box is said to have housed Torah scrolls, and the bronze cylinders passed off as the remains of a menorah. Even elements unparalleled in any other synagogue are treated as representative of a Jewish space: a room within a room is the "holy of holies," a water basin is the sign of a Jewish community uniquely committed to purification, and incense shovels the first sign of the active use of incense in Jewish ritual space in Late Antiquity.⁴⁴ Jews in different locales may well have devised different rituals and erected divergent spaces for their community. But to suggest that

40. Sedov, "Les fouilles du secteur 3," 88.

41. Sedov, "Les fouilles du secteur 3," 122.

42. Patrich, "Review of J.-F. Salles et A. V. Sedov, *Qāni*," 245.

43. Sedov, "Les fouilles du secteur 3," 88. Our translation.

44. On the basin, see Sedov, "Les fouilles du secteur 3," 104.

these utterly unprecedented features are evidence for a new type of synagogue is both unfalsifiable and an extreme form of special pleading.

Finally, while the layouts of the building in its second and third phases are entirely different, in the estimation of the excavators, the fact that some walls are oriented from northwest to southeast—that is, “oriented toward Jerusalem”—further underscore the synagogue identification. It is important to note that the orientation of a wall is both formally indeterminate (which way does a wall “face?”), and often, it is utterly random. The *cella* of the Temple of Concord in Rome, too, is oriented toward Jerusalem.

Neither the architecture nor the small finds allow us to make a plausible identification of this space. To illustrate this point, we note that every piece that has been suggested as pertaining to the function of the space as a synagogue in Phase Three has clear parallels in late ancient Christian spaces. For instance, although incense shovels appear from time to time in synagogue art, the use of incense in ancient synagogues is, uncommon at best, to the extent that it existed at all.⁴⁵ Incense did become increasingly popular in Christian ritual spaces over the course of Late Antiquity, on the other hand.⁴⁶ While very few bronze menorahs have been discovered, bronze cylinders could be part of any type of candelabrum, which were common throughout homes and churches in Late Antiquity.⁴⁷ A prominent water basin is more obviously related to well-attested late ancient Christian rituals, but again, one can imagine any number of reasons that a building abutting a desert in a saltwater port might benefit from easy access to fresh water. While it is true that a handful of late antique synagogues had basins, these features are primarily attested in synagogue atriums, not in the buildings themselves, as we see at

45. Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 234 and 306.

46. On incense shovels in Jewish Late Antiquity, see Leonard Victor Rutgers, “Incense Shovels at Sepphoris?” in *Galilee through the Centuries: Confluence of Cultures*, ed. Eric M. Meyers (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 177–98. On incense in Christian ritual spaces, see Béatrice Caseau, “Incense and Fragrances: From House to Church. A Study of the Introduction of Incense in the Early Byzantine Christian Churches,” in *Material Culture and Well-Being in Byzantium (400–1453): Proceedings of the International Conference (Cambridge, 8–10 September 2001)*, ed. Michael Grünbart, Ewald Kislinger, and Anna Muthesius (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2007), 75–91.

47. Lee I. Levine, “Synagogues,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, ed. Ephraim Stern, Ayelet Lewinson-Gilboa, and J. Aviram, vol. 4 (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1993), 1421–24, 1423; Steven Fine and Leonard V. Rutgers, “New Light on Judaism in Asia Minor during Late Antiquity: Two Recently Identified Inscribed Menorahs,” *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 3 (1996): 1–23.

Qanī'.⁴⁸ It should go without saying—but perhaps does not—that a burnt box lacking any evidence of scrolls could have been used to store any object.

Commenting on the report, Joseph Patrich was forced to conclude that Sedov's "room of ablution," along with the other details described above, indicate that "we have here a unique type of a synagogue, unknown in contemporary provinces of Palaestina, or in the western Diaspora."⁴⁹ Yet, again, such a room could fit well within church architecture, which regularly included rooms of ablution with basins sunk into the ground, though in churches these are often referred to as baptistries.⁵⁰ Though the excavators suggested that the later building's architectural layout was consistent with Byzantine basilica-style synagogues, Patrich rightly rejected this out of hand, arguing that the building style "is unknown from any of the synagogues in the Land of Israel or in the Mediterranean Jewish diaspora." Even this, however, did not stop Patrich from accepting Bowersock's identification of the space as a synagogue.⁵¹ Other historians and epigraphers continue to accept the identification of the site as a synagogue.⁵² In the end, however, neither architecture nor small finds suggest the identification of Phase Three as a synagogue.⁵³ The only way to sustain such a forced reading of the materials

48. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue*, 146. For a South Arabian inscription referring to basins in a ritual context, see YM 14556 = CSAI I, 114.

49. Patrich, "J.-F. Salles et A.V. Sedov, *Qāni'*," 245.

50. See, for instance, Michael Peppard, "The Photisterion in Late Antiquity: Reconsidering Terminology for Sites and Rites of Initiation," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 71 (2020): 463–83.

51. Joseph Patrich, "An Ancient Jewish Synagogue in the Port City of Qāni' in Yemen" (Hebrew), *Qadmoniot: A Journal for the Antiquities of Eretz-Israel and Bible Lands* 142 (2011): 105–6. In fact, Seth Schwartz argued that synagogues were crafted in response to the churches. See Seth Schwartz, *Imperialism and Jewish Society: 200 B.C.E. to 640 C.E.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 215–39.

52. Price, "Himyarites at Beth She'arim"; Paul A. Yule and Katharina Galor, "Zafār, Watershed of Late Pre-Islamic Culture," in Robin, *Le Judaïsme de l'Arabie antique*, 388; Pierluigi Piovaneli, "Jewish Christianity in Late Antique Aksum and Himyar? A Reassessment of the Evidence and a New Proposal," *Judaïsme ancien—Ancient Judaism* 6 (2018): 175–202, 192; Grasso, "Late Antique Kingdom's Conversion."

53. Robin, "Introduction," 9, says the identification of the space as a synagogue is "fragile" but on 67–68 says that the later building is consonant with a synagogue, mainly due to its orientation. He acknowledges that the thesis rests entirely on the inscription from the earlier building, which, it must be noted, had a different orientation (Sedov, "Les fouilles du secteur 3," 87). See also Christian Robin, "The Judaism of the Ancient Kingdom of Himyar in Arabia: A Discrete Conversion," in *Diversity and Rabbiniization: Jewish Texts and Societies Between 400 and 1,000 CE*, ed. Gavin McDowell, Ron Naiweld, and Daniel Stökl Ben Ezra (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2021), 165–270, esp. 196, who says: "The hypothesis suggesting that a building in Qanī' is a synagogue rests on meager evidence that does not appear to be decisive," though he offers as evidence only his own discussion, which we cite immediately above. Frantsouzoff also questions the identification but

is if one is already convinced of the identification of Phase Two as a synagogue. Even then, there must be a continuity of function between the two radically different architectural phases. This is a point that is assumed but not argued by any commentator on the Qanī “synagogue” materials. Sedov and Vinogradov, Bowersock, Patrich, and Price have not offered any arguments for thinking that the function of the space in Phase Two and Phase Three are related in any way, or that there was continuous occupation of the site. The proposed dates of the phases—third or fourth century for Phase Two, fifth or sixth for Phase Three—leave open the very real possibility that the space lay fallow and unused for a period of a hundred years or more. If we are to take seriously the identification of one phase in the identification of another, a plausible case for continuity must be made. Thus far, it has only been assumed.

5. THE LITERARY EVIDENCE FOR JEWS IN ḤAḌRAMAWT: RECONSIDERATIONS

If this site was a synagogue—in either of its phases—its import is clear: it would represent the earliest material evidence of Jews in Ḥaḍramawt, and the earliest archaeological evidence for a synagogue anywhere in South Arabia. Bowersock argues, however, that there was already overwhelming evidence for Jews in fourth-century Ḥaḍramawt such that “the history of the Ḥaḍramawt at this time provides a far better background of the Jewish interpretation of the new Greek text than for the Christian one.”⁵⁴ Yet this bold claim rests on two sources, both of dubious historical value. Bowersock mentions Philostorgius’s report that the missionary Theophilus of India arrived in Ḥaḍramawt in the late fourth century, attempting to proselytize the ruler of the Sabaeans. Philostorgius reports that Theophilus was impeded by Jews, at first. “The Jews opposed [the embassy], and persuaded the barbarian not to be ready to admit such a stranger into his realm or to make innovations in religion unless Theophilus first worked some sign, and only then allow him to enter the city, as is their wont as unbelievers to demand frequent signs.”⁵⁵ It is difficult to accept this source as reliable evidence for the presence of Jews

primarily on the grounds that the name Kosmas is not Jewish but Greek/Christian. Needless to say, this is not a particularly strong objection. Serge A. Frantsouzzoff, review of *Qānī. Le port antique du Ḥaḍramawt entre la Méditerranée l’Afrique et l’Inde*, *Syria* 89 (2012): 462–64.

54. Bowersock, “New Greek Inscription,” 6.

55. *Martyrium Arethae* 2, translation from *Philostorgius: Church History*, trans. Philip R. Amidon (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 42.

in South Arabia in the fourth century.⁵⁶ First, we must remember that the text commonly understood as that of Philostorgius is not, in fact, Philostorgius's fourth-century *Ecclesiastical History*. Rather, it is a scholarly corpus comprising Photius's ninth-century epitome of the text, along with a set of presumed extracts from Philostorgius embedded in the *Passion of Artemius*, the *Martyrdom of Arethas*, and other late ancient and medieval materials. Bowersock found this particular piece of evidence for the fourth-century Jewish community at Ḥaḍramawt in Simeon Metaphrastes's tenth-century *Martyrdom of Arethas*.⁵⁷

Further, despite its brevity, this (possible) extract of Philostorgius is riddled with typical literary topoi: the successful missionary in the pagan east and the unsuccessful interference of the erstwhile enemies of the Christians, the Jews. As is to be expected, Jewish opposition is quelled by the successful miracles performed by the saint, and the source itself even suggests that Jewish skepticism was part of their "wont as unbelievers."⁵⁸ One might contend that, although Philostorgius undoubtedly uses literary topoi typical of Christian missionary stories, he nevertheless drew from general knowledge of the presence of Jews in South Arabia. Is there other evidence to support this reading of Philostorgius, as extracted by the *Martyrdom of Arethas*?

To shore up the evidence, Bowersock cites another tenth-century source. He draws on a comment from the medieval author al-Mas'ūdī (d. 965 CE) that pertains to the late sixth century, when Abraha's son Masrūq, the ruler appointed by the Aksumite powers, allegedly ruled Yemen tyrannically. When Masrūq's cousin beseeches the Roman emperor to intervene, he replies: "You are Jews, and the Ethiopians are Christians. It is not possible in our religion to help the opponents against those who believe as we do."⁵⁹ For the sake of argument, if we assume that this source is historically accurate, we must conclude that it reflects the consequence of the conflict in the early sixth century between the Jewish rulers of Ḥimyar and the Christian

56. Astonishingly, not only does Bukharin find Philostorgius's report to be strong evidence for the presence of Jews and accept the basic historicity of Theophilus's mission, but he also argues that one of the three churches he built was none other than that in Qanī'. See M. D. Bukharin, "The Apostolic Mission of Theophilus in India" (Russian), *Vestnik drevnei istorii* 3 (2011): 174–90.

57. To be sure, Bowersock is hardly alone in accepting the "Philostorgius" report of this episode at face value. See similarly Iwona Gajda, "Remarks on Monotheism in Ancient South Arabia," in *Islam and Its Past: Jahaliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qur'an*, ed. Carol Bakhos and Michael Cook (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 250.

58. *Martyrium Arethae* 2 (Amidon, *Philostorgius*).

59. Bowersock, "New Greek Inscription," 6.

Aksumites that brought Abraha, Masrūq's father, to power. Yet, inexplicably, Bowersock concludes from this evidence: "The date of this response seems to be in the sixth century, but the episode recounted here may reflect diplomacy in the fourth."⁶⁰ Bowersock offers neither evidence nor argumentation to support his claim: we have quoted it here in its entirety. There is simply no reason to assume that contextually specific events of the sixth century are reflective of the general climate of Ḥaḍramawt two centuries earlier. The fact that the ultimate source for this comment dates to the tenth century requires further scrutiny.

Finally, Bowersock mentions the alleged fifth-century conversion of the Ḥimyarite ruler Abū Karīb to Judaism, along with many of his subjects. In this story, reported in a number of Arabic sources, two Jewish sages traveled to Yemen and introduced Judaism to Abū Karīb. This story is at the very least "semi-legendary," as Michael Lecker delicately put it.⁶¹ But even if it does bear verisimilitude to historical events, it would reflect a situation in which Judaism was introduced *after* the construction of the Qanī building and the creation of the inscription, not the context for its founding.⁶²

To be sure, it is undeniable that there were Jews in Yemen by the fourth and fifth centuries of the Common Era. This is clear even without the typical appeals to the political history of Yemen and the place of Judaism within it. Their presence there is indicated by a number of inscriptions, including one from the fourth or fifth century referring to "Homerites" in the famous Jewish necropolis in Beth Shearim, as well as by a series of undated Ḥimyarite inscriptions typically dated sometime between the late fourth and early sixth centuries.⁶³ There is also evidence that Jews engaged in trade in and around the Persian Gulf.⁶⁴ However, there is nothing to suggest that Yemen was widely populated by Jews, as Bowersock alleged. Outside of the framework of Big Bang origin stories, it is rather straightforward to imagine many communities—Jewish, Christian, and others—living in sites like Qanī and

60. Bowersock, 6.

61. Michael Lecker, "The Conversion of Ḥimyar to Judaism and the Jewish Banū Ḥadl of Medina," *Die Welt des Orients* 26 (1995): 129–36, 135.

62. Lecker, "Conversion of Ḥimyar," 129–36. For a more recent, and thoroughly positivist, take on the so-called reform of Abū Karīb, see Christian Robin, "Ḥimyar et Israël," *Comptes rendus des séances de l'Académie des inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* 148 (2004): 831–908.

63. For Beth Shearim, see Robin, "Ḥimyar et Israël," 836–41, and more recently, Price, "Ḥimyarites at Beth She'arim." For a review of evidence of Jews in Ḥimyar, see Robin, "Ḥimyar et Israël," 832–44, as well as Robin, "Le judaïsme de Ḥimyar," *Arabia* 1 (2003): 97–172.

64. Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, Book 7.

elsewhere throughout Yemen at this time.⁶⁵ The Jews of Qanī' simply did not leave any convincing archaeological or epigraphic evidence.

6. CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, it is worth contemplating why the shaky identification of the building as a synagogue was widely accepted, even by those scholars who otherwise questioned core aspects of it. For Bowersock, the synagogue and early presence of Jews in the region are significant not simply as a matter of antiquarian interest; they serve as essential background for his interpretation of the overlapping hostilities between local regional powers of Aksum in modern Ethiopia and Ḥimyar in modern Yemen, of the Christian and Jewish religions, and of the dueling Roman and Persian superpowers that would explode in the conflagration of the early sixth century—that is the central thesis of his *Throne of Adulis*.⁶⁶ The presence of a synagogue in the fourth century would suggest an already robust and self-assured Jewish presence in the region. The report of Jewish interference in Theophilus's mission exposes the current of religious hostility that was already pulsing in the region. Jewish access to the local ruling powers is already evidenced by Abū Karīb's conversion to Judaism. And the report in a medieval Arabic source of the Roman Emperor's rejection of a petition from the king of Yemen in the late sixth century on the grounds that "you are Jews, and the Ethiopians are Christians" is taken as indicative of the Roman attitude toward the region already in the fourth century.⁶⁷ While this is not the place to assess Bowersock's thesis about the sixth century, the synagogue provided one piece in a puzzle of evidence to contend that the conflict was not just a local and predictable dispute between competing powers but rather a deep-seated conflict finally coming to a head.⁶⁸

For others, Bowersock's identification of "the Qanī' synagogue" coupled with the evidence of a Jewish necropolis at Ḥaṣī points to not only a Jewish

65. On the rejection of origin stories for the explanation of the spread of Christianity, and its relationship to Judaism, see Simcha Gross, "A Long Overdue Farewell: Retiring the Purported Jewish Origins of Syriac Christianity," in *Jews and Syriac Christians: Intersections across the First Millennium*, ed. Aaron Michael Butts and Simcha Gross (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2020), 121–44.

66. Bowersock, *The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 79–80.

67. Bowersock, "New Greek Inscription," 6.

68. For a more local and regional understanding of the conflict, see George Hatke, "Africans in Arabia Felix: Aksumite Relations with Ḥimyar in the Sixth Century C.E." (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2011).

presence in Arabia but also “unity and continuity within the Jewish settlement of Yemen” over centuries and across geographical regions.⁶⁹ This romanticized description of unified and continuous Jewish practice, however, does not hold for *any* large geographical area in Late Antiquity. Some have even used the description of Yemeni-Jewish customs by a twentieth-century Yemeni rabbinic authority to interpret anomalous features of the “synagogue,” such as the prominently positioned water basin.⁷⁰ This example, in particular, evokes the incautious manner in which earlier generations of scholars often used modern anthropological studies of customs and rituals to interpret ancient evidence from the “same” communities, invoking more or less explicitly Orientalist models of the East “as a kind of ideal and unchanging abstraction.”⁷¹

There is a troubling resilience to the hypothesis that itself deserves examination. It is difficult to understand the wholehearted acceptance of Bowersock’s thesis by the original excavator and epigrapher. Similarly, it is mystifying that Bukharin’s incisive challenges to Bowersock’s interpretation of the inscription went largely unnoticed, and also that Bukharin himself accepts the identification of the final phase of the building as a synagogue despite having removed the very foundations upon which the identification rested. Patrich applied his significant expertise to undermine core architectural arguments made by the excavators to assimilate the site with Jewish synagogues from Late Antiquity, and yet he, too, ultimately accepts the identification as a synagogue—just one with no architectural precedent. For far too many scholars, the allure of a fourth-century Yemenite synagogue has proven beguiling.

There is no reliable evidence to suggest that the buildings in Area 3 at Qanī’ were ever used as a synagogue, and the evidence available simply is insufficient to make a determination regarding the ancient function of the space. While this is a difficult truth for historians to hear, it does not obviate the fact that the grand edifice of claims with which this article began is built

69. Joseph Tobi, “The Jews of Yemen in Light of the Excavation of the Jewish Synagogue in Qanī’,” 353–54. Tobi’s claim on p. 353 that the term *mikrab* in Old South Arabian inscriptions also refers to synagogues has simply not been proven yet; see A. J. Drewes, “The Meaning of Sabean mkrb, Facts and Fiction,” *Semitica* 51 (2001): 93–125; and Robin, “Quel judaïsme en Arabie,” 122–28. The inscription suggesting a Jewish necropolis at Ḥaṣī is MAFRAY-Ḥaṣī I.

70. Patrich, “Ancient Jewish Synagogue,” 106, citing Joseph Kapich, *Yosef Kafah, Halikhot Teman: Ḥaye Ha-Yehudim Be-Tsan’a U-venoteha* (Hebrew) (Yad Ben Zvi: Jerusalem, 2002), 98.

71. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge, 1978), 16.

on a foundation of brittle, crumbling plaster. The writing of history necessarily involves fragmentary data and educated guesses. But, there simply must be a threshold of uncertainty at which we admit that we cannot answer all the questions that we pose. In such cases, it is irresponsible to do more, no matter how attractive the story. ■