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The Murals of the Synagogue at Dura Europos as an Expression of Roman *Koine*

Abstract: The figurative decorations of the synagogue in Dura Europos have aroused questions about their significance and reading strategy. They have been seen as expressions of different Jewish currents in Late Antiquity. In many contributions, detailed analyses are provided, which may be correct as such but tend to leave out the greater context, such as the interplay with the architecture, the connection with the cultural *koine* of the world outside Dura, and the international Jewish community. The question of what the murals represent often overshadows the question of how adequate affects were achieved. In this paper it is argued that an integrated view, that is, a connection of the scenes with the Greco-Roman world of images, does greater justice to the paintings and solves the problem of their isolation as a unique case of religious decoration. Without reflecting a purely theological programme, the decorations match perfectly the room's shape and function, demarcating religious space, and thus enhance the prestige of the Jewish community at large. They constitute sacred *decor*, but at the same time make the synagogue a place of memory, connecting with Roman traditions in public and private decoration that display decorative narratives¹.

'They began to paint pictures on walls [of synagogues] and he did not hinder them'².

Introduction

Upon its discovery in 1932 by Count Robert du Mesnil du Buisson, one of the 'shocking' aspects³ of the Dura Europos synagogue was its mural decoration, which displayed a wide array of biblical scenes, further enriched by 'pagan' motifs on the dado and on the tiles of the ceiling. They seemed to 'unsettle traditional notions central to the ordering of the "Judeo-Christian" tradition' and violate the Second Commandment (Exodus 20.4; Deuteronomy 5.8)⁴.

In the Jewish world especially the decorations have kindled a fierce debate about their meaning. Their heterodox character has been interpreted as a 'conformity to local custom'⁵: Dura Europos was a special locus due to its assumed isolation. Over the course of the 20th century, however, many more figurative monuments (especially mosaics) that contradict the Second Commandment have come to light in synagogues. For this reason, scholars have been eager to find solutions, either by

1 Many thanks are due to the organisers of the Kiel round table, who were so kind as to stimulate me to write this paper. I am very grateful to Lisa R. Brody and Megan Doyon from Yale University Art Gallery in New Haven for generously providing me with excellent photos. Doyon informed me about the old pictures in an email on September 19th, 2019: 'Alas, we don't have any colour images of the synagogue walls overall. The images that we have are from the 1930s excavations, and colour film was too expensive/hard to process in Syria etc. I can only offer you black and white images (...), they were scanned almost 20 years ago, when we had all the negatives on site (currently at another art gallery storage facility).' The director of the Museum am Dom in Trier, Markus Groß-Morgen, was kind enough to provide an image of a model (Fig. 2) of the synagogue. Further important input was offered by Lucinda Dirven, Jan-Willem van Henten, Paul Meyboom and Miguel John Versluys.

2 Avodah Zarah 33, 48d (Palestinian Talmud), words of Rabbi Jochanan. Cited in Kraeling 1956, 344; Gutmann [1973] 1992, XXVIII.

3 Weisman 2012, 4: 'earth-shattering'. According to Archer St. Clair (1986, 109) the paintings 'revolutionised our concept of Jewish art'. For that reason, these Jews were considered heterodox or even 'aberrant' in older publications. Du Mesnil du Buisson published the first full monograph on the synagogue in 1939. On him, see Hopkins 1979, passim.

4 Wharton 1994, 6 f.

5 Matheson 1982, 25; cf. Gutmann 1984, 1328–1330.

observing that the worshippers did not respect the Second Commandment so severely in daily life, or by assuming that the mixing of Jews with Romans and Greeks created a new practice. Clearly among the Jews a practice of making images existed in the 2nd and 3rd centuries A.D.⁶ that continued in later times, including the production of figurative mosaics in synagogues⁷. Some scholars have pointed out that Jewish culture was embedded in the Greco-Roman tradition, in which imagery was a general feature. As stressed by Tonio Hölscher time and again⁸, Greco-Roman society was more of a visual culture than a culture of scripture. The age-long integration of the Jews within that society encouraged them to adopt its customs and practices⁹. Importantly, paintings and mosaics were not the carved images at stake in the Second Commandment. At Dura Europos, the multitude of scenes depicted in the synagogue made them inappropriate for veneration, since it was difficult to concentrate upon a specific scene, given the sheer mass of images¹⁰. Moreover, there was no opportunity to contemplate the images in detail during services, as worshippers sat on benches positioned along the walls, with their backs to the narrative scenes. This internal seating disposition offers further evidence that the images served no cultic function.

Yet the synagogue's Jewish audience had peculiar wishes concerning art, which has caused Uzi Leibner and Catherine Hezser to observe that 'ancient Jewish art can therefore be understood properly only within the context of ancient Jewish history, tradition, and religious practice'¹¹. Lee I. Levine suggests that such art can only be 'Jewish art' if it has a clear connection with the religious environment in which the artistic product functions¹². However, such a statement would equally be true for temples serving similar groups of initiated or *mystai* (such as the *mithraeum*) – it does not mean that the products related to these cults were uniquely Jewish, Christian, or Mithraic in nature. Since specific audiences were composed of more than Jewish believers, including members of the Greek, Aramean, Syrian and Roman communities in addition to many others, they were surely familiar with other forms of religious art in their living spaces. Even if we do not know whether the adherents to different cults visited each other's shrines, or if the shrines were open to outsiders at all (which is not very likely), within the small community of Dura Europos the inhabitants may have had some awareness of the existence of temples or sanctuaries dedicated to different sects; artists working within the spaces, however, would not necessarily have been drawn from the same group¹³. The stylistic correspondence between the murals of contemporary cult rooms betray a reciprocal familiarity and common patronage between Jews and other Durene citizens¹⁴. Maybe Jaś Elsner's conclusion that there existed no Jewish art at all except for iconography might be too radical, but he has made an extremely good point about not excluding Jewish monuments from their contemporary culture¹⁵.

⁶ Leibner – Hezser 2016, 1 f., with bibliography; Talgam 2016, 98 f.; see already Kraeling 1956, 340–346.

⁷ Matheson 1982, 26 f.; Prigent 1990, 1–35; Gutmann [1973] 1992, XXXI–XXXII. For figurative depictions in synagogues, see i.a. Levine 2012; Hachlili 2013, 251–276; Talgam 2016; Leibner – Hezser 2016.

⁸ Most recently Hölscher 2018, 1–13.

⁹ Eristov 2018, 114 f. They were 'ni iconodules, ni iconoclasts,' a point also observed by N. Kaminski-Gdalia in 1995 (quoted in Moormann 2011, 198 no. 35). Still valuable for the characterisation of Durene mural painting is Perkins 1973, 33–69. Ling 2014, 397–399 aptly discusses the paintings as part of Late Antique Roman mural painting. For a recent assessment of Durene art, see also Dirven 2016b, 76–87.

¹⁰ Hachlili 2013, 388 observes that there was 'no sanctity ascribed to a painting'. See also Hachlili 1998, 135–155. 178–182. 193–197; Hachlili 2013, 283 f.

¹¹ Leibner – Hezser 2016, 3. On the *mithraeum* see Dirven 2016a; Gnoli 2016. On decorated *mithraea* see also Moormann 2011, 163–182 (Dura: 179 f.).

¹² Levine 2012, 4–6.

¹³ See Dirven 2016a on possible objections. In a personal communication, Lucinda Dirven has expressed her doubts about my suggestion of relationships between the communities and the artists. Cf. Elsner 2003, 118 f.

¹⁴ See Dirven 2016b, 82–88.

¹⁵ Elsner [2001] 2007, 124 (historiography 119–124). On Jews and the Roman world, see Schwartz 2010.

In this contribution I want to look at these unique decorations as part of a Greco-Roman *koine*, or globalised Roman world¹⁶. I will argue that an isolated, Jewish-centred view of the synagogue's paintings – and of related works of art in synagogues – leads to a dead end, for this approach separates the sanctuary from the socio-cultural environment of the worshippers¹⁷. We observe a familiarity between Jews, Christians and other religious groups with respect to decorative practices within the town, whereas 'pagan' elements in the synagogue, known from other painted shrines as well, form a trait d'union with other citizens' centres of worship. There existed a willingness to cope with these same practices in their own religious centres, in which people from all over the Roman Empire, but especially from the east, came together¹⁸. The questions addressed in this paper focus on the form and function of the various decorations, their intermediality and their connection with the synagogue's architecture¹⁹, rather than the discussion of religious disputations and interpretations of specific scenes from the Torah²⁰. The paintings certainly constituted sacred *decor*, but at the same time served as instruments of historical memory while also forming a connection with the Roman figurative *koine* in both public and private decorative practices. As a figurative set, both the mural decoration and tiles on the ceiling were barely visible in detail, and consequently an overwhelming sense of bewilderment at this rich decoration within a comparatively simple setting dominated. The viewer, whether participating in a liturgical service or strolling like a 'flâneur', could try to focus his view and read specific scenes, however. In domestic contexts, the superposition of figurative scenes often caused individual images to lose their significance, thereby functioning only within the entire decorative scheme. In the synagogue, this multivalent decoration underlined the historical and religious traditions of the Jews within their *beth*, their ritual common house.

A box full of images

When the Sassanians threatened to conquer the garrison town in A.D. 256, destroying part of the western fortification wall, the synagogue was partially preserved within the debris and backfill that covered the adjacent buildings (Fig. 1)²¹. Dura was a multi-cultural community of Roman citizens from all parts of the Empire, especially the east. Citizens lived together with people from other areas who probably had a good existence here²². Commercial and military activities prevailed²³.

The town's synagogue and the Christian church are especially interesting for several reasons. First, because they are the oldest buildings of their kind from which we possess parts of the original,

¹⁶ On this aspect, see Versluys 2015.

¹⁷ Remarks in that direction can be found in Kraeling 1956, 321–363.

¹⁸ See most recently Fine 2011; Stern 2012; Peppard 2016 (on the church, with many references); Sommer 2016, 57–61. 63 (on the synagogue); Talbot 2016; Stern 2019.

¹⁹ See also Haug, this volume.

²⁰ It must be said that study of the material, which is located in the National Archaeological Museum of Damascus, is hampered nowadays by its inaccessibility (cf. Wharton 1994, 5f.). I saw the murals in person in October 1985, and now have to rely on the photographic dossier in Yale. The last *in situ* research on the paintings known to me was conducted by a team from the CNRS in Paris as part of the Mission Franco-Syrienne d'Europos-Doura in 2007. They observed various layers of modern varnishes and traces of deterioration. See Leriche – Coqueugnot 2011, 31 Fig. 1.18; Leriche 2016 (on that work, see Dirven 2019).

²¹ On the discoveries in Dura Europos, see Hopkins [1973] 1992, 11–21; Hopkins 1979 (for the synagogue, 140–177); Matheson 1982; Chi – Heath 2011; Baird 2018 (see also the extensive review by Dirven 2019, 917–922). For older overviews, see Rostovtzeff 1938 and Du Mesnil du Buisson 1939. The basic publication remains Kraeling 1956. See also Gutmann [1973] 1992; Schneid 1976; Prigent 1990; Hachlili 1998, 97–197; additional publications quoted in the following. A good summary of work done until the early 1980s is Gutmann 1984.

²² See most recently Kaizer 2016b; James 2019.

²³ Regarding the military character of Dura Europos, see James 2019.



Fig. 1: Dura Europos, plan. Location of the synagogue indicated by arrow.

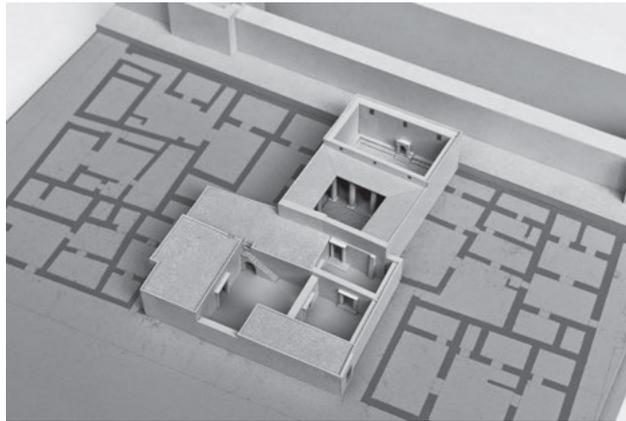


Fig. 2: Model of the synagogue at Dura Europos, produced for the 2007 Constantine exhibition in Trier.

figurative mural decorations, and, second, because the iconographic programmes are considered to be unparalleled. We should not, however, be led astray by the alleged uniqueness of the decorations, for ‘absence of evidence does not necessarily mean that there is evidence of absence’²⁴. Third, these buildings were the ritual centres of specific groups of religious people, all relying on a strong tradition of reading holy texts within a theological context rather than following oral and non-theological traditions, as is the case in other cults that addressed specific groups of believers²⁵.

The synagogue was built in the back part of a private house. There exists a great discrepancy between the exterior of the hall and its interior (Fig. 2): the outside does not give any clue as to the function, content and importance of the space, a feature found in other Durene shrines as well²⁶. The effect of the paintings for the visitor may have been startling: he or she entered a wonderful world of pictorial representations. The room measures 13.65 × 7.68 m and was approximately 7 m high, with two entrances on the east side. The central doorway is positioned almost in front of the main feature, the Torah shrine located in the centre of the west wall; this door served as the

²⁴ Weiss 2016, 127, reacting to the rarity of murals in synagogues.

²⁵ On mysteries, see Bowden 2010; Bremmer 2014.

²⁶ Allara 2002, 31. 38. 47. For an overview of the Dura religious decorations, see Moormann 2011, 189–201.



Fig. 3: Torah niche located in the west wall of the synagogue.

entrance for the male members of the community (Fig. 3). The second door, positioned just to the south, provided access to the women²⁷. Windows were constructed in the upper parts of the long east and west walls, and moveable candelabra probably provided additional light. Low concrete benches were installed along all four walls, accommodating approximately 60 to 65 worshippers. If there was space for standing or additional benches located in the centre of the room, even more people could have attended the services²⁸. Next to the Torah niche a seat, or *bema*, was installed for the leader of the ceremonies²⁹. As in other synagogues³⁰, the niche was directed towards Jerusalem, so that the worshippers prayed towards the lost Temple (Figs. 2–3). This niche might have accommodated the *aron*, or shrine for the Torah, which is represented on top of the niche itself³¹.

The existing arrangement was created c. A.D. 244–245, when an earlier assembly space was replaced. Parts of the older synagogue were found under the walls of the new room. The older building contained two areas for religious activities: a smaller room associated mostly with women, and a larger one located more or less under the later hall. Its decoration, reconstructed on the basis of some remains *in situ*³², consisted of a yellowish dado adorned with diagonal hatches in green and red, imitating *giallo antico*. Parallels of this ‘incrustation style’ have come to light within various complexes in Dura, which confirms Carl Kraeling’s conclusion that the murals found here were ‘entirely conventional and traditional’³³. The paintings follow a fashion of interior decoration

²⁷ According to Steinberg (2006, 473. 481), women sat on the benches along the south wall. Cf. Hachlili 2013, 580.

²⁸ Kraeling 1956, 17. 334 f.; Steinberg 2006, 473. Rosenfeld and Potchebutzky (2009, 205) assume up to 124 people, whereas Weisman (2012, 2) gives a number of more than 120 people. Levine (2012, 99) suggests 60–65 persons for the first phase and doubles that for the second phase. A number of 60–75 persons is assumed for the Christian church (Dirven 2008, 48). The total population of Dura in the 3rd century A.D. numbered between 6,000 to 8,000 people (Levine 2012, 71 no. 23). Gutmann (1984, 1315) has suggested that there were only 65 Jews in Dura Europos.

²⁹ I use the phrase ‘leader of the ceremonies’ in a broad sense, designating the person who could teach and preside over the gatherings. This was not necessarily the rabbi or one of the leaders of the community (Hachlili 1998, 23; Hachlili 2013, 191. 219 f.). For some (e. g., Gutmann 1984, 1328), he was none other than Samuel, known from the ceiling’s texts (*infra* 151). On rabbis see also Schwartz 2010, 110–165.

³⁰ Seager [1973] 1992, 79–116; Branham 1992, 384; Hachlili 1998, 67 f. Since this niche had been there in a previous phase as well (see below), this custom must have already existed in the 2nd century A.D. Prigent 1990, 45 f. connects the custom with the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70. On these niches, see Hachlili 2013, 182–184.

³¹ Prigent 1990, 47–49. 55 Pl. 2.

³² Kraeling 1956, 34–38 Pl. 49; Hachlili 1998, 96–98; Rosenfeld – Potchebutzky 2009, 197–205. Here I am leaving out the less preserved decoration in the small secondary room.

³³ See various cases in the eastern part of the Roman empire, as illustrated in Zimmermann 2014, Pls. 69 (Sardes). 75–78 (Hierapolis). 90 (Sagalassos). 82 f. (Antandros). 128 f. (Herodion); see also Eristov 2018, 106 (Near East).

practiced all over the Empire, which does not reflect at all the ‘limited repertoire of the local artists’³⁴. Mock veneer was a widespread type of wall painting in Greek and Roman sanctuaries that enhanced the interior’s prestige by creating an elevated atmosphere³⁵. The ceiling of this first phase also drew reference from architectural concepts: it was covered in square blue coffers ornamented with yellow circles, surrounded by a red grid.

When the Jewish community constructed its second, larger synagogue, apparently thanks to the euergetism of the patrons mentioned on the ceiling, the new space received mural decoration in two phases. The Torah shrine and wall section above it were the first parts to be decorated. The niche (Fig. 3) has paintings similar to those found in the earlier synagogue: mock veneer, embellished by some almost abstract figurative elements³⁶. Its ‘pediment’ is an oblong rectangle (partially cut by the niche’s arch) decorated with a painting of the Ark of the Covenant, or perhaps the Second Temple, alongside symbolic figures of the menorah, *ethrog* and *lulav*, and the Sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham on Mount Moriah in Jerusalem, known as the *Aqedah* (Genesis 22)³⁷. The tree that appears on the wall above this field shows various stages of repainting, in which other figurative scenes were added. Here we see two representations of Jacob: one shows him lying on a *kline* surrounded by his sons, the other depicts him with Joseph and his two sons. A third scene portrays David playing the lyre³⁸. Kraeling ascribes to this stage the columns painted in the corners of the room, which served as mock supports for the ceiling. To this phase a first outline of the dado has also been ascribed. This sober ensemble reflects the decorative fashion of the earlier synagogue³⁹.

The lion’s share of the decoration belongs to the second phase. Some 60% of the original murals have been preserved: the west wall is complete, the north and south walls (Figs. 4–10) are cut diagonally and the east wall (Figs. 11–12) retains only dado and part of the lower register. All walls originally displayed four horizontal friezes up to around 4.6 m, crowned by a white surface reaching the total estimated height of 7 m.

The dado contains 44 panels. 14 are filled with lozenges embellished by circles, displaying yellow, red and green patches of mock marble (e. g., *giallo antico*; green and red porphyry) in the technique of *opus sectile* veneer, while another 14 contain masks; the final 16 panels present images of animals. Walking felines occupy further rectangular spaces⁴⁰. The dado follows decorative models known throughout the Greco-Roman world during the Imperial period. Its ‘pagan’ character might have been chosen as an ideal decoration for the section against which the seated worshippers could lean without damaging the figurative scenes. Its pictorial quality is high; a real specialist in mock veneer and quasi *opus sectile* must have been at work here⁴¹. The same is true for the frames of the panels in the three figurative friezes, which consist of meticulously designed undulating bands. They show a refined execution in comparison to the somewhat crude figurative scenes.

³⁴ Both quotations from Kraeling 1956, 38. Taken up in the same way by Levine 2012, 74 and Levine 2016, 57 f.

³⁵ Some early examples are found in synagogues dated to the 1st century A.D., including Magadala, which is still unpublished (Talgam 2016, 98) and Umm el-Umdan (Talgam 2016, 98 n. 9 f.). Other complexes mentioned in Prigent 1990, 175 n. 1; Hachlili 2013, 249 f.; Michaeli 2018, 168 f. For later instances cf. Weiss 2016, 126 f.

³⁶ See the description in Kraeling 1956, 55 Pl. 15, 2–3

³⁷ Rostovtzeff 1938, 104 f.; Kraeling 1956, 56; Hopkins 1979, 146 f.; St. Clair 1986, 112; Branham 1992, 388. All these motifs appear in addition to an Aramaic inscription mentioning Uzzi as the maker (Kraeling 1956, 269 inscription 2). On differences between the depiction and Genesis 22, 13, see i.a. Hopkins 1979, 144 f.; St. Clair 1986, 110 f.; Prigent 1990, 112–123. For a summary of the debate, see Hachlili 1998, 100 f. (contra St. Clair 1986). Talbot (2016, 95) sees the ensemble as an expression of the hope for the Temple’s resurrection and the return of the Jews to Jerusalem. On *Aqedah* depictions in Dura and elsewhere, see Hachlili 2013, 390–401.

³⁸ It is not relevant to expand these few notes to a discussion of the various proposals made in the scientific literature, but see Rostovtzeff 1938, 109; Du Mesnil du Buisson 1939, 19–29; Kraeling 1956, 214–227; Hopkins 1979, 145 f.; Gutmann 1983 and 1984; Prigent 1990; Flesher 1994, 181 f.; Fine 2005; Talbot 2016, 95; Xeravits 2017, 115–117.

³⁹ Kraeling 1956, 65 f.

⁴⁰ There is no need to connect them with the Second Sophistic, for they are a rather banal filling motif (contra Talbot 2016, 99 f.). On Second Sophistic and the Near East, esp. Jewish culture, see Levine 2012, 86–91.

⁴¹ Perkins 1973, 57. Hachlili (1998, 134 f.) offers a similar verdict.

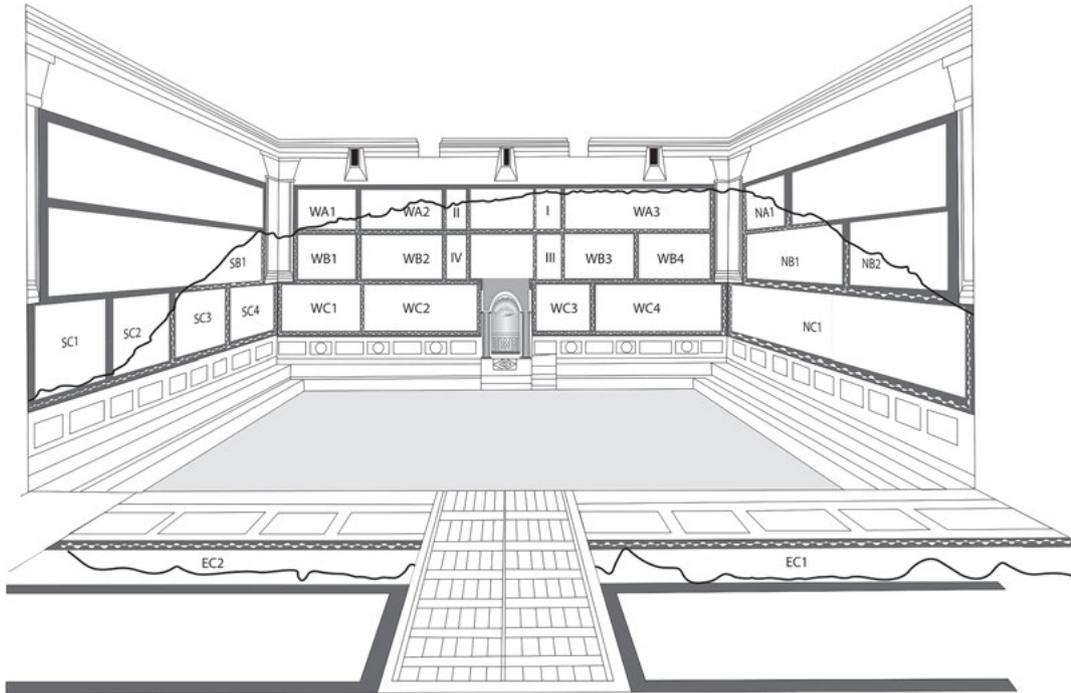


Fig. 4: Organisation of the wall decoration in the synagogue.

There follow three zones (from top to bottom labelled A, B, C; the four walls are indicated with W, N, E and S; this formula, e. g., WC3, is used in what follows) of irregularly positioned panels, arranged as large oblong or square isodomes (Fig. 4). The registers do not reach an identical height on each wall, so they must have been planned separately. 58 narrative scenes fill 28 panels (Fig. 5). The articulation of the figurative scenes resembles that of a comic strip (without speech bubbles), but does not incorporate a chronological order or display a consecutive narrative in each register⁴². The viewer was intended to adopt an ‘itinerant’ view, associating images according to his or her personal choice; recognising overarching themes would not have been easy. Visibility of details is limited and the general effect was seemingly much more important than an analysis of minutiae⁴³. But the viewer did receive some assistance in distinguishing certain narratives, thanks to certain eye-catching features. Some protagonists, especially Moses, Aaron and Daniel, are recognisable by their size and dress, while some fields are filled with large architectural structures probably intended to depict the Second Temple or the Ark of the Covenant. The size and position of the scenes and scale of the figures depicted in them helped the onlooker to pick out certain themes within this wilderness of images (suggestions of sets are presented in Fig. 6). The visitor could cast a glance at scenes that he or she recognised or associated with memories or personal preferences. However, we do not find here specific theological anchors intended to help the worshipper practice their beliefs. Therefore, as noted above, I think that this set of images was not intended as a ritual instrument or set of ritual explanations to be used during services, but rather a means of enriching of the space.

Moses features on the west wall, located in WC3 and WA3 at the right side of the Torah niche (Fig. 7) and in WB1 on the extreme left side (Fig. 8), that is, in each horizontal zone, but not in the

⁴² On the basis of his interpretation of the scenes, Du Mesnil du Buisson (1939, 15–17 Pl. 7) suggested that there was a clear reading programme. According to him, the scenes were arranged as a series, in pairs or otherwise, to be seen from the outside towards the centre. Since he read the two panels with isolated men and the seated David as Moses representations, his suggestion holds up well for the upper register of the west wall. In contrast, he did not recognise WA1 as a scene depicting Solomon in association with WA2.

⁴³ See Hölscher 2018, 299–333 on the ‘*aporia*’ of this difficult recognisability regarding what belongs to *decor*.

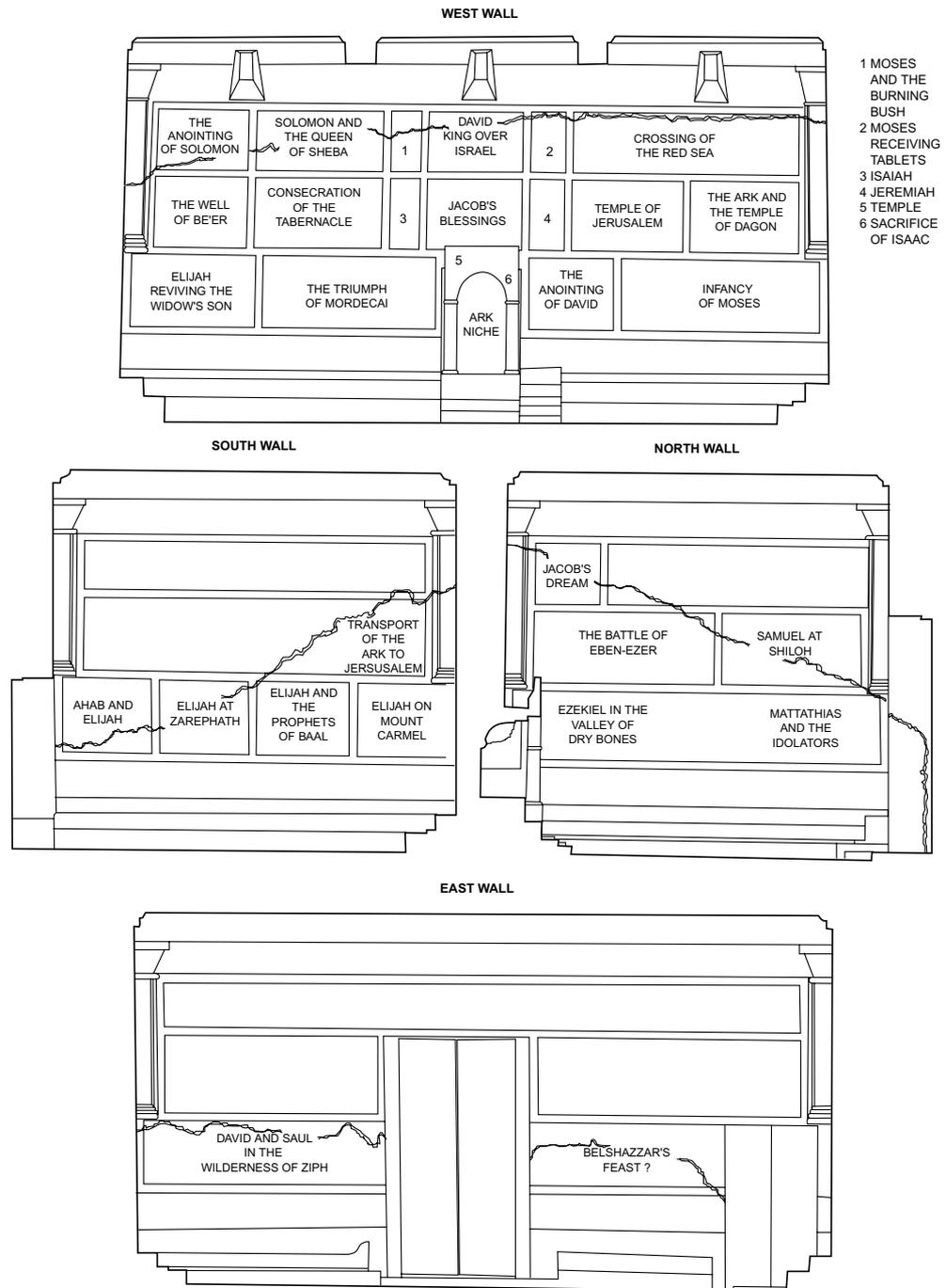


Fig. 5: Distribution of themes in the synagogue.

same position. He also probably appears four times in the narrow panels flanking the central space with the tree. If we accept the interpretation of the four solitary figures as portraits of Moses, each depiction represents a specific aspect of his biography; exegetic details can be found in various discussions of the figures⁴⁴. Moses' collaborator and successor Aaron sits in WB2 (Fig. 8), right next to WB1. As the saviour and lawgiver of the Jews, Moses is clearly the protagonist of the decorations

⁴⁴ For more on this interpretation, see i.a. Goodenough 1953–1968, IX, 110–123; Hachlili 1998, 111–113; Fine 2005, 178–180; Levine 2012, 103f. 114f.; Talbot 2016, 96f.; Xeravits 2017, 117f. For other readings see Kraeling 1956, 227–239 (Moses, Ezra and Abraham twice); Gutmann 1984, 1317; Kessler 1987; Weitzmann – Kessler 1990, 153. 170–173 (Moses, Isaiah and Jeremiah); Kessler 1994, 302–347; Talbot 2016, 96.

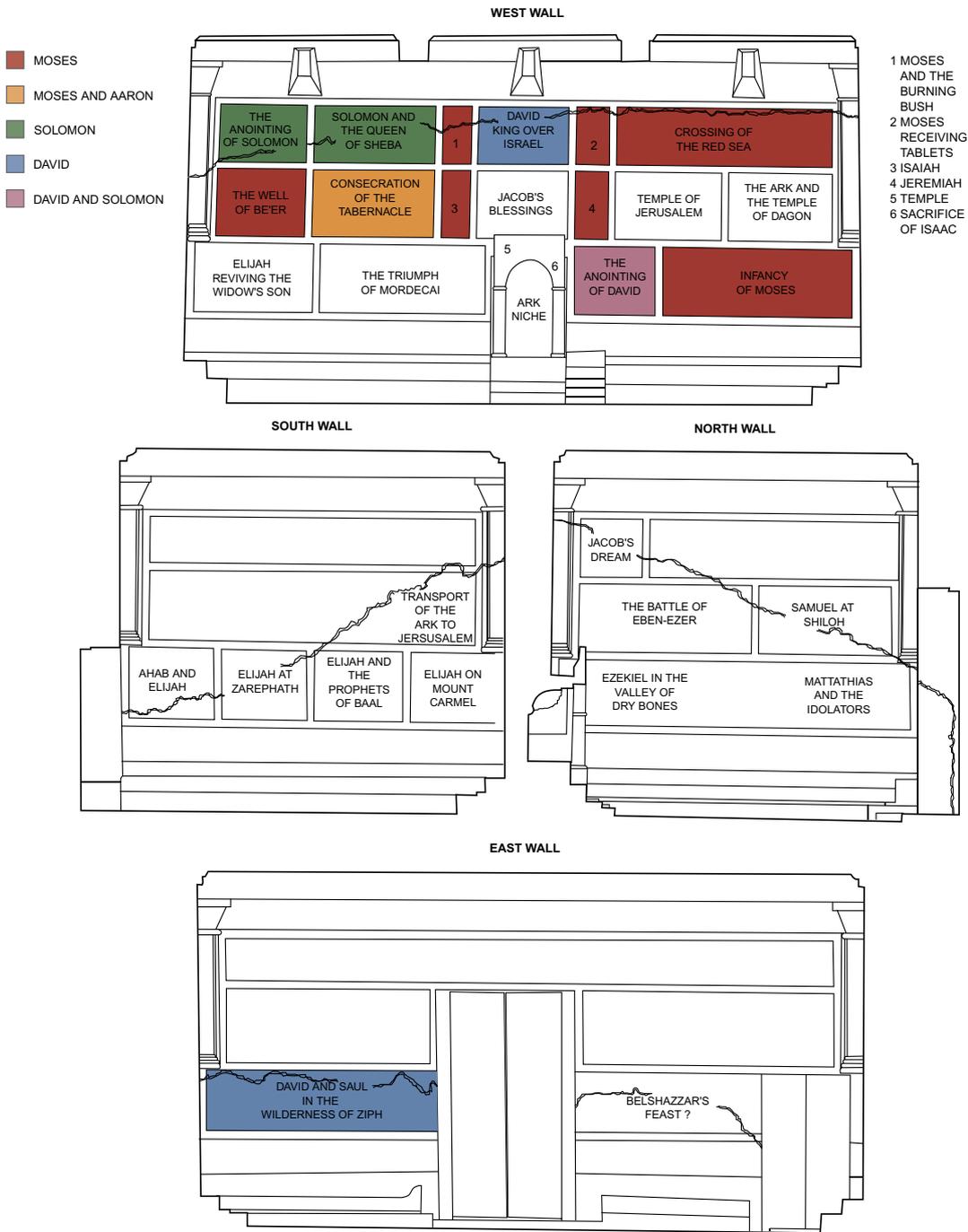


Fig. 6: Locations of some of the primary themes: Moses (A), David (B), Ezechiel (C), texts (D).

and, at the same time, pre-founder or *ktistes* of the new 'state' in the Land of Israel. Solomon occupies WA1–2, while he also appears in WC2, anointing David. This king is also represented with Saul in EC2 (Fig. 11) and presides on the west wall above the Torah niche. Elijah features in four panels on the south wall (SC1–4) and in the adjoining fifth panel on the west wall (WC1), which work together in a narrative sequence (Figs. 8 and 10). The Ark of the Covenant and the Second Temple occupy three panels (WB2–4), only separated by Jacob's Blessings on top of the Torah niche (Fig. 8); two more Arks are present in SB1 and NB1; thus all depictions of the Ark feature in the same register (B) (Figs. 9–10).

There are texts in Aramaic, Greek and Middle Persian. While the Greek and Aramaic ones are explanations and are associated with the images, those in Persian are written on top of the deco-



Fig. 7: West wall of the synagogue, southern section.



Fig. 8: West wall of the synagogue, northern section.

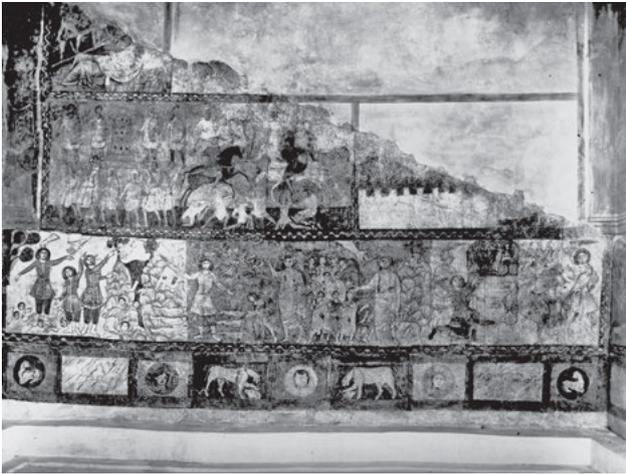


Fig. 9: North wall of the synagogue.

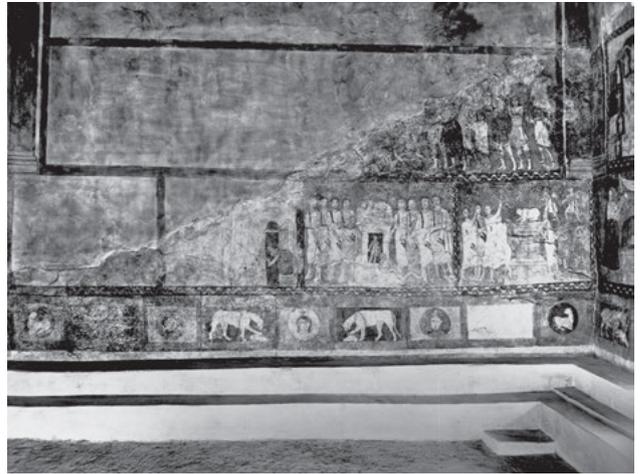


Fig. 10: South wall of the synagogue.



Fig. 11: East wall of the synagogue, northern section.



Fig. 12: East wall of the synagogue, southern section.



Fig. 13: Ceiling tiles found in the synagogue.

rations. They contain brief comments, and sometimes tag the author by recording his name and function. They are testimonies of visitors in A.D. 253–254, evidently applied with the consent of the synagogue’s keeper⁴⁵. This is a procedure we rarely encounter in religious monuments. It exemplifies the phenomenon of ‘tagging’, i. e., the application of graffiti by visitors who wanted themselves to be recorded next to the gods⁴⁶. At the same time, these graffiti are not expressions related to active worship or specific religious activities, and therefore strengthen the idea that people also visited the synagogue at moments other than religious services.

Although the decoration of the ceiling is barely visible because of the hall’s height, much attention was paid to it. The 234 tiles that have been preserved represent around half of those required to cover the entire ceiling (Fig. 13)⁴⁷. In addition to 23 images of female heads, which are typically seen as personifications of nature, there are 40 zodiac signs, 39 animals, 119 vegetal elements, two apotropaic eyes and three inscriptions surrounded by wreaths⁴⁸. The motifs lack biblical connotations and some simultaneously occur in non-Jewish Durene contexts⁴⁹. The names of the *euergeteis*, the priest and *archon* Samuel and the treasurer Abraham, are exceptional⁵⁰. We might ask the purpose of these markers, since it was impossible to decipher the texts, which were located more than 7 m above the floor. The tiles displayed ‘an artificial sky and landscape that suspended the synagogue assembly hall in biblical times and prompted supplication of the divine by Jews, *proselytes*, and other acolytes in that space⁵¹. They prove how the Jewish population was embedded in the cultural sphere of ‘Persian West and the Graeco-Roman East’⁵². The coffered ceiling follows an old tradition in the Greco-Roman world⁵³.

⁴⁵ Kelley 1994, 60. An interpretation of these texts as the names of painters has been dismissed on account of their position (Kelley 1994, 69 n. 7). Fine 2011, 290 f. esp. 300: ‘Inscriptions form the first layer of interpretations of the Dura-Europos synagogue paintings’. Wharton (1994, 20 f.) calls the Persian texts ‘disruptive’.

⁴⁶ On this phenomenon, see Stern 2012.

⁴⁷ Kraeling 1956, 41–54 Pls. 8–9.

⁴⁸ The total, deduced from Kraeling’s description and table (Kraeling 1956, 51) is at odds with Kraeling’s total number, probably due to confusion regarding broken pieces. On the ceiling, see also Stern 2010.

⁴⁹ Stern 2010, 490–498. She observes that some motifs are known from ceilings, others from wall decorations. She sees the ceiling as a symbolic representation of the ‘suspended sky’. Zodiac signs frequently occur in Jewish religious contexts (Hachlili 2013, 339–388).

⁵⁰ Kraeling 1956, 263–268 inscriptions 1 f.; 277–279, inscriptions 23–25.

⁵¹ Stern 2010, 498. 501. On 483, she calls it a ‘large aerial mosaic’.

⁵² Stern 2010, 502. Contra Elsner (2003, 119), who stresses the non-religious character of the tiles. He does so correctly, following Kraeling (1956, 54).

⁵³ I do not see the need to look for parallels in Babylonia (e. g., Kraeling 1956, 53), while the dossier of ‘classical’ cases is abundant.

The undecorated floor of the building consisted of ‘a layer of pebbles mixed with plaster’⁵⁴. This soberness may have to do with the costs of the complex, since mosaics occur in other synagogues of the same period, or perhaps it suggests ‘that there were rugs, although the presence of holes in the floor – which may have accommodated lamp stands, fences, and the feet of wooden *bemata* – indicates otherwise’⁵⁵.

Ways of interpretation: Jewish views

Communis opinio suggests that the synagogue’s decoration illustrates how the God of Israel led the Jews to their safe home, providing (notwithstanding the many obstacles to overcome) an eternal shelter. This explains the emphasis on struggle, victory and establishment of authority in many scenes. Perhaps during the service, the Rabbi pointed at determinate scenes to illustrate or explain his sermon, but they never formed objects of worship and would, as we have seen, not contradict the Second Commandment⁵⁶.

Much attention has been paid to the ways the paintings were read, including the question of whether the images should be recognised as a solid iconographic programme based on Holy Scripture, and if so, which part was the artists’ starting point. In reality, many of the scenes differ from the textual versions with regard to specific details. Readings made by the ancient visitors include rabbinic and messianic approaches, which build on different interpretations of the Bible⁵⁷. The first emphasises a close reading of the Torah, the second sustains the non-rabbinical view of an upcoming arrival of the Messiah. The latter’s emphasis on the notion of hope is sometimes connected with the concurrence of Christianity’s growth; this, however, cannot be established⁵⁸. Therefore, it is not likely that the images served as a response to the Christian New Testament⁵⁹. Or perhaps the set of scenes expressed a form of Jewish nationalism, in which a Messianic vision was combined with opposition to the contemporary tendency towards gnosticism; there would then be ‘national-religious’ items situated next to ‘assimilationist’ elements⁶⁰. The stories encircling Esther and the daughter of the pharaoh, which are located in highly visible positions on either side of the Torah niche (register WC; Figs. 7–8), have been regarded as instruments to attract non-Jewish women to enlarge the community⁶¹.

One of the most famous and influential approaches defined the synagogue’s paintings as expressions of Jewish mysticism. Three of the 13 volumes of Edwin R. Goodenough’s *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* are dedicated to a meticulous analysis of pictorial motifs as symbols of mysticism based on Jewish traditions, Philo’s late 1st century writings and insertions from the non-Jewish world⁶². Regardless of the veracity of his interpretations, which have been used as a

⁵⁴ Kraeling 1956, 17.

⁵⁵ Kraeling 1956, 255 f.

⁵⁶ Cf. Gutmann [1973] 1992, 149: ‘The biblical scenes serve here as pious anchors to secure the continued function of the ark and its salvatory power within a new context.’

⁵⁷ E. g., Garte 1973, who describes resurrection as an expression of Messianism. See also Prigent 1990, esp. 251–253; Weitzmann – Kessler 1990; Steinberg 2006 (although she rejects Kessler’s conclusion at 488 no. 3); Fine 2009, 131–134. On rabbinic practices, see Schwartz 2010.

⁵⁸ See Dirven 2004 and 2008.

⁵⁹ As proposed by Talbot (2016, 98 f.). For overviews of the interpretations, see also Gutmann 1984, 1322–1324 (concluding in favour of a rabbinic reading); Moormann 2011, 196–198; Levine 2012, 102–111.

⁶⁰ Schneid 1976, 100–102 (English summary; I am not capable of reading the Hebrew text); Weitzmann – Kessler 1990, 178–183. This proselytism might be explained as a reaction against the rising power of Christianity. Contra: Levine (2012, 107), who also gives examples of possible polemic representations on 373–379.

⁶¹ Steinberg 2006. On the rather limited status and relatively scarce depictions of women in the synagogue, see Hachlili 2013, 567–581.

⁶² Goodenough 1953–1968, IX–XI.

thought-provoking basis for further readings⁶³, Goodenough tends to isolate the paintings from their larger cultural context, excluding alternative agendas⁶⁴. The mere fact that Jewish narratives feature in combination with ‘pagan’ elements (comparable to those that appear in other Durene complexes as well) should warn us against an exclusively ‘Jewish’ interpretation. ‘Pagan’ motifs such as the zodiac signs on the ceiling tiles and the animals and masks on the dado might provide evidence for a holistic programme⁶⁵. It is the decorative character of the paintings and ceiling tiles that is essential, not the depiction of religious motifs to be observed during prayer.

Various interpretations suggest that the painters possessed a certain biblical learnedness, and were cognisant of the Torah and the themes chosen for the images. This suggestion excludes the possibility that the painters had some form of manual (either figurative or written) displaying the iconography in their hands as they stood on the scaffolding. We know nothing about the existence of image books (*‘Bilderbücher’*) and that option, therefore, does not help us further. A certain command of the Holy Scriptures must have existed amongst the craftsmen, but they may also have received oral suggestions or incorporated examples from other synagogues in the area (or perhaps material from some alternative, unknown template). So the question as to what was first, text or image, seems to be answered best by assuming that the painters activated their knowledge of the stories, as told to (or read by) them, but without a textbook, let alone a *‘Bilderbuch’*⁶⁶. At the same time, we are warned against a ‘rabbiniisation’ of Jewish art, which could work independently from textual sources⁶⁷. Furthermore, the correspondence with other painted religious complexes in Dura Europos sustains the hypothesis that a single workshop produced all of contemporary cultic monuments⁶⁸. And, if we adopt the position of the viewer, responses to the images could differ depending upon an individual’s attitude, knowledge, background and other factors.

Ways of interpretation: Greco-Roman views

An example of a Greco-Roman interpretation of the decorative programme is Warren Moon’s analysis of various details as inspired by Classical art. His approach runs the risk of losing the thread by singling out quite specific details, such as statuary motifs employed in Classical Greek art that were barely visible to the synagogue’s visitors and lacked importance within the overall ensemble. Moon’s interpretation of the large menorah in the panel above the Torah niche provides a useful example of this phenomenon. To him, the shape of the candelabrum suggested a connection with Roman military signs and, therefore, with military victory. In contrast with the *menoroth* in other panels, it is studded with round disks, a design found also on the *semeion* or *signum* of a legion—this, he suggests, might be associated with the presence of Jews in the Roman army. Yet *menoroth* both in other images within the synagogue and other contexts also possess branches or feet full of roundish disk-like elements⁶⁹.

A purely Greco-Roman reading of the complex would do little justice to the stories depicted. But viewing the paintings as part of the Greco-Roman *koine* rather than as an expression of an

⁶³ I.a. Schneid 1976.

⁶⁴ On Goodenough’s reading, see i.a. Avi-Jona [1973] 1992, 117–135; Prigent 1990, 178 (‘interpretations excessives’); Wharton 1994, 7; Leibner – Hezser 2016, 7; Xeravitz 2017, 120 f.

⁶⁵ Leibner – Hezser 2016, 13, with references.

⁶⁶ Gutmann 1984, 1327 f.; Wharton 1994, 19 f.

⁶⁷ Leibner – Hezser 2016, 4 f. 141; Prigent (1990, 251) concludes ‘qu’en plusieurs occasions nous avons pu constater que le peintre ne cherche pas à illustrer la Bible’.

⁶⁸ I.a. Elsner 2003, 118 f.

⁶⁹ Henig 1983; Dirven 2004; Rosenfeld – Potchebutzky (2009, 207–214) point out connections with *legiones* I, II and IV *Parthica*. For other *menoroth* with disks, see Hachlili 1998, 324, 334; Levine 2012, 151 Fig. 70, 2, 4. On menorah depictions, see Hachlili 1998, 312–344; 2013, 286–324; 2016, 196–206.

exclusively Jewish character⁷⁰ has a great significance, if we accept the Jews' integration in Dura's community. They belonged to a globalised Roman political and cultural system in which *koine* 'can be called the software of Roman visual culture'⁷¹. That is why I suggest that we should focus less on details taken from one specific set of religious images or the other, and argue instead for an integrated reading of the images. Greco-Roman components give shape to the biblical content and respond appropriately to the demands of various users, whose presence we can infer from the graffiti in various languages described above. The audience included religious Jews of Babylonian tradition as well as itinerants, who were often associated with the Roman military. The fact that most scenes display activities in the past, or to use the Roman word, *gesta*, implies that the scenes symbolised the virtues important for Jewish Romans as well as the holy history of the Jews, from the time of Abraham to the Kingdom of Israel. As in the case of other polyvalent or multi-layered monuments, like the sculptures from Late Hellenistic Commagene, the synagogue's decoration displays a bricolage of diverse iconographical sources and a style that betrays influences from various regions, including the traditions of the Roman Empire⁷². The painters narrated their stories with the help of motifs familiar to them, both in respect to the content and the manner in which they were represented⁷³. What these expressions of visual culture have in common is the agency of the past, the representation of forerunners who strengthen the position of their successors: whether successful personally or not, the Durene Jews knew that they had a splendid history, just like (other) Greeks and Romans, for which reason the visualisation of memory was relevant⁷⁴.

Unfortunately, we cannot establish a relationship between the sacred and the private realms, for we have no figurative decorations from houses that belonged to Jews. Consequently, we cannot establish whether the *decor* of houses and sanctuaries was governed by principles shared by both the private and religious spheres or whether they were organised under their own rules⁷⁵. When we look at 'pagan' sanctuaries throughout the Empire, we encounter similar or even identical figurative images in both shrines and houses. In both instances, the images served as references to myths associated with the venerated deity or proprietor, to metaphoric values, or were included as part of a colourful decorative ensemble⁷⁶.

A clear example of visualising memory can be found in one of the largest images, the Crossing of the Red Sea, located in WA3 (Fig. 7). This endeavour is presented as a continuous narration in three sections within the same frame. In the Biblical story, the Jews stole away from Egypt and were almost captured by the Pharaoh's troops when they arrived at the borders of the Red Sea. God and Moses then parted the waters and created a pathway for the fleeing crowd. In the frieze, however, we see three episodes presented in a continuous narration in a manner similar to depictions of

⁷⁰ As is the case in many studies, e. g., Du Mesnil du Buisson 1939, passim; Kraeling 1956, 385–402, to cite the two fundamental publications only.

⁷¹ Versluys 2015, 158. His paper is a plea for viewing the different currents within Greco-Roman art as expressions of a 'globalizing *koine*' (159). On *koine*, see also Dietler 2017.

⁷² For the methodology and theory on a more 'holistic' reading of mixed styles, such as the synagogue's paintings, see Versluys 2017, 185–248; Versluys 2019 (he speaks of 'creative appropriation' on 220). On the style debate concerning Dura, see Wharton 1995, 52; Dirven 2008, 50 f. (with a focus on the Christian church); 2016b (contra the traditional characterisation as 'Parthian' art). We may also refer to the fruitless negation of the notion of 'provincial Roman' art by Richard Brilliant ([1973] 1992), on which see Moon [1992] 1995, 285 and Dirven 2016b, 83 no. 87.

⁷³ See Hachlili (2013, 428–434) on the simultaneous visual and written traditions of transmitting the biblical stories. She calls the depictions 'folk art'.

⁷⁴ For memory and the representation of the historical past, see Hölscher 2018, esp. 95–150.

⁷⁵ On the complexity of *decor*, see Haug, this volume.

⁷⁶ See the many examples discussed in Moormann 2011, e. g., the Augusteum and Sacello degli augustali in Herculaneum, as well as the Temple of Apollo and Temple of Isis in Pompeii. I do not believe in the interactions between Christians and pagan imagery as proposed in various studies by David S. Balch (e. g., Balch 2008, with my review, Moormann 2009).

Roman military campaigns⁷⁷. On the right (1), the Jews depart a Roman-style city dressed in military attire, following a giant Moses clothed in civilian dress. The central section (2) depicts the Red Sea full of drowned Egyptians, the result of an unfought battle, with Moses pointing at the scene. At the far left (3), the Israelites proceed under the guidance of Moses in an *adventus* towards freedom, thanks to the great *virtus* shown. In religious terms, this depiction would be considered false, since the exodus was no military operation. But in practice, the artists must have had in mind military representations like those that appear on Roman commemorative reliefs. Regarding Moses' biography, there is one more significant episode: Moses' infancy in Egypt, which is shown in the lowest register, just to the right of Torah niche (WC4). This scene is part of a foundation myth analogous to that of Romulus and Remus in Roman art: its conspicuous position near the Torah niche testifies to Moses' importance as the forefather of Israel.

Similar references, but of devotional nature, pertain to the many offering scenes. Elsner sees them as definitions of the cult's specific character, setting Jews at a distance from the religious imagery of the ruling Romans, which he defines as a sort of cultural resistance⁷⁸. Géza Xeravits characterises each offering scene as a 'message of consolation', suggesting that the Durene Jews were an oppressed minority. This impression cannot be substantiated by the context, however⁷⁹. In contrast, the sacrifices express the positive Roman notions of *religio*, *devotio* and *pietas* (religious commitment, devotion and piety towards the gods), qualities fundamental for both emperors and citizens during the Imperial period. Whilst emperors stressed these virtues in their public imagery, citizens displayed them on sarcophagi of the *vita privata* genre, produced throughout the 3rd century A.D.⁸⁰. In the synagogue, the Jews behaved like pious worshippers, fulfilling their ritual duties like their Roman counterparts elsewhere in town, as seen in the Dura *mithraeum*, the Temple of Bel and the shrine dedicated to the Palmyrene gods, for example⁸¹. Inside the synagogue, these *exempla* strengthened their religious zeal and motivation. Here, *decor* did not function as a sacred tool used during services, but rather as an historical backdrop that enhanced the self-esteem and prestige of the worshippers. For this reason no images of prayer or the reading of holy texts appear, and the Commandments given to Moses by God are absent as well: these subjects would have been too close to the Second Commandment's indiction.

The military character of various scenes may connect the Synagogue's patrons with the military, a dominant force at Dura Europos. Support for this notion can also be found in the iconographic details that might have escaped the attention of onlookers. In panel NB1, the Battle at Eben-Ezer (I Samuel 4.1–11), Stefanie Weisman observes a correspondence between the military gear depicted in the scene and weapons found in Dura (Fig. 9)⁸². That we cannot really distinguish between the two groups of combatants, Jews and Philistines, might have to do with the use of the same equipment by both groups and the mixture of people in the city itself. The Jewish defeat should be viewed together with the adjacent panel WB4, the Ark of the Covenant near the Temple of Dagon: this defeat is a necessary step towards the eventual victory over the Philistines (Fig. 8). For Weisman, the preponderance of military scenes suggests that military personnel had an influence on the character of the iconography. The images display brave deeds similar to an emperor's *gesta*, in which he appears as a virtuous military commander in public space, demonstrating that military imagery played an important role in self-representation throughout the Roman world. The anoint-

⁷⁷ An analysis of the military details is provided by Weisman (2012, 14–17). On Moses' paramount prominence, see i.a. Levine 2012, 113–116; here Fig. 6.

⁷⁸ Elsner [2001] 2007. See also Baird 2018, 141.

⁷⁹ Xeravits 2017, 122f. Gutmann (1984, 1325) suggests that paintings in the synagogue, Christian church and other shrines were intended 'to gain converts', which seems a far-fetched idea, lacking sound evidence.

⁸⁰ E. g., a sarcophagus from the Via Latina in Roma dated to around A.D. 270–280, which I have recently analysed (Rome, Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Massimo, inv. 40799; see Moormann, forthcoming, Fig. 5). For emperors and citizens offering sacrifices, see Holscher 2018, 35–40.

⁸¹ See Moormann 2011, 190–192; Tortorella 2014, 319–329; Kaizer 2016a.

⁸² Weisman 2012, 6–12 Figs. 2–5. Hopkins (1979, 152f.) calls the *loricati* Gaulish.

ing of David by Solomon⁸³ acquires a Roman touch (and Imperial importance) if we acknowledge its military character, as observed by Tommaso Gnoli, who reads the ceremony as a kind of military initiation⁸⁴. Here the Jews had no parallel, since the investiture of a Roman emperor was never depicted in public imagery.

It is by no means necessary to interpret the paintings as a kind of opposition against other religions (especially the Christians) present in Dura. Perhaps the images represent a sort of challenge to their Durene peers, but I fail to see the aggression of these cult scenes towards the reigning Romans, as argued by Elsner. Although the decorations display defeats of enemies, these groups do not include Romans or other local groups who might be offended, unless we view the violent Dagon scene (WB4), in which a cult statue is destroyed, as an insult to the Romans. Indeed, the military actions betray the pride of the Jews, but this is self-inclusive in their sacred space. Instead, I would rather turn the argument around: by displaying their *pietas*, *virtus*, *iustitia* and the like, the Jews are acting like good Romans. These abstract values had become common place over the years and had replaced mythical imagery in both the public and private realms by the 3rd century A.D.

The *columnae cochleatae* of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius represent good counterparts for compressed depictions of sequential events in Roman art. They are similar to the synagogue paintings, in that they arrange long and short scenes side-by-side and include bewildering multitudes of figures (amongst which the emperor is frequently highlighted). Triumphal arches often adopt a similar approach; sequential scenes appear on the Arch of Trajan in Beneventum (A.D. 109–114), which depicts six horizontal layers of figurative representations, as well as the arches of Septimius Severus in the Forum Romanum and in Lepcis Magna (A.D. 202–203). Farther to the east, we can also recall the large frieze of Antoninus Pius from Ephesos, unfortunately from an unknown setting and date. Galerius' arch in Thessaloniki, built at the end of the 3rd century A.D., provides a final example of superposed figurative scenes. Although these monuments employ a different medium (i. e., relief sculpture) and feature in dissimilar contexts, they retain a certain connection with the Durene images. The reliefs were originally painted, and their representations depended on earlier forms of figurative imagery, such as the canvases carried around in triumphal processions⁸⁵. Our Jewish community, or at least the Jews involved in military activities, may have been familiar with this genre of monuments, which – admittedly – are remote from Dura in both time and space. And, as noted previously, the messages conveyed in the synagogue relied upon the presentation of the whole decorative programme, not only its constituent parts.

The interest in large figurative scenes in Late Antique painting is a well-known phenomenon, and examples of the technique appear both at Dura and other sites⁸⁶. A near-contemporary parallel is the tetrarchs' shrine in the Temple of Luxor. Its articulation is similar⁸⁷: the four tetrarchs are displayed in a niche located in a wall opposite the entrance, with the decoration serving as a form of 'social memory'⁸⁸ or even a 'triumphalist homage to the majesty of the Tetrarchy'⁸⁹. Although the

⁸³ WC3, after 1 Samuel 16, 13. The content is indicated by an Aramaic inscription. Debate has risen concerning the number of men depicted. According to 1 Samuel 16, 10, there should be eight sons. Here we see a representation based on 1 Chronicles 2, 13–15 and Flavius Josephus, AntJud 6, 161–163. Cf. on this mix of sources, Kraeling 1956, 168. 351–358; Gutman 1983, 96–98; Fine 2005, 173. 182; Kalimi 2009, 123–132; Stern (2010) suggests a midrash tradition. Kalimi rightly rejects this link with a midrash version, since, as noted by Wharton, this work originated only in the 5th or 6th century A.D. See Wharton 1994, 19; 1995, 38–51; Levine 2012, 110.

⁸⁴ Gnoli 2016.

⁸⁵ Moon ([1992] 1995, 312f.) suggests 'placards' as sources of inspiration. However, these would remain restricted to a limited group of users. He includes 'sign paintings' sent by Septimius Severus to Rome, which documented his eastern campaigns, and refers to Brilliant's equation of the reliefs of the Arch of Septimius Severus with the Dura paintings (Brilliant 1967, 224).

⁸⁶ Ling 2014, 414–419 (however, excluding Dura, discussed previously at 397–399).

⁸⁷ See the fine description in Jones – McFadden 2015, 104–133.

⁸⁸ Jones – McFadden 2015, 32–37 quotation 37.

⁸⁹ Jones – McFadden 2015, 105.

rites performed in Luxor and Dura Europos differed, references to the images were relevant in both circumstances. Both displayed a memory of a glorious past in combination with the virtual presence of powerful figures, in Luxor honouring the Tetrarchic emperors and in the synagogue at Dura offering thanks to the God of Israel⁹⁰. Memory was virtually omnipresent in ancient culture. Durene Jews responded to this sentiment with their figurative scenes and by doing so acted as the Romans did. We observe here what has been called a ‘process of referentialism’ between expressions of religious art – in which the setting creates specific features (such as objects, dress, stories) – and a wider cultural environment⁹¹. And, what is more, the specificity of the iconography in the synagogue served as an expression of Jewish identity both within the Durene community and beyond.

What strengthens this suggestion is the presence of various other religious groups who participated in their own cults in designed spaces at the same time. Naturally we can also find a large number of cults in other places (e.g., Rome), but the similarity of Dura’s cult spaces, with their interest in multiple figurative scenes (e.g., the Temple of the Palmyrene Gods, the Christian baptistry and the *Mithraeum*) suggests a sort of *aemulatio*, or representative rivalry, rather than a severe ‘segmentary opposition’⁹². The choice of narrative scenes was familiar to Christians, Jews and followers of Mithras, and corresponded to the religious narratives of their cults⁹³. Thus, the synagogue was not an entirely innovative and ‘rebellious’ monument of isolated Jews, but rather an ensemble to be seen within the context of similar story-telling cults, as well as part of the broader Roman context of sacral buildings. The narrative stories depicted refer to the glorious past and show the fundamental role that memory played.

In both Dura Europos and beyond, complex decorations were employed in religious and official buildings to illustrate the prominence of the group depicted (here the Jews of Dura Europos), and to establish the importance of the past as a solid foundation for the present. This implies that at Dura Europos we do not see a dispute between Jews and Christians on one side and pagans on the other⁹⁴, or between Jews and Christians themselves⁹⁵. Rather we observe a local fashion of temple decoration that ties in with the *longue durée* tendencies of Greco-Roman art⁹⁶.

Conclusion

The figurative paintings of the synagogue in Dura Europos do not constitute a *rara avis* in the realm of the Roman Empire and its art. The Jewish population of Dura opted for a form of interior decoration that did justice both to their own demands and to their environment, in which the full decoration of sacred spaces with figurative scenes had become customary by the 3rd century A.D. The community included citizens, soldiers and civilians who knew the Roman world (or at least the oriental part of it) and did not see themselves as separated by virtue of their belief. The patrons of the paintings singled out motifs from the past to display their roots and historical virtues. In doing so, the narrative scenes display qualities similar to those found on public and private ‘pagan’ art throughout the Roman world. Even if non-Jewish visitors never entered the synagogue, the Jews of Dura felt at home in a familiar atmosphere that corresponded with sacred spaces frequented

⁹⁰ Stern 2019.

⁹¹ Elsner 2011, 126.

⁹² Elsner [2001] 2007, 271. Above, I hinted at the possibility of a single workshop, a suggestion that should be worked out on the basis of autopsy and excellent photographic material.

⁹³ As is the case with the decoration of Isis shrines. On these particularities in contrast with the interior design of purely Roman cult buildings, see Moormann 2011, 204 f.

⁹⁴ Elsner [2001] 2007.

⁹⁵ Weitzmann – Kessler 1990, 153–183.

⁹⁶ Dirven 2004; Levine 2012, 74–79, 97–118.

by other citizens in their town. This decorative programme was neither alien nor unique, as we can deduce from other complexes known from the Land of Israel and elsewhere – it belongs to the Greco-Roman cultural *koine* of Late Antiquity. We are not, however, able to define possible relationships between the sacred *decor* of the synagogue and the private realms of its patrons and users, simply because we have no such material at our disposition.

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Fig. 2: Museum am Dom, Trier.

Fig. 4: After R. Hachlili 1998, III-6.

Fig. 5: N. Laos, after Weitzman – Kessler 1990, Fig. 2.

Fig. 6: E. M. Moormann, after Kraeling 1956, Pls. 9–12.

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