

## Article

# Revisiting Epigraphic Evidence of the Oldest Synagogue in Morocco in Volubilis

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**Abstract:** Volubilis was a Roman city located at the southwest extremity of the Roman Empire in modern-day Morocco. Several Jewish gravestone inscriptions in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin, likely from the 3rd century CE, have been found there. One of them belongs to “Protopolites Kaikilianos, the head of a Jewish congregation (*synagogue*)”, and it indicates the presence of a relatively big Jewish community in the city. The Hebrew inscription of “Matrona, daughter of Rabbi Yehuda” is unique occurrence of using the Hebrew language in such a remote region. The Latin inscription belongs to “Antonii Sabbatrai”, likely a Jew. In addition, two lamps decorated with menorahs, one from bronze and one from clay, were found in Volubilis. In nearby Chellah, a Jewish inscription in Greek was also discovered. We revisit these inscriptions including their language, spelling mistakes, and their interpretations. We relate epigraphic sources to archaeological evidence and discuss a possible location of the synagogue in this remote city, which was the first synagogue in Morocco.

**Keywords:** Volubilis; ancient synagogues; Morocco; Mauretania; Hebrew epigraphy; Greek epigraphy; Jewish gravestone inscriptions; epitaphs; Jewish cemeteries

## 1. Introduction

Volubilis (Arabic: وُلَيْلِي, Berber: ⵙⵓⵔⵉⵏ, also called *Qsar Pharaoun* (قصر فرعون) was an ancient Berber and Roman city, a capital of the Kingdom of Mauretania, located next to the modern city of Meknes in Morocco. After the fall of Carthage in 146 BCE, Mauritania became a client state of the Roman Empire, and Volubilis was Romanised, in particular, by King Juba II (52/50 BCE–23 CE) of Numidia and Mauretania, who established his royal capital in the city. In 44 CE, Mauritania was annexed by the Roman Empire, and Volubilis became the capital of the new Roman province *Mauretania Tingitana*. Roman rule lasted until 280 CE, although Roman influence remained significant throughout the fourth century despite the decline of the city. By the time of the Arab conquest in 708 CE, the city center had been abandoned, and the population, mostly Awraba Berbers, moved to the southwest of the old city, where a new city wall was constructed, while the old city center was turned into a cemetery. After the capital of the region was moved to Fez by the rulers from the Idrisid dynasty in the early 800s, Volubilis was almost deserted (Panetier 2002, p. 50; Risse 2001; Marion 1960).

Semitic population was present in Volubilis throughout its history. The Phoenicians appeared here since at least the third century BCE. Jews had contacts with Mauretania on several occasions. *Midrash Exodus Rabba* 18:6 (35b) contains a reference to Mauretania including a folk-etymology of the word ברבור *barbur* (appearing in 1 Kings 5:3) as “a fowl coming from Barbary” (Hirschberg 1974, p. 27).

After the death of King Juba II's wife, Cleopatra Selene II (40 BCE–before 6 CE), who was a daughter of Mark Antony, Juba II married Glaphyra (35 BCE–7 CE), a widow of Herod the Great's son Alexander. Alexander had been executed by his father's order for a conspiracy against him. Glaphyra was a Cappadocian princess; however, being a daughter-in-law of the Judean king, she had adopted Judaism, at least, to some extent. Her marriage to the king of Numidia and Mauretania did not last for a long time. She divorced Juba II and married another son of Herod the Great, a half-brother of her first husband, Herod Archelaus, the *Ethnarch* of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea. Despite Glaphyra's brief tenure as a Queen of Mauretania, the story of her second marriage caused interest towards the African country among the Jews (Hirschberg 1974, *ibid.*)

While reports about the earliest presence of the Jews in northwestern Africa tend to be legendary, reliable data is based on epigraphic sources. In particular, it is often stated that a synagogue existed in Volubilis in the 3rd century CE (Frézouls 1971, pp. 287–92). The claim is based entirely on Jewish inscription from the city, which mentions *πατήρ τῆς συναγωγῆς τῶν Ἰουδαίων* (*pater synagoges ton Iudeon*, “head of the Synagogue of the Jews”); however, no attempt has been made to identify the location of the synagogue in the city.

There are several sites in North Africa where ancient synagogues were found or where they could possibly have existed with their locations more or less successfully identified on the basis of archaeological evidence. This included Hammam Lif, with the archaeological evidence based on mosaics, Carthage, Lepcis Magna, and Tipasa (Stern 2008, p. 196). Volubilis would be the most western location of a synagogue in North Africa.

When history of the Ancient Jewish diaspora is studied, there is a significant gap between the rabbinical sources in the Hebrew and Aramaic languages and Greek and Latin sources including the epigraphic texts, which led Shaye Cohen to his concept of “epigraphic Rabbis” different from Rabbis as community leaders.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the funerary language has its own peculiar features,<sup>2</sup> due to the sacral nature of epitaphs which express certain attitudes towards life and death.<sup>3</sup> In addition, there is often a gap between the literary sources and archaeological and artistic evidence with the latter often being borrowed from non-Jewish examples and sometimes re-interpreted.<sup>4</sup>

The meaning of the term *συναγωγή* (*synagoge*, literally, “a congregation”) and the function of the synagogue in the ancient Roman Jewish diaspora remains a matter of controversy, as well as the meaning and functions of the titles of community leaders, such as “head” or “Rabbi”<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, it is important to attempt to relate epigraphic and archeological evidence.

The objective of the present article is to revisit Jewish inscriptions from Volubilis and to discuss the possibility of the existence of an ancient synagogue in the city. Our work is based on observations from a recent visit to the site and on an extensive analysis of published literature sources. The Jewish inscriptions from Volubilis have been published by various authors; however, these epigraphic sources are found in different and rare publications, often without translation and appropriate

<sup>1</sup> Cohen (1981, pp. 1–17) note that Jewish inscriptions from North Africa are less known than from other region. There is no comprehensive corpus of such inscriptions, except for the article in French by (Le Bohec 1981), which provides a list of 81 inscriptions without their translations and without photographs. Hopefully, recent efforts in “Digital Humanities” will eventually include also cataloging ancient Jewish inscription; efforts in this direction are made, in particular, by Saar (2016, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Karen Stern states: “North African Jewish texts provide no evidence of the languages Jews spoke, although the preponderant combination of Latinate onomastic and linguistic tendencies indicates that the majority of western African Jews were Latin dialect speakers. In all cases, commemorative language serves as a flexible implement to mark the identities of North African Jews after their deaths” (Stern 2008, p. 191).

<sup>3</sup> About the sacral function of Hebrew epitaph see (Nosonovsky 2017).

<sup>4</sup> For example, the reinterpretation of the story of Odysseus and Sirens in a mosaic of the Beit-Leontis synagogue in Beit-She'an (Hasan-Rokem 2014, pp. 159–89). Kiperwasser (2019) studied rabbinical sources on the migration of Babylonian Jews to the west and notes that “the relationship between the Diaspora Jew and the Land of Israel is expressed in the conflicted self-perception” (Kiperwasser 2019, p. 126). However, much less is known about Jewish migration to such extreme western region as Mauretania Tingitana.

<sup>5</sup> See (Cohen 1981, pp. 1–17), also note 17.

commentaries. No systematic attempt has been made to identify the site of the synagogue in Volubilis using archeological sources. Our goal is to re-read these sources not only for the sake of corrections of previous mistakes, but also for the sake of gaining new knowledge on the synagogue in Volubilis.

## 2. Epigraphic Evidence

Three Jewish gravestone inscriptions from the pre-Islamic period have been found in Volubilis.

### 2.1. Inscription One

Inscription one (Le Bohec 1981, No 80, limestone, current location in Volubilis) is in Hebrew, and it was published for the first time in 1892 by Ph. Berger (Berger 1892, pp. 64–66; Le Bohec 1981, No. 80; Besnier 1904, No. 2). (Figure 1a). His reading of the inscription is

מטרונא	Matrona
בת רבי	the daughter of Rabbi
יהודה נה	Yehuda, [may she] rest [in peace]

Note that this is the only Hebrew inscription from the region. The use of Hebrew language in gravestone inscriptions was very limited in the Mediterranean Jewish diaspora during the first centuries CE.<sup>6</sup> It is even more surprising to find a Hebrew inscription in such a remote location as Volubilis.

Berger does not provide details about the provenance of the inscription; however, he believes that the epitaph is dated the 3rd century CE. Frézouls suggests that the Roman name *Matrona* shows the tendency of using Latin and not Greek names by the Jews of the region (Frézouls 1971, pp. 287–92). Stern discusses the Jewish naming trends related to the names *Matrona* and *Yehuda*, and suggests that “the idiosyncratically named Rabbi Yehuda chose to accord his daughter a thoroughly Latinate name *Matrona*, which was a “personal name commonly allocated in North Africa.”<sup>7</sup>

Regarding the title “Rabbi”, Cohen (1981, p. 16) argues that in the pre-Islamic period it remained “a popular title, which could describe individuals who were not part of that Hebrew and Aramaic-speaking society which produced the Talmud; synagogues in both Israel and the diaspora were not led by men titled ‘rabbis’”

As far as the final blessing formula נה, it is interpreted as a shortened form of תנוה [ta]nuah “she will rest” or נפש נה “may [her] soul rest”.<sup>8</sup> The latter interpretation is likely given the possibility that another line could be present with the word נפש (soul). An alternative interpretation of נה is the name Noah thus implying the dual name *Yehuda Noah*. The Hebrew name Noah is mentioned in a 314–324 CE inscription from Rome (Ilan 2008, vol. 3, p. 140).

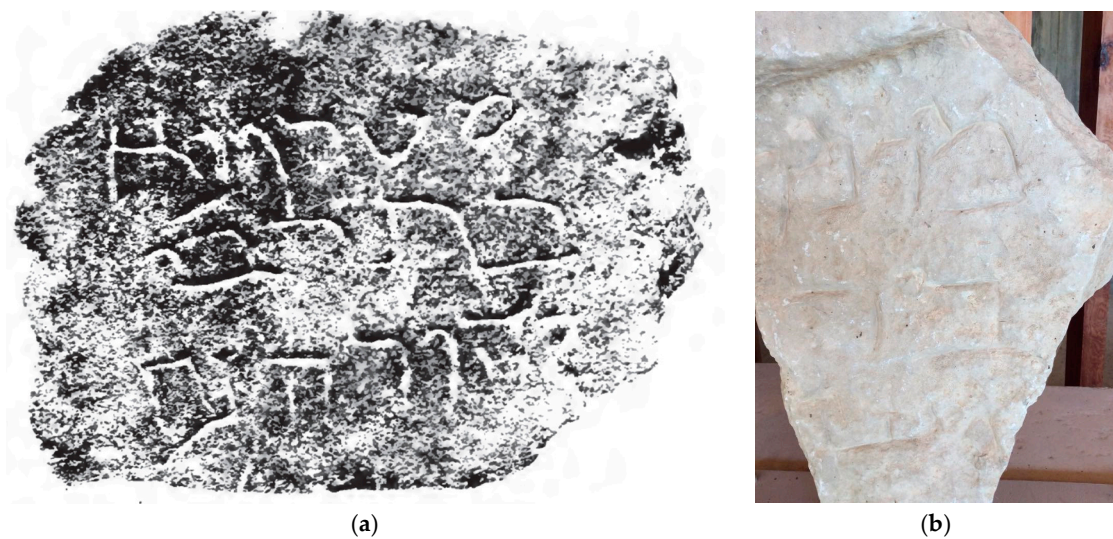
During our visit to Volubilis in December 2018, we found only a piece of the fractured gravestone with the upper right part of the inscription including the letters מט and בת. The piece is on display in the lapidarium of the local exhibition marked “Hebrew inscription. Unknown date. Limestone” (Figure 1b).

<sup>6</sup> Due to extremely poor knowledge of Hebrew, which was considered לשון חכמים (“the language of the sages”), Jewish epitaphs from first centuries CE from Italy rarely used Hebrew besides single words (Olman 2015, p. 136). Moreover, numerous mistakes were typical for Hebrew epitaphs from the first centuries from Italy, including ינוה for the feminine (Noy 1993, Nos 164, 167), משכבה instead of משכבה (Noy 1993, Nos 120, pp. 138, 143) and even an inscription written from left to right (Noy 1993, pp. 310–11, 334–39; 232). Simonsohn (1974, p. 847) asserts that “the knowledge of Hebrew among European Jewry of that period [until the 5th century] was apparently very restricted and expressed itself in a few standard words in the tombs’ inscriptions”.

<sup>7</sup> Stern (2008, pp. 140–41). The name *Matrona* was spread in 3th–4th CE among Jewish population of Egypt, Rome, Gaul, and Asia (Ilan 2008, vol. 3, p. 599). Final aleph (and not hey) shows Greek long e (Ματρώνη, lat. *Matrona*) (Ilan 2008, vol. 1, pp. 25–26). Note also, that it was very common in various parts of the Jewish diaspora that female names were borrowed from local non-Jewish languages.

<sup>8</sup> Compare with the epitaph בזה הקבר תנה מרים (‘In this grave Miriam will rest’) from Phanagoria in South Russia (Nosonovsky 2002); standard formula נפש נה, e.g., in Faustina’s epitaph in Venosa (Simonsohn 1974, p. 849).

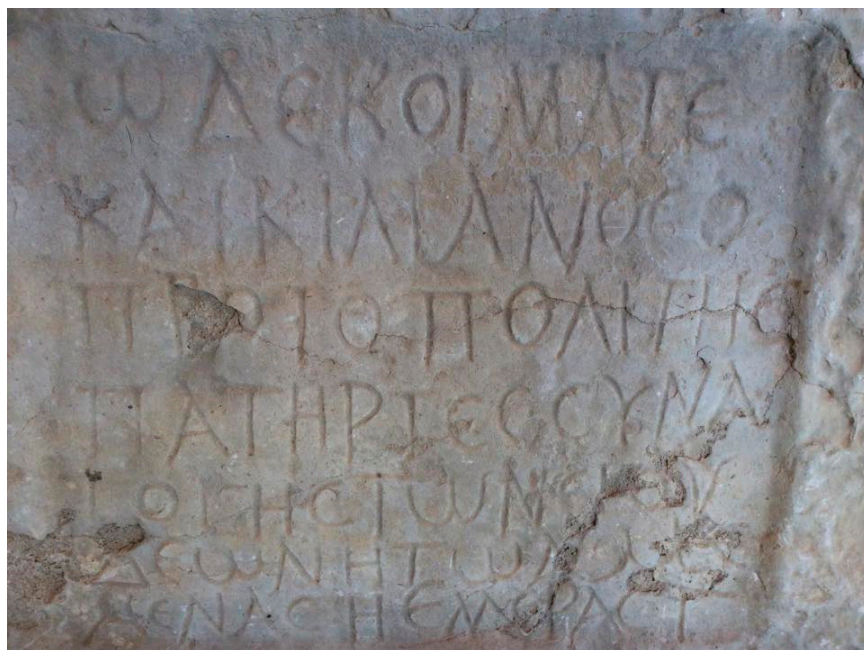




**Figure 1.** The Hebrew inscription from Volubilis: (a) as presented by Ph. Berger (b) as found during the 2018 visit on the site.

## 2.2. Inscription Two

The second inscription ([Le Bohec 1981](#), No 79, limestone 0.95 m × 0.32 m × 0.56 m, inscription field 0.38 m × 0.28 m, current location in Volubilis) is in Greek (Figure 2) is also on display in the lapidarium of the local exhibition in Volubilis. It is marked: “Epitaph in Greek of the synagogue rabbin. Volubilis. Third century. Limestone”.



**Figure 2.** The Greek inscription from Volubilis (December 2018).



The inscription was discussed in detail by Frézouls<sup>9</sup>. His reading of the inscription is the following:

ὦδε κοιμᾶτε	Rest in peace here,
Καικιλιανὸς ὁ	Caecilianus
πρωτοπολίτης	a <i>Protopolites</i> ,
πατήρ τες συνα	the head of the cong-
γογῆς τῶν Ἰου	regation of the Je-
δέων ἡτῶν με`	ws, 45 years
μενας η` ἐμέρας γ`	8 months and 3 days

It is difficult to date the inscription merely on the basis of its script, because it can belong to any time during the period from the first century BCE to the fourth century CE, or even later. The inscription has several mistakes in Greek words, which is not unusual for Jewish inscriptions in the *koine* especially in the margin of the *oikumene* (van der Horst 1991, pp. 24–34). Thus, the word κοιμᾶτε (*koimate*) is used instead of the traditional κοιμάσθω (*koimastho*) in middle voice. Apparently, the carver intended to carve κοιμᾶτο (*koimato*) in active voice; however, he used the letter *epsilon* instead of *omicron*, possibly under the influence of the previous word ὦδε (*hode*), which is terminated by *epsilon*. The word πρωτοπολίτης (*protopolites*) is misspelled as προτοπολίτης (*protopolites*), the article τῆς (*tēs*) is misspelled as τες (*tes*), συναγωγῆς (*synagōges*) as συναγογῆς (*synagoges*), μῆνας (*mēnas*) as μενας (*menas*). These mistakes can indicate that the carver did not distinguish between the long and short vowels, although he possessed some knowledge of grammar, because he correctly used the letter *omega* in the words τῶν (*tōn*), Ἰουδέων (*Iudeōn*), and ἐτῶν (*etōn*).

The introductory blessing formula of the inscription ὦδε κοιμᾶτε (*hode koimate*, “Rest in peace here”) is more characteristic for Jewish epitaphs. Non-Jewish Greek epitaphs typically used the formula personal name and χαῖρε/χαίρετε (*khairē/khairete*), while Roman epitaphs employed the abbreviated formula “D.M.(S.)” (“*Dis Manibus [Sacrum]*”), “For the ghost gods” meaning “to the memory of”) as an introductory blessing formula. However, the variant ὦδε κοιμᾶτε (*hode koimate*) is not the most common one even in the Jewish epitaphs. More popular variants were ἐν εἰρήνῃ κοίμησις (*en eirene koimesis*, “peaceful sleep of death”<sup>10</sup>) and ἐν εἰρήνῃ κοιμάσθω (*en eirene koimastho*, “may you rest in peace”<sup>11</sup>). The literal translation of our inscription would be “so may he rest”.

*Caecilianus* was a popular local cognomen in the region of Volubilis during the second and third centuries CE, which was often given to slaves freed by the *Caeciliani* clan, so Stern (2008, p. 114) suggests that the person could have been a freed slave. Note that the third century CE was the peak of the popularity of the proper name *Kaikilianos* (*Caecilianus*) in the Roman world, and the Greek variant is mentioned in dozens of inscriptions from the second and third century CE from Asia Minor and other regions, including many cognates.<sup>12</sup>

As far as the term πρωτοπολίτης (*protopolites*, literally, “first citizen”), it has been quite common in funeral epigraphy among both Jews and non-Jews. Rahmani (1994) interprets it as a Greek term for a member of the *honestiores* under the *Constitutia Antoniniana* of 212 CE. Albrecht (2015) notes that the title could be used either in a Jewish context, or in a non-Jewish context, particularly, such as Coptic. The exact meaning of the title is still controversial. It could likely be an honorific state (secular) title that appeared in the Jewish world after the decree of Septimius Severus and Caracalla (Schrüer 1973, p. 131).

<sup>9</sup> Frézouls (1971, pp. 287–92). See also (Le Bohec 1981, No. 79; Thouvenot 1969, pp. 357–59, pl. IV).

<sup>10</sup> CIJ passim, various spelling.

<sup>11</sup> JWE (2005, pp. 2, 166), also (CIJ 1975, p. 365).

<sup>12</sup> Such as *Kaikilos*, *Kaikilis*, or female *Kaikiliane*, *Kaikilia* of the same period, and very few in other periods. For Greek variants see (Fraser and Matthews 1987). The Latin name *Caecilianus* was also very popular during the same period in the region of North Africa, see (Frézouls 1956, p. 98; Ilan 2008, vol. 3, p. 475). For Latin inscriptions from Volubilis see (Besnier 1904, Nos. 37–39, 57, 61–63).

An additional argument for dating the inscription to the 3rd century CE is the synchronous inscription from Ziph near Hebron<sup>13</sup> with the rare word πρωτοπολίτης (*protopolites*). If we accept it as an honorific state title, it cannot appear before the 212 decrees of Septimius Severus and Caracalla which granted Roman citizenship to all free residents of Roman Empire. Therefore, our inscription is dated to the third century CE or even later (Schrüer 1973, p. 131).

The most intriguing part of the inscription is the title πατήρ τῆς συναγωγῆς (*pater tes synagoges*, “head of the congregation”). According to Frézouls (1971), this is an honorific communal religious title and it constitutes undisputable evidence for the existence of the synagogue in Volubilis. The word πατήρ (*pater*) means “the leader”, and it was a very common title in Greek inscriptions from different parts of the Jewish world.<sup>14</sup> However, the term “synagogue” (Greek συναγωγή, Latin *synagoga*) was used for the congregation itself, while the place of worship was generally known as a προσευχή (*proseuche*)<sup>15</sup>. The discussion about the use of the two terms has been ongoing for a long time, until new evidence appeared with the publication of the inscription from Bosphorus,<sup>16</sup> where both words, συναγωγή (*synagoge*) and προσευχή (*proseuche*), were found. In the inscription from Bosphorus, it is obvious that the former word means “congregation”, while the latter word is used for the place of gathering for prayer or worship. This strongly suggests that the expression *pater tes synagoges* might mean simply “the leader of the community”.

Despite these arguments, there are also examples when the word *synagogue* is likely to mean a place of gathering or a building, rather than a community. An illuminative example is the inscription in honor of Polycharmus from Stobi, Macedonia, which also contains the term *pater tes synagoges*.<sup>17</sup> After having studied all possible interpretations—an honorific title, a title equal to the Roman *patronus*, a title implying certain administrative duties in the synagogue, and a title of a benefactor of the Jewish community—the editors concluded that Polycharmus had been a benefactor or a donor of the community before the inscription was carved. Moreover, they suggested that “he may received a title following his donation of the building which became a synagogue, as the inscription was ordered by him to clarify the legal position of his donation ... the term συναγωγή indicates the local Jewish community”.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, it is likely that the word *synagoge* in this inscription may be interpreted as the donated object, i.e., a building, and not as a community.

There is another inscription dated to the first century BCE or first century CE from Jerusalem (CIJP 2010, No. 9), where the word *synagogue* definitely means the building because it is used as a part of the expression ὠκοδόμησε τὴν συναγωγὴν (*okodomese ten synagogen*), which has the only meaning “(he) built a house of the synagogue”. This inscription is also remarkable because it was carved in the time before the destruction of the Second Temple.

Based on these arguments, the interpretation of the expression *pater tes synagogues* in our inscription as “the person who organized and built a synagogue”, rather than just the head of the community, is possible.

<sup>13</sup> CIIP 3847.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, (CIJ 1975, pp. 319, 494; IJO 2004, Mac 1) etc.

<sup>15</sup> See (Leon 1960, p. 139; cf. Levinskaya 1992, p. 199, n. 7; LSJ 1996, s.v.).

<sup>16</sup> IJO BS5 = (CIRB 1965).

<sup>17</sup> IJO Mac 1. Cf. *meter tes synagoges* (“mother of synagogue” in (Brooten 1982, p. 57ff)), also the common term *archisynagogos* or *archon tes synagoges* discussed in (Brooten 1982, pp. 15–30). The meaning of the word “synagogue” as a house of worship and as a congregation is a complicated issue. Thus, in the Septuagint the word עֲדָתָא (congregation) was translated as “synagogue,” while Josephus uses the word “synagogue” for a building in his *Bellum Judaicum* 2, chapters 285–292. For a discussion on the Greek and Jewish terms in Greek literary sources and epigraphy see (Hengel 1975, pp. 27–54). The collection of literary and epigraphic resources is found in (Anders Runesson and Olsson 2010). Note that the Hebrew term for the synagogue, בֵּית כְּנֶסֶת (*bet-keneset*), literary means “house of congregation”.

<sup>18</sup> IJO (2004) Mac 1 lemma, p. 66, with literature.

As far as the expression τῶν Ἰουδαίων (*ton Iudeon*), among all the possible interpretations of the word *Judeus* in inscriptions<sup>19</sup>, the only appropriate meaning for our inscription is “the Jews”. This is different from the inscription in the neighboring Chellah, which will be discussed below.

### 2.3. Inscription Three

The third inscription (Le Bohec 1981, No. 81, stone 0.79 m × 0.51 m × 0.33 m, inscription field 0.25 m × 0.22 m, current location unknown) is in Latin (Le Bohec 1981, No. 81).

DM S	For the ghost gods
Ant(onii) Sabba	Antonii Sabba-
tr[a]i; uix(it) annis (tribus), menses (quinque) et die	trai. He lived (three) years (five) months
bus (quattuor); pater pi(i)ssimus fe	and (four) days; by loving father
c(i)t.	made.

This Latin inscription is treated within the group of the Jewish inscriptions because of the patronymic Sabbatrai(s). Le Bohec (1981, p. 195) cautiously calls him “judaïsant” (a Judaizer). The formula of the inscription: DMS, name with patronymic and age of the dead was typical for all people of the Roman *oikoumene*, regardless the religious identity. However, the name Sabbatrai(s) is no doubt from the Hebrew root *shabbath*, and it was popular only among Jews.<sup>20</sup> In such a form the name seems to be hapax, but maybe the letter *r* was a mistake of the engraver and we can read here Sabbat(h)is.

### 2.4. Additional Findings

An additional evidence of the Jewish presence in Volubilis is a Greek inscription with the name Σαλεμων (*Salemon*), which is believed to correspond to שלום *Shalom*.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Brahmi<sup>22</sup> claims that there are total of six inscriptions from Volubilis, which may be considered Jewish.

Besides the epitaphs, two lamps decorated with menorahs were discovered during excavations. One is a remarkable bronze lamp with a candelabrum menorah-shaped stamp, which was found in Volubilis (Thouvenot 1969, pl. IV) and is now kept in the Rabat Archeological Museum (Figure 3a). The bronze lamp with a seven-branched candelabrum above the handle belonged to a member of the Jewish community, likewise another terracotta lamp with the menorah on the reservoir (Figure 3b) (Thouvenot 1969, pl. VIII; Ponsich 1961, p. 27).

Note that Volubilis was among the most remote south-western cities of the Roman Empire. However, even to the west of Volubilis was the Roman settlement of Chellah (near modern Rabat), where a Greek tombstone inscription on a marble plaque (Le Bohec 1981, No. 78). was found by H. Basset:

Μαρκεῖνος	Marinus <sup>23</sup>
Πτολεμαῖ	Ptolemaeus
ος Ἰου	from Ju-
δέος	Dea

In this inscription, the word *Judeus* is better understood as a local ethnicon, “from Judea”.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup> See (van der Horst 1991, p. 68), with literature.

<sup>20</sup> For parallels see (Ilan 2008, vol. 3, pp. 186–92).

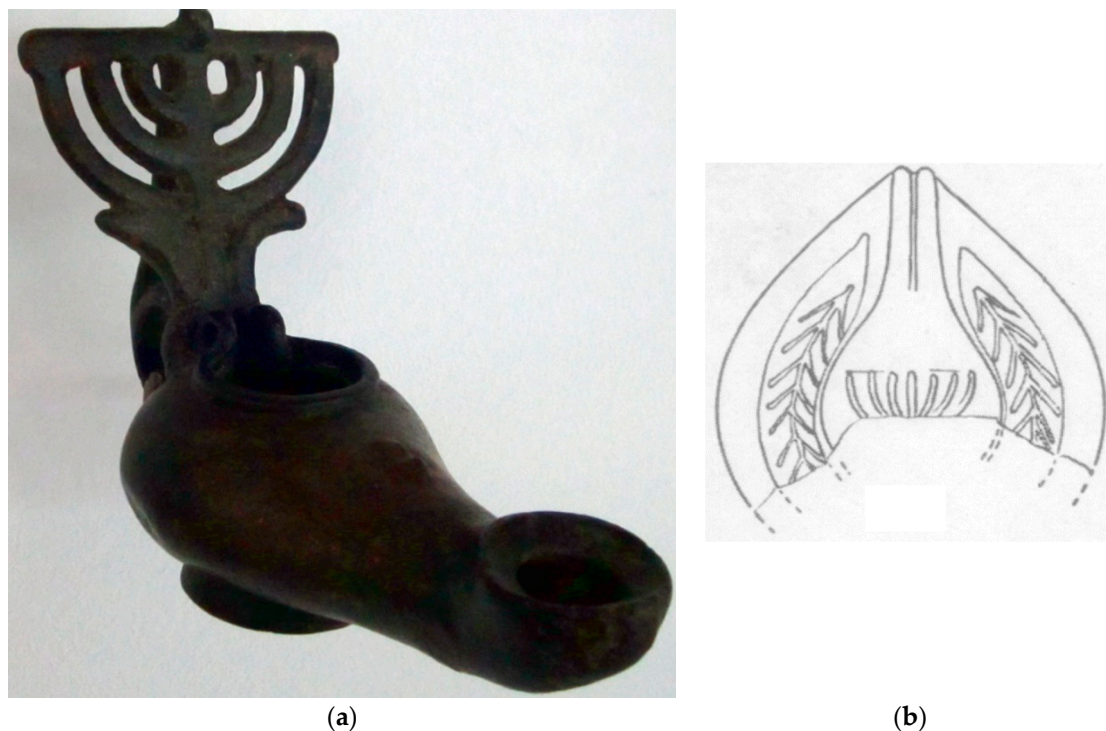
<sup>21</sup> CIL 21900, 21901. For different variants of the Greek transliteration (Σάλαμων, Σελέμων, Σαλάμων, Σολομών, etc.), see: (Ilan 2008, vol. 3, pp. 161, 191–92).

<sup>22</sup> Brahmi (2014, p. 549). He mentions the epitaph of “DMS/Anniae bene m(erentis)/Vixit/ann(is)”; however, it is unclear why this epitaph is Jewish, since the name Anna could be both Jewish or Christian.

<sup>23</sup> Ilan (2008, vol. 3, pp. 521–22), lists examples from Rome, Egypt, and Carthago.

<sup>24</sup> Hirschberg notes in his chapter that having Greek names and using the Greek language was common among the North African Jews of the period: “Most probably, that man obtained Roman citizenship under the law of Antoninus (Caracalla) in 212 and, like many others, added to his Greek name the personal name of that emperor: Marcus Aurelius (Antoninus).





**Figure 3.** (a) The menorah shaped bronze lamp from Volubilis, 4th–5th century. Archeological Museum in Rabat. (b) A fragment of a lamp with the menorah on the reservoir (redrawn from (Ponsich 1961, p. 27)).

### 3. Archeological Evidence

Ancient synagogues from both the Land of Israel and in the Jewish diaspora made a significant impact upon the formation of the modern Jewish identity and artistic style.<sup>25</sup> The identification of excavated Ancient synagogues remains controversial, because it is difficult to determine whether a particular public building served as a synagogue. In many cases, only Jewish inscriptions or mosaics with distinctively Jewish motifs can serve as a decisive argument to attribute a particular excavated structure as a synagogue. Besides that, typical features of the synagogues include the west–east orientation towards Jerusalem, and a source of water for purity considerations (Levine 2000; Weiss 2014). Stern has examined specific architectural features of Jewish devotional buildings in North Africa using Naro as a case study, and she concluded that Jewish practices did not differ much from their neighbors: “The Jewish population of Naro drew from North African devotional practices to define the space of the synagogue, its related organizational hierarchies and the activities that occurred within it ... Signs of cultural difference occasionally mark the otherwise locally conventional architecture and decoration” (Stern 2008, p. 252).

In North Africa, there are several excavated buildings, which were identified, with a certain degree of confidence, as ancient synagogues. The synagogue of ancient Naro (present-day Hammam

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His Hellenistic name and the Greek scripts suggest that he or his forebears came from the eastern region, perhaps from Cyrenaica, or even from Egypt. The name Salimos, found in Volubilis in Greek script, is general Semitic; it was used also by the Arabs, and occurs already among the Jews of Elephantine” (Hirschberg 1974, p. 68). Stern states that “The percentage of Jewish inscriptions in the Greek language and Greek scripts from Africa Proconsularis, Mauretanian Caesaria, Mauretanian Tingitania, and Mauretanian Sitifis exceeds the general percentage of Greek to Latin inscriptions within those areas” (Stern 2008, p. 191).

<sup>25</sup> Rodov (2013) states that the relationship of the Jewish culture in Renaissance Poland with the earlier adaptations of the Christian revival of classical antiquity by Italian Jews made a significant impact upon the formation of East European synagogue art. The remains of ancient synagogues became a new source of inspiration for synagogue architecture during the second half of the nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century in both Europe and America (Kravtsov 2019).

Lif in Tunisia) from the third to the fifth centuries CE constitutes the most complete archaeological evidence for Jewish religious practices in Roman North Africa. The synagogue was discovered in 1883 by the French captain Ernest De Prudhomme and identified by its mosaics including menorahs, biblical motifs, and devotional inscriptions (Stern 2008, p. 193). The synagogue was situated by the sea near the hot springs. As for the synagogue's orientation, Goodenough (1953) and Levine (2000) suggested that it was oriented towards the east; however, Stern (2008, pp. 207–9) made strong arguments that this assertion is incorrect and suggested that architectural features of the Hammam Lif synagogue did not differ significantly from those of other places of worship in the region, such as Christian churches and pagan shrines.

It has been suggested in the literature that ancient synagogues could have existed in several other North African cities including Leptis Magna, Carthage, and Tipasa. Ward Perkins (1952) hypothesized that a structure with a niche facing eastward in the forum of Lepis Magna (Libya) could serve as a synagogue until it was converted into a church in the sixth century. In Carthage (Tunisia), deposit patterns of Jewish lamps could mark a site of a synagogue, while in Tipasa (Algeria) a column capitol decorated with a menorah was interpreted as a possible location of an ancient synagogue. In addition, Procopius asserted that Jews from Boreium (Libya) possessed a synagogue, which was later converted to a church by Justinian.

As far as Volubilis, Frézouls (1971) suggested the existence of a synagogue at Volubilis, which he asserts was converted into a basilica, however, his claim is purely speculative. The center of the Roman city consisted of the forum with adjoining temples, a basilica, a capitol complex dedicated to Jupiter and several bathes (thermes), Figure 4a,b. So far, a number of temples have been excavated and identified in Volubilis; however, no attempt has been made to interpret any of these structures as a synagogue. These temples are traditionally marked by letters from A to H and they have been identified as either pre-Roman or Roman. Therefore, it is desirable to review excavated houses of worship in order to decide whether any of these buildings can serve as candidates for a synagogue.

Temple A having the north-south orientation is located to the east from the city center. This temple was the oldest religious structure in Volubilis, and it is identified as a Punic temple. The temple was destroyed and profaned by construction of an oven and other structures in the middle of the 1st century CE.

Temple B also having the north-south orientation is located on the left bank of the Fertassa river. At this location, more than 800 stelae were found representing figures in different attitudes: saluting, offering, listening and praying. Such figures are typical of sanctuaries dedicated to the god Saturn, whose worship replaced that of the Punic god Baal Hammon.

Pre-Roman Temple D having the north-south orientation located to the west of the Forum was the Forum Temple; however, it was modified many times during its history. Temples G and H (east-west orientation) were twin temples situated on the western edge of the Mauretanian city.

Temples from the Roman period are also present in Volubilis. Roman shrines include the Capitol devoted to the Capitoline Triad, Jupiter, Junon, and Minerve, which was erected in 217 CE during the rule of the Emperor Macrin. The basilica was built at around the same time.

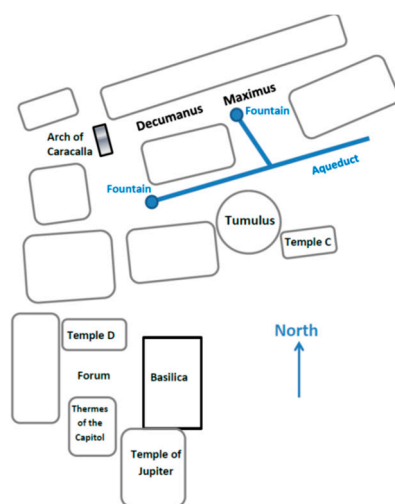
Temple C having the east-west orientation was built over the pre-Roman city wall and it is a little temple with its cella built onto a raised podium on the west side. An independent water supply was assured by a well to the southeast, just outside the temple (Figure 4c). The temple seems to have been destroyed after the Roman withdrawal of the third century (Spagnoli 2006, p. 177).

The epigraphic and archaeological evidence discussed in the previous section suggests that a significant Jewish community existed in Volubilis in the third century CE, and it is likely that the community had a permanent place of worship and prayer. However, it is not easy to identify any particular building of the Roman period with the synagogue. Temple C has the east-west orientation, and a nearby water source was found, however, the altar or the cella was located on the western and not on the eastern side. On the other hand, as indicated by Stern, even in the Hammam Lif synagogue

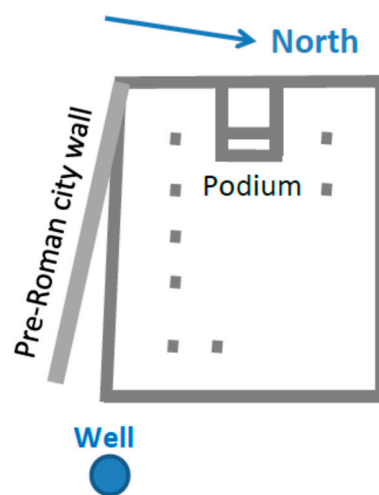
the orientation towards the east is quite questionable. Therefore, further analysis of archaeological evidence on this matter is desirable.



(a)



(b)



(c)

**Figure 4.** (a) Basilica and forum in Volubilis, view from the north (photo credit: G. Minkovsky). (b) Plan of the forum area of Volubilis. (c) Plan of Temple C with the east–west orientation and a water supply.

#### 4. Conclusions

Three Jewish funeral inscriptions in Hebrew, Greek, and Latin were discovered in Volubilis. In addition, there is a Greek inscription with the Jewish name Σαλεμων was found, and two lamps decorated with menorahs. All these artefacts are likely to have dated to the third century CE, and they indicate that a significant Jewish community existed in the city at that period. The naming patterns and the language of the inscriptions suggest that the Greek language played a significant role for the Jews of the region, probably due to their origin from eastern parts of the Roman Empire. Despite that, there are several mistakes in the Greek inscription mostly related to the confusion of the long and short vowels *omega* and *omicron*, *eta* and *epsilon*.

A Jewish community existed in Volubilis, and specific titles are used in the inscriptions including Hebrew “rabbi” and Greek “*protopolites*” (“first citizen”) and “*Pater tes synagoges ton Iudeon*” (“head of



the *synagogue* of the Jews”). The term *synagogue*, which literary means “a congregation”, can also be interpreted as a house of worship/prayer, since it was used in this meaning in some epigraphic sources.

It is difficult to identify a particular communal building of the third century CE which could serve as a synagogue, because North African synagogues of the period lacked distinct architectural features which could distinguish them from non-Jewish objects, apart from Jewish inscription and mosaics with biblical scenes, which have not been identified in Volubilis. It has been suggested that a synagogue was converted into the Basilica, however, there is no evidence for that hypothesis. More close attention to the excavated structures of the Roman period, such as Temple C, should be paid. We visited Volubilis in December 2018. Two Jewish inscriptions are exhibited at the local archeological center; however, they are hardly interpreted in detail, moreover, the Hebrew inscription is broken and only a small piece has survived.

In the study of the Judaism in Roman diaspora, there is a gap between three types of sources: (a) literary texts in the Hebrew and Aramaic languages, (b) epigraphic sources with mostly funeral inscriptions in the Greek and Latin, sometimes with some Hebrew, and (c) archeological evidence including the architecture of synagogue buildings and artistic interpretations of biblical stories and motifs. Studying epigraphic, literary, and archeological evidence in combination could help to close this gap, so more detailed attention of epigraphists to the North African Jewish inscriptions including creating a comprehensive corpus with texts, images and translations would be highly desirable. Hopefully, current efforts in digital humanities related to Jewish epigraphy would eventually fulfill this task.

Our analysis of Volubilis Jewish inscriptions and archeological evidence suggests that there was a significant Jewish community in Volubilis in the 3rd century CE. The Hebrew inscription is short and standard in terms of the words used. However, it is unique due to its geographic location, because it is the most western such inscription. The inscription constitutes evidence of using the Hebrew language in a place extremely remote from the contemporary centers of Judaism in Babylonia and Palestine. Moreover, the titles in the Greek inscription indicate that a significant Jewish community existed in Volubilis and that a synagogue likely existed there. There are still open questions regarding the Volubilis Jewish community, such as where the Jewish cemetery and synagogue were located, were there any other tombstones, and is there any evidence about this community in any other sources. While we cannot locate the synagogue precisely from the archeological data (several candidate buildings could be suggested including basilica and Temple C), the mere fact of its existence is important. We conclude that a Jewish community existed in this south-western extremity of the Jewish diaspora, and that the community had a distinct linguistic identity using the Hebrew and Greek languages, as opposed to the Latin and Berber languages of the non-Jewish population.

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