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Roland de Vaux at the 'Synagogue
Church' in Nazareth, Israel*

Article

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A report on the unpublished excavation by Roland de Vaux at the 'Synagogue Church' in Nazareth, Israel

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Introduction

This brief report publishes for the first time the only excavation known to have taken place at the 'Synagogue Church' in Nazareth, Israel. This excavation was undertaken in 1945 by Roland de Vaux (1903-1971), a Dominican based at – and ultimately director of – the École Biblique in Jerusalem, who is best known as the first excavator (in 1951-56) of Qumran.

A synagogue at Nazareth is mentioned in the New Testament (Luke 4:16-30), and pilgrims from Egeria in the late fourth century onward refer to a church (known as 'the Synagogue Church') on what was said to be the same site. However, it is not until James of Verona, in the early fourteenth century, that the whereabouts of this church is indicated. James says it was 'two stone-throws' to the south of the Church of the Annunciation, which puts the church either in the south of the present Franciscan property around the twentieth-century Church of the Annunciation or beneath modern shops.¹

Francesco Quaresmi, writing in the seventeenth century, says that it was by then dedicated to the Forty Martyrs and was to the north-west of the Church of Saint Joseph on the way to Saint Mary's Well. This may place the 'Synagogue Church' on the other side of central Nazareth to the earlier account, in or near the present *sug*. The building known today as the 'Synagogue Church' today stands in approximately this location, just north-west of the Crusader building reconstructed by the Franciscans and dedicated by them to Saint Joseph. The famous Franciscan archaeologist Bellarmino Bagatti accepted that the synagogue referred to in the New Testament might be on the site of the current 'Synagogue Church', while arguing that the extant building is, at earliest, medieval.²

The present 'Synagogue Church', which stands within the enclosure of the nineteenth-century Melkite (Greek Catholic) church to its east, was acquired by the Franciscans in 1741, who gave it to the Melkites in 1771. It was used regularly as a church until 1882, when the present Melkite church was constructed adjacent to it, and still retains an altar and iconostasis on its north side (fig.1).³ It is regarded as an ecclesiastical building by Christians in Nazareth and regularly visited by both pilgrims and tourists. Denys Pringle, in his magisterial study of the churches of Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem, dates the oldest parts of the structure to the medieval period and allows either an ecclesiastical or secular interpretation for the first phase of the building.⁴

The structure may be described in summary as a roughly built (perhaps deliberately rusticated) mid-grey limestone rectilinear room 12.6m x 6.3m, aligned North-South, with a pointed barrel-vault 6.4m high and paved floor. Its west, north and east sides are obscured by modern buildings. Inside, there are an arched niche (1.9m wide and 1.4m deep) and a 1.4m-wide door in the east wall and a sunken floor (1.7m below present external surface level) reached by steps. There is another – modern – door (with steps) in the south wall, and it is this that is used as the main entrance to the church today. Two broken monolithic mid-grey-brown limestone columns have been set in the present floor next to the entrance, one each side of this door. That to the east of the door is fluted with oval ended relief bands, and has a projecting upper rim. This column may date to the Crusader period but as neither column is certainly from the site they will not be discussed further here.⁵

It is generally believed that the church has never been excavated but, in 2007, one of the authors (Dr Eliya Ribak) found the original, French-language, typescript report of De Vaux's excavation in the Israel Antiquities Authority (hereafter, IAA) archives in Jerusalem (fig.2 and 3). This very brief report had apparently been deposited with the authorities by its author during the period of the British Mandate and thereafter transferred into the IAA archive. So far as we are aware, the copy of the report in the IAA archive is the only information regarding this excavation still existing.

The excavation report

To summarise the French-language text, de Vaux observed that the building does not appear to be of any great antiquity and that the structure is of several phases of construction. The east, west and north walls are probably contemporary and predate the south wall, which is contemporary with the Melkite church. Before the construction of the latter wall, the structure may have extended approximately 6.5m further south.

The excavation was a 1.5m x 1.25m 'test-pit' (a 'sondage' in the terminology of the mid-twentieth century) inside and through the existing floor of the structure. The building's east wall was found to a depth of 90cm below the 1940s paving, whereupon it sat on 15cm-deep foundations. These foundations were found to consist of three courses of quarried stone, separated by beds of chalk on a bedding of large unshaped stones, c.40cm by up to c.50cm, forming its foundation.

Modern pottery sherds were found in the top 90cm of soil and a small Turkish coin dating to 1773/4 was found under the paving at a depth of 50cm, showing the paving to be of late eighteenth-century or later date. The foundation was cut through a black soil with medieval pottery sherds (reported as twelfth to fifteenth century). However, beneath the foundations there was a yellow-brown soil containing fewer sherds. These 'predated the Crusades', perhaps meaning that they were not obviously medieval in appearance.

Interpretation

Although one need not necessarily take the dates assigned by de Vaux to the medieval pottery literally, given the date of his study, he established that the earliest phase of the present church overlies a layer containing medieval material. This indicates at least a post-Byzantine or later date, and, if one credits the broad dating assigned by him, a post-fifteenth century date. The structure was not, therefore, that seen by Late Antique pilgrims to Nazareth, nor is there any reason to suppose that it incorporates any part of an earlier synagogue. The existing building is of several phases, and has been refurbished (and re-floored) in the post-medieval period. This is, of course, consistent with its inclusion in the Melkite church complex in which it currently stands. There is no archaeological reason why the current structure could not be an entirely post-Crusader construction, although predating 1741 when the Franciscans acquired it. Interestingly, although de Vaux's source for this comment is unstated, the report suggests that the present structure is just part of a much larger building, extending 6.5m to the south of extant structure. If so, then this would be an important observation in relation to the interpretation of its primary use.

The discovery of a layer with 'pre-Crusader' (perhaps either Roman-period or Byzantine) pottery beneath that underlying the church walls suggests that this area of the present city was perhaps occupied prior to the existing structure, and the limited scale of the test-pit allows the possibility that one or more undiscovered earlier building(s) could have stood on the site. De Vaux's excavation does not, therefore, resolve the question of whether or not the present 'Synagogue Church' stands on the site of the synagogue in Nazareth mentioned in the New Testament, or of the Late Antique church. Perhaps the most significant clue to the building's original use from de Vaux's work is the possibility that the existing 'Synagogue

Church' was only the northern portion of a larger (perhaps 19.1m x 6.3m) structure.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the Israel Antiquities Authority for allowing us to consult their unpublished archive and to the same organisation for their official permission, given on 4th June 2007, to publish the material in this paper. All of the data concerning de Vaux's excavation in this paper are used courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority, and contained in the Israel Antiquities Authority Archives, British Mandate Record Files file no. 78, Jerusalem General.

Fig. 1: Photograph of the interior of the 'Synagogue Church', Nazareth, looking toward the altar (by Ken Dark, 2005).



Fig.2: Roland de Vaux's previously unpublished plan of the 'Synagogue Church' in Nazareth in 1945, showing the position of his excavation. Courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority, Israel Antiquities Authority Archives, British Mandate Record Files file no. 78, Jerusalem General, reproduced with permission of the IAA.

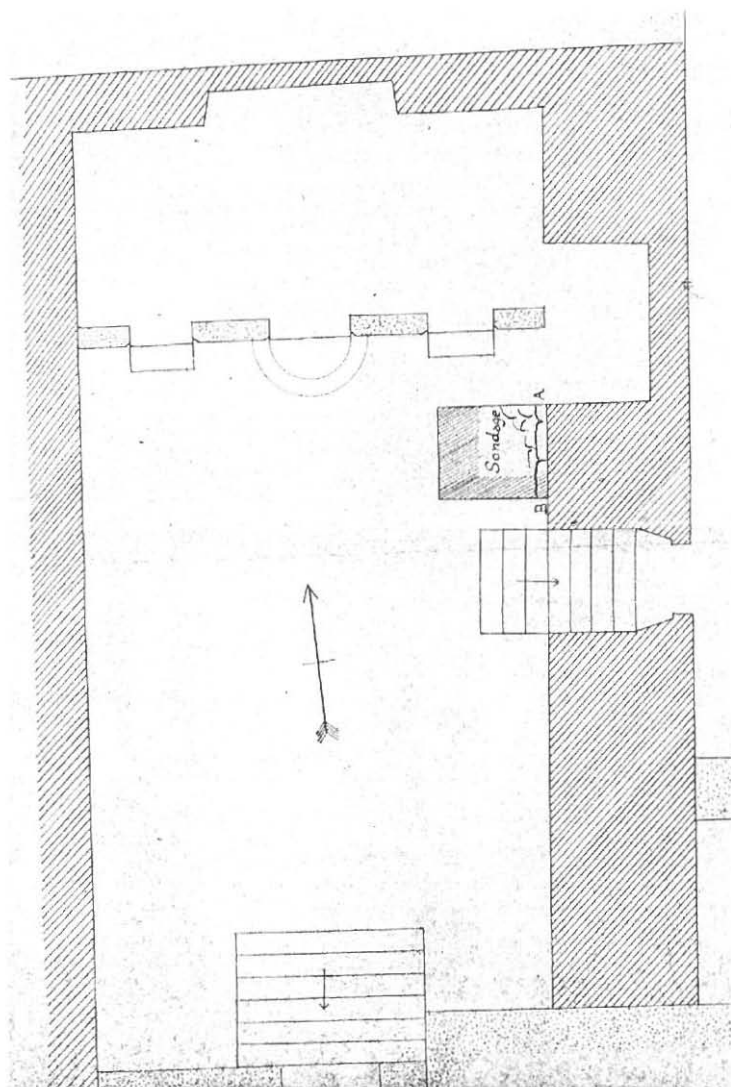


Fig. 3: Roland de Vaux' report on his excavation, followed by a transcription of the document.

RECHERCHES ARCHÉOLOGIQUES SUR LE SANCTUAIRE ARABE

LA "SYNAGOGUE" OU LE "MOSQUEE" CRISTIAN

À NAZARETH.

Rechts.

*Left by hand
with the plan
by P. de Vaux on
26.3.46 -*

P.A. Ruck

Tout ce qui est actuellement apparent ne paraît pas remonter à une grande antiquité. Les murs Est, Ouest et Nord sont les plus anciens. Leur parement intérieur, en pierres taillées mais non exactement appareillées, est visible jusqu'à la naissance de la voûte en berceau brisé, qui est en moellons couverts d'un enduit. Le parement extérieur du mur Est est en grande partie moderne, ainsi que l'entrée; l'angle Nord-Est est plus ancien. L'extérieur du mur Nord est visible dans une boutique adjacente, mais le parement est caché par un enduit; il semble que ce mur ait perdu son parement extérieur de pierres taillées, ce qui expliquerait sa largeur moindre que celle du mur Est. La face extérieure du mur Ouest n'est pas visible la rue qui le longe est à un niveau de plus de 2 m. au dessus du niveau de la "Synagogue" et les boutiques sont construites sur l'épaisseur du mur, en débordant sur la voûte. Il semble que ce mur avait la même largeur que le mur Est (2 m.20).

Le mur méridional est récent; il date de la construction de l'église adjacente, construite en 1884, consacrée en 1887. Avant cette date, la "Synagogue" s'étendait, paraît-il, plus au Sud, d'environ 6 m.50. L'angle Nord-Ouest de l'église actuelle coupe l'angle Sud-Est de la "Synagogue". L'iconostase, construite en pierres, est moderne.

Pour déterminer l'âge des parties les moins récentes, un sondage de 1 m.25 sur 1 m.50 a été fait contre le mur Est. Ce mur descend, sur la même ligne et avec la même construction, à 90 cm. au dessous du pavement actuel. Il est assis sur des fondations qui débordent de 15 cm. Les fondations sont constituées par trois assises de pierres équarries séparées par des lits de cailloux, d'une hauteur totale de 1 m. 10. Le tout repose sur un sous-sol de grosses pierres, tassées irrégulièrement sur 40 cm. de hauteur et débordant de 5 cm. au maximum.

Les premiers 20 cm. sous le pavement actuel sont des débris de cailloux et de terre, avec des tessons de céramique récente. Une petite monnaie turque a été recueillie environ 50 cm. sous le pavé; elle est datée de 1187 H. = 1175/74.

Les fondations plongent dans une couche de terre noire avec peu de cailloux. Les tessons datent cette couche du Moyen-Âge, environ du XIIe au XIVe siècle.

Au bas des fondations, la terre devient jaune brune, et les tessons sont rares et antérieurs à l'époque des Croisades.

Les conclusions que l'on peut tirer de ce sondage restreint paraissent être les suivantes:

- le pavement actuel et le niveau correspondant sont postérieurs à la fin du XVIIIe siècle.
- le mur Est (et les murs Ouest et Nord qui semblent contemporains) a été construit postérieurement à l'accumulation des débris de la couche de terre noire, c'est-à-dire postérieurement à l'époque des Croisades et peut-être aussi tant que le XVIe-XVIIe siècle.
- il n'y a pas de trace en cet endroit de constructions qui datent des Croisades ou qui leur soient antérieures.

Transcription

Note archéologique sur le sanctuaire appelé la « Synagogue » ou « L'École du Christ » à Nazareth.

Tout ce qui est actuellement apparent ne paraît pas remonter à une grande antiquité. Les murs Est, Ouest et Nord sont les plus anciens. Leur parement intérieur, en pierres taillées mais non exactement appareillées, est visible jusqu'à la naissance de la voûte en berceau brisé, qui est en moellons couverts d'un enduit. Le parement extérieur du mur Est est en grande partie moderne, ainsi que l'entrée; l'angle Nord-Est est le plus ancien. L'extérieur du mur Nord est visible dans une boutique adjacente, mais le parement est caché par un enduit; il semble que ce mur ait perdu son parement extérieur de pierres taillées, ce qui expliquerait sa largeur moindre que celle du mur Est. La face extérieure du mur Ouest n'est pas visible. La rue qui le longe est à un niveau de plus de 2 m. au dessus du niveau de la « Synagogue » et les boutiques sont construites sur l'épaisseur du mur, en débordant sur la voûte. Il semble que ce mur avait la même largeur que le mur Est (2 m. 20).

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- Il n'y a pas de trace en cet endroit de constructions qui datent des Croisés ou qui leur soient antérieures.

Jérusalem, 26 mars 1945.

Notes

¹ For pilgrim accounts: J. Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels: Newly Translated with Supporting Documents and Notes*, 3rd ed., Warminster, Aris and Phillips, 1999, p.96. D. Pringle, *The Churches of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem: A Corpus*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988, *Volume II L-Z (excluding Tyre)*, no.172, pp.145-6.

² B. Bagatti (with E. Alliata, trans. R. Bonanno), *Excavations in Nazareth: From the 12th Century until Today*, Jerusalem, Franciscan Printing Press, 2002, 158-9, no. 5. Pringle, no. 172, p.146.

³ G.S.P. Freeman-Grenville, *The Basilica of the Annunciation at Nazareth and Adjacent Shrines*, Jerusalem, Carta, 1994, p.54.

⁴ Pringle, no.172, pp.145-6.

⁵ This description is derived from personal observation by Ken Dark in 2005, supplemented by the description and illustrations in Pringle, no.172, p.147, and the photographs of the interior of the structure and columns on the 'Bible Walks' website:

<http://www.biblewalks.com/Sites/SynagogueChurch.html> (last accessed 07 July 2009).

Pringle says: 'The south wall ...contains a door 1.4m wide and an arched niche 1.9m wide and 1.4 deep,' (p.147) but these features are shown both on de Vaux and Alliata's plans in the east wall. Alliata's plan is reproduced, in the correct orientation, in figure 42 of Pringle (p.146).