

New Observations on the ‘Basalt Stone Table’ from Horvat Kur, Galilee

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The 2012 discovery and 2016 publication of the basalt stone table from Horvat Kur, Galilee, has triggered a lively discussion about the meaning of its decoration and its function in its secondary and original contexts. The geometrical patterns on its top and three sides, as well as the objects represented on the front side are possibly connected with banqueting. The present article examines some recent arguments in favour of the table’s interpretation as a ‘Torah reading table’. As this article intends to demonstrate, on the basis of new stratigraphic analyses, none of the recent observations provide strong enough grounds for obliging us to follow this interpretation.

1. INTRODUCTION

At the end of the 2012 season at Horvat Kur, Kinneret Regional Project (KRP) examined the north-eastern corner of a building first uncovered in 2008 and identified as a Byzantine synagogue in 2010 (New Israel Grid 25050-60/75450-60). During excavations in Area A, square AE 28, volunteers discovered a flat basalt object that had been integrated into a secondary bench (Reg. No. 21200/1). Since its discovery and initial interpretation as a ‘stone table’ (Zangenberg 2016a), the object has initiated a lively discussion about its character and possible function. This article arises out of a kind invitation by Prof. Tessa Rajak, Chair of the Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society to present the latest results of KRP’s excavations at Horvat Kur. The lecture was delivered to the members of AIAS on June 12, 2019 at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London. I am grateful to Prof. David Jacobson and Dr. Rachael Sparks, Co-editors of *Strata*, for their invitation to continue the discussion and present some new observations and recent discussions on stone object no. 21200/1.

I base these notes on the latest results of Kinneret Regional Project’s study season during the summer of 2019. This work has revealed a much more detailed picture of the stratigraphy of several superimposed synagogue buildings excavated between 2010 and 2018 in Area A of Horvat Kur (**Fig. 1**).¹ These new data are important for understanding the architectural context of the Horvat Kur stone



KINNERET REGIONAL PROJECT
HORVAT KUR
Public Building
Overall Plan

Drawn by A. Rheeder
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PB-01-01-001-REV 2

Fig. 1. Stone plan of excavated architectural remains in Area A, 2016 (Plan © Kinneret Regional Project / Annalise Rheeder).

object and thereby help us to better conceptualise its potential function in both its secondary and — in a very tentative and experimental way — also its primary functional context. Such stratigraphic data are essential for any discussion, since they provide us with crucial benchmarks of what can be said and what not, and help us avoid turning hypotheses into facts and then using them as arguments in favour of even further-reaching theories.

2. INTERPRETING THE HORVAT KUR BASALT STONE TABLE: SOME HERMENEUTICS

Immediately after the basalt stone table from Horvat Kur (New Israel Grid 25050-60/75450-60) was found at the end of Kinneret Regional Project's 2012 excavation season, a lively discussion ensued about its character and possible function (**Fig. 2**). A first preliminary publication of the object appeared in 2013 (Zangenberg, Münger, Hakola and McCane 2013: 573–575), followed by a detailed discussion in the commemorative volume dedicated to Yizhar Hirschfeld (Zangenberg 2016a; interpretations in Zangenberg 2016b: 187–188 and Zangenberg 2019: 106–107).



Fig. 2. Aerial view of Horvat Kur, 2015. Note the synagogue on the main plateau in Area A, against the backdrop of the Lake. One can see Mount of Beatitudes to the right and, in the valley to the left, the Tabgha oasis. (Photograph © Kinneret Regional Project / Griffin Aerial Imaging Ltd.)

In the 2016 article, I described the location and architectural context in which the stone table was found, and I offered an inventory of all the decorated sides and a first interpretation of the object. Regarding its shape and decoration, I suggested that object no. 21200/1 can best be considered ‘an imitation of a low chest, table or pedestal’ perhaps to display or present certain objects (Zangenberg 2016a: 72*), whilst the decoration points to banqueting as a possible original functional context.

In the same 2016 commemorative volume, following my preliminary publication of the object, Mordechai Aviam programmatically presented the Horvat Kur stone as ‘another reading table base’, placing the object in the same category as the ‘Magdala stone’ found in 2009 (Aviam 2016). Steven Fine, however, has rejected the association of the Horvat Kur stone ‘with the earlier Magdala ashlar’ without presenting a detailed discussion (Fine 2017: 38 n. 49; a very brief reference to the Horvat Kur stone table can also be found in Aviam and Bauckham 2018: 135). Despite Fine’s call for caution, Aviam’s identification of the Horvat Kur stone as ‘another reading table base’ was recently taken up by Tibor Grüll who discussed

the table among ‘new archaeological proofs’ for the ‘reading of the Torah in the First Century Synagogue’ (Grüll 2018).

This is not the place to offer a broader critique of recent interpretations of the Magdala stone (see, e.g., Aviam 2013; Binder 2014; Bauckham 2015; Aviam and Bauckham 2018). It suffices to emphasise that the current debate about the Magdala table is severely hampered by the lack of fundamental data, including a thorough documentation of the stratigraphy and hence of the development of the changing spatial context of the Magdala stone table (for the present see, e.g., Aviam 2018). This uncertainty is hazardous when one considers that many scholars have already started exchanging ideas about the function and theological worldview behind this enigmatic object. Furthermore, intensive reconstruction and conservation efforts might have irretrievably obscured important archaeological evidence. Let me give an example: Where exactly was the Magdala stone found in the synagogue? Aviam (2016: 81*) has corrected me (referring to Zangenberg 2016a: 68*): ‘The Migdal stone was not found “in the corner of the central hall of the synagogue”, as claimed by Zangenberg, but rather closer to the centre of the hall’. He further claims that ‘the stone’s location is the result of work conducted at the site, probably before the war against the Romans’ (Aviam 2016: 81*). That may indeed ‘make sense’, but *how* can we know that to be the case? What is the evidence for it? I would gladly accept Aviam’s opinion if we had compelling evidence in support of it. Later, in a more recent publication, Aviam and Bauckham go on to describe the original find spot of the stone table in much more detailed, but not necessarily clearer terms: ‘In the central space of the hall of the synagogue was found a large rectangular limestone block. It was not actually in the center of that space (as some reports erroneously stated and where a replica of the stone now stands) but a little to the southeast of the center. (It is difficult to tell whether this is where it stood when the synagogue was in use.)’ (Aviam and Bauckham 2018: 135). So where exactly was *that*? What is the evidence for *such* a statement? Does this rambling sentence really say the same as Aviam stated in 2016? Time may hopefully provide clarity. These critical remarks are not intended to diminish the efforts of the excavators nor interpreters. The Magdala synagogue remains one of the most important finds of Galilean archaeology in recent decades. My comments only demonstrate how dangerous it is to use the Madgala stone as a hermeneutical tool to decipher the function and character of a seemingly similar, but potentially very different object like the Horvat Kur stone. Let us now return to consider the Horvat Kur specimen in some detail.

3. THE HORVAT KUR BASALT STONE TABLE (OBJECT 21200/1)

Crucial for any interpretation of the Horvat Kur basalt stone table is the fact that it was *not* found in its original context, but in a secondary context (Zangenberg 2016a: 62*–63*). In the secondary context, the stone table functioned as part of a bench that was integrated between the pre-existing columns to create additional seating space (Zangenberg 2019: 104–105; correcting Zangenberg et al. 2013: 573–75 speaking of a 'stylobate wall') (**Fig. 3**). This bench dates to the last phase of the so-called broadhouse synagogue (**Fig. 4**). The *terminus post quem* for the placement of the table (i.e., the spot where KRP found it) is defined by two gold coins dated to shortly before 600 CE (Zangenberg 2016a: 63*; Zangenberg 2016b: 187–188) (**Fig. 5**). Prior to this date, we have no direct information on the whereabouts, position and function of the table. It is possible, but far from proven, that the table had already been part of the synagogue's inventory; it could also have been brought to the synagogue from somewhere else in the settlement during the c. 600 CE refurbishment phase (**Fig. 6**).

Since the 2016 publication had extensively dealt with the shape and decoration of the table, I will not focus on these aspects again. I only would like to emphasize that I still do not see any reason to abandon the hypothesis that — given that the surface is decorated with coffers, glyphs and rings — the object most likely imitates wooden furniture (Zangenberg 2016a:71*–72*; accepted by Aviam 2016: 80*) (**Fig. 7**). Furthermore, the decoration on the front side presents a symmetrical arrangement of candelabra and jugs flanking a *simpulum*, a ladle for scooping liquids, and a handle-less chalice — objects that were widely used in antiquity during ritualised, cultic or societal dining (**Fig. 8**). I also consider it likely that that the shallow rectangular cassette on the table's top surface represents (or was made for placing) a flat, shallow receptacle such as a *lanx* (**Fig. 9**). The overall furniture-like appearance of object no. 21200/1 and its decoration with common elements of banqueting paraphernalia are important indications regarding its possible original reference context (Zangenberg 2016a: 74*–75*; rejected by Aviam 2016) (**Figs. 10, 11, 12**).



Fig. 3. Aerial view of central nave and eastern aisle of Byzantine broadhouse synagogue at the end of 2012 excavation season. Note the line of the broken-out secondary bench W7290/7287 with basalt stone table 21200/1 and adjacent lime stone block 21207/1 (south on top). (Photograph © Kinneret Regional Project)



Fig. 4. Aerial view of southern half of Byzantine broadhouse synagogue at the end of 2012 excavation season. Note basalt stone table 21200/1 on the lower left corner (south on top). (Photograph © Kinneret Regional Project)



Fig. 5. Basalt stone table 21200/1 and adjacent lime stone block 21207/1 during excavation.

- (a) The table's stumpy feet and the level of floor 1.7291 are not yet exposed (looking east from central nave).
- (b) Basalt stone table 21200/1 and adjacent limestone block 21207/1 from above. (Photographs © Kinneret Regional Project)



Fig. 6. Basalt stone table 21200/1 and floor l. 7291 now fully exposed. Note how the feet are sunk into the plaster and how the floor slopes up the lower edge of the stone table, supported by small chink stones. The shallow depression on the top and the decorative side pointing into the nave are clearly visible. (Photograph © Kinneret Regional Project).



Fig. 7. Horvat Kur basalt stone table 21200/1 after cleaning.
(Photograph Israel Museum Laboratories; © Kinneret Regional Project)

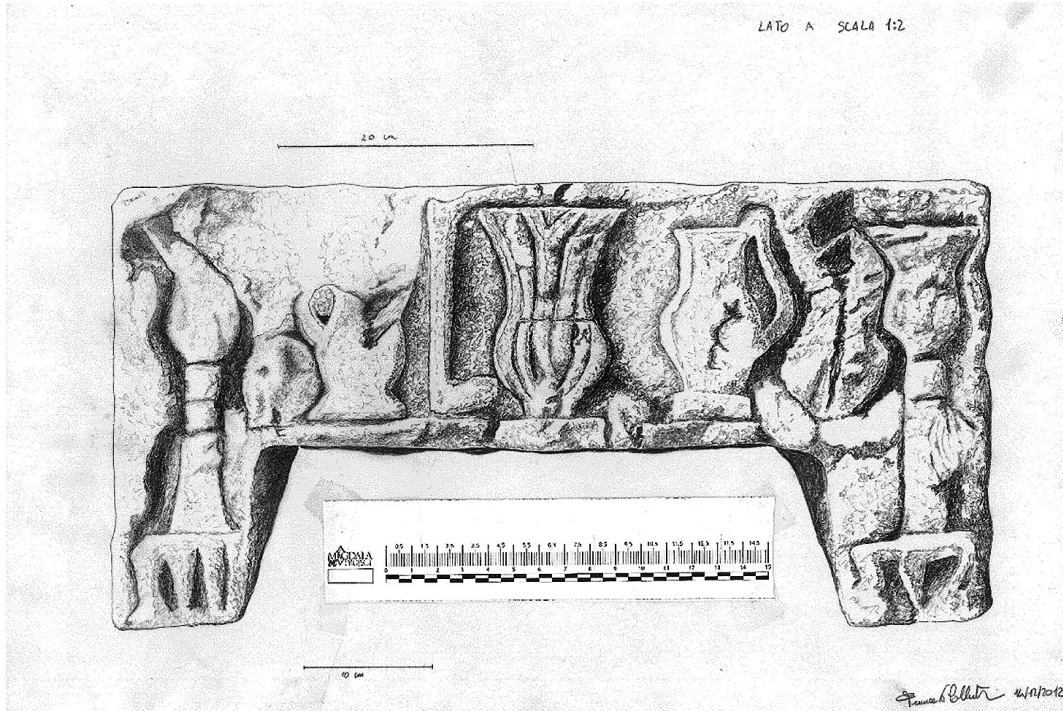


Fig. 8. Decorative side A of basalt stone table 21200/1. (Drawing Francesco Pilastri, Magdala Excavation Project; © Kinneret Regional Project).

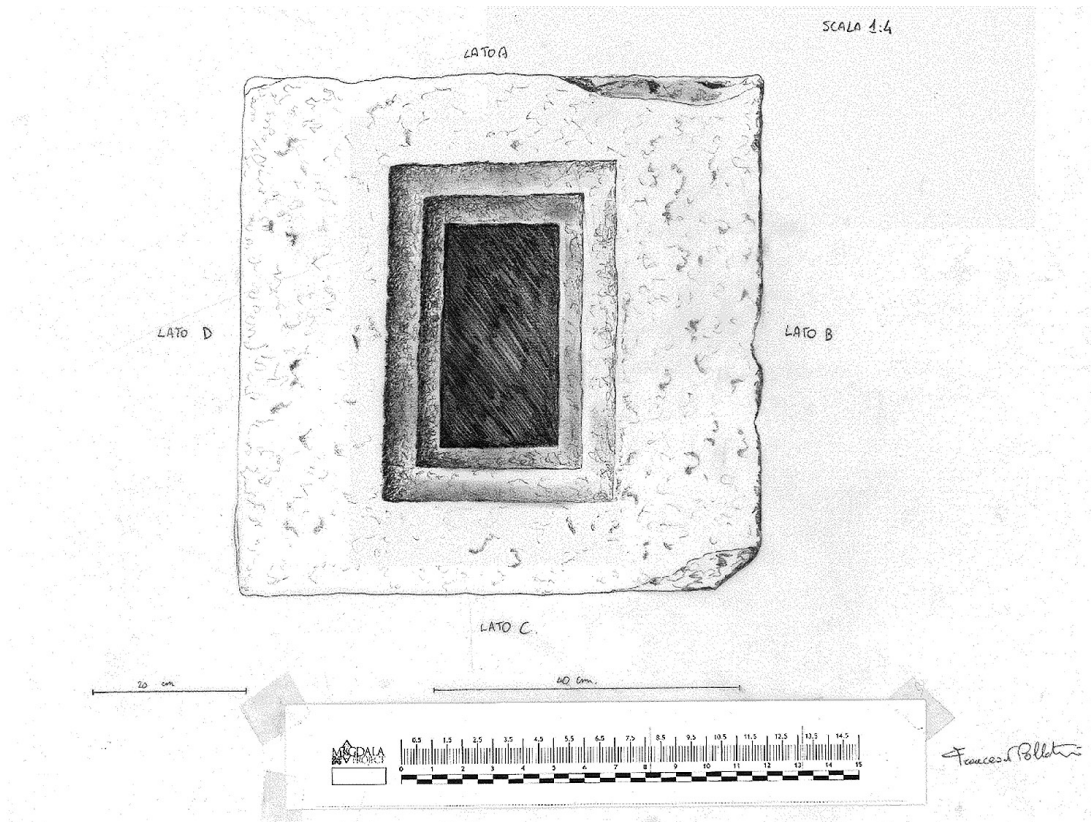


Fig. 9. Top of basalt stone table 21200/1. (Drawing Francesco Pilastri, Magdala Excavation Project; © Kinneret Regional Project).

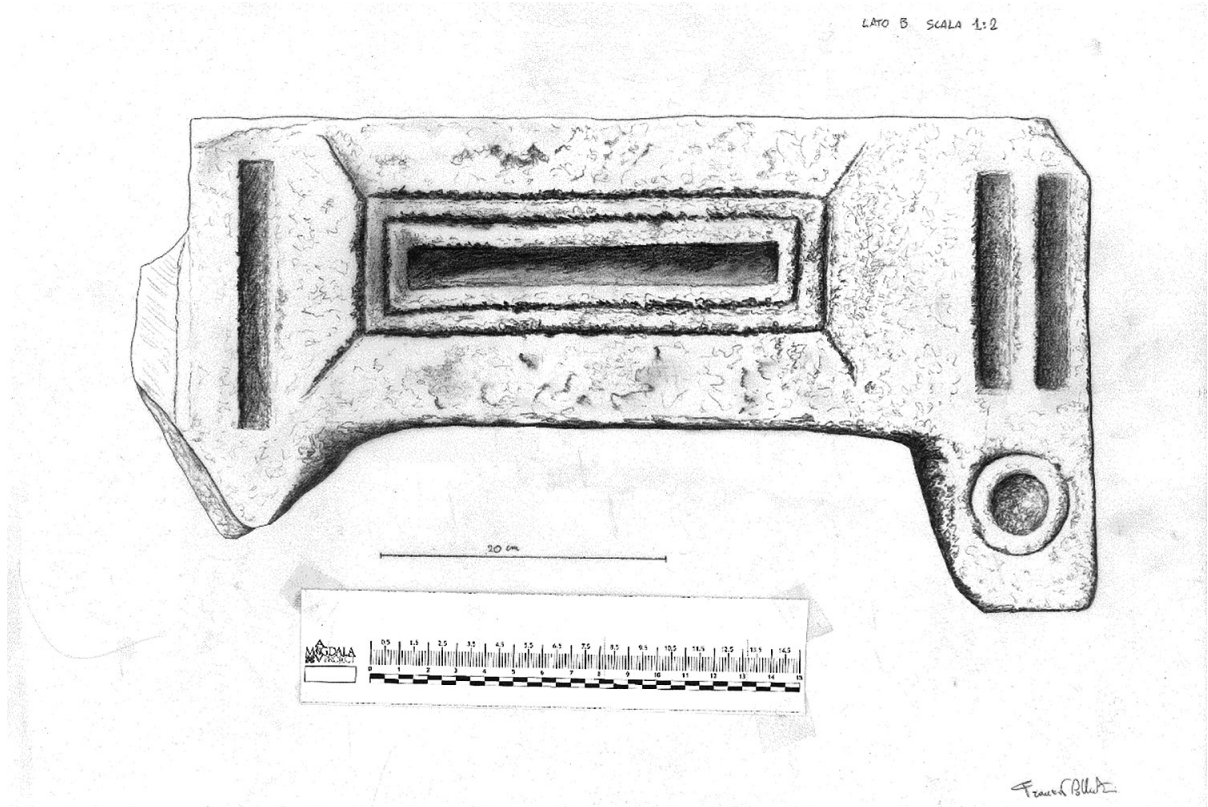


Fig. 10. Northern side B of basalt stone table 21200/1. (Drawing Francesco Pilastri, Magdala Excavation Project; © Kinneret Regional Project).

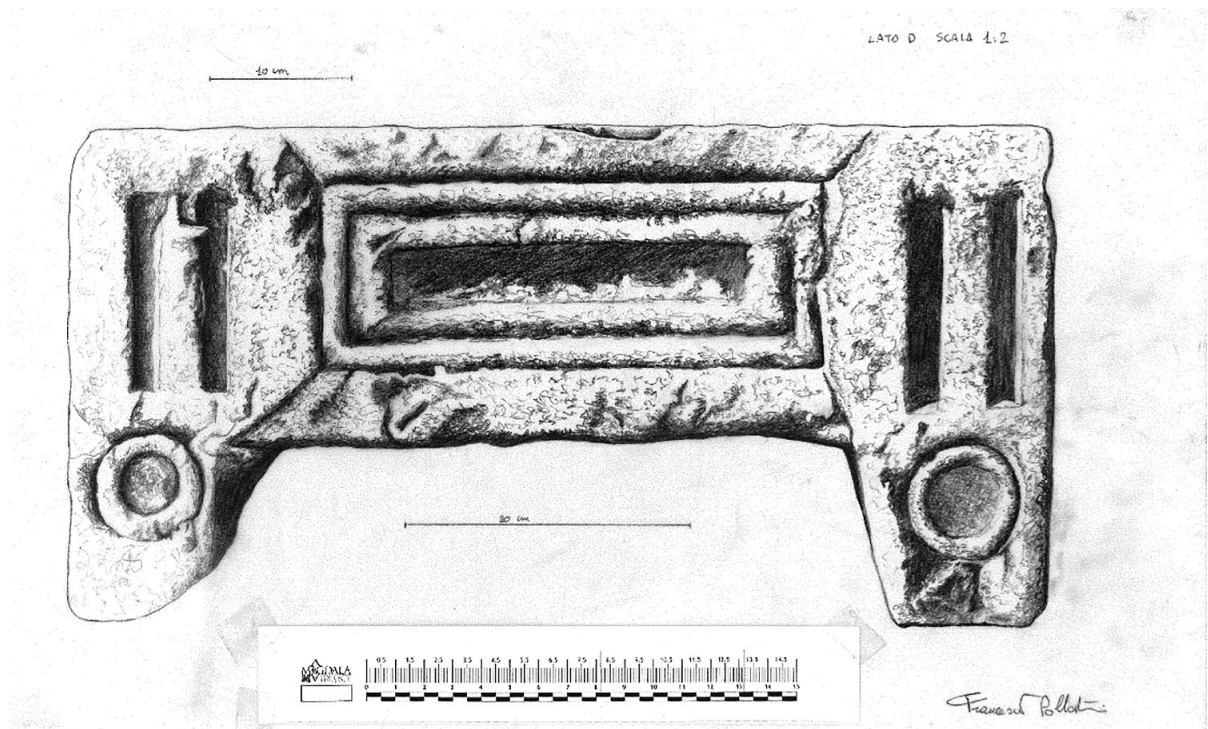


Fig. 11. Southern side D of basalt stone table 21200/1. (Drawing Francesco Pilastri, Magdala Excavation Project; © Kinneret Regional Project).

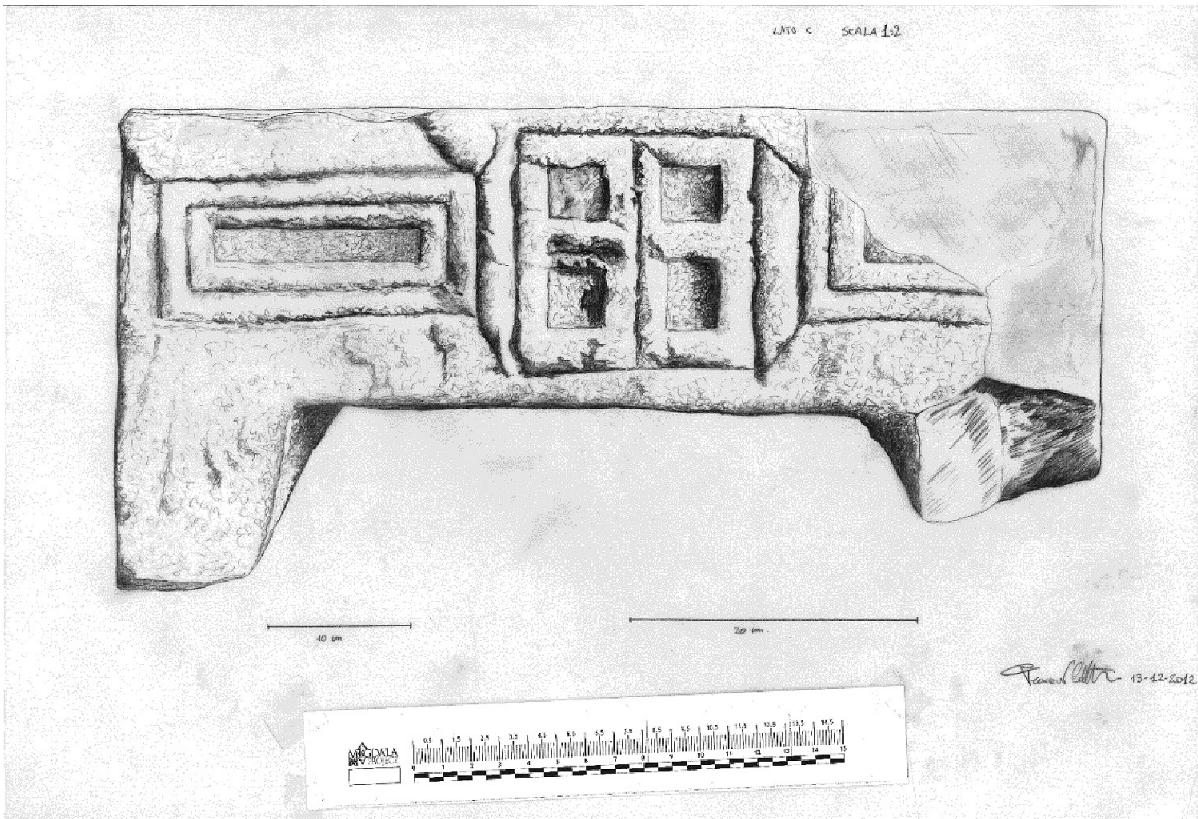


Fig. 12. Back side C of basalt stone table 21200/1. (Drawing Francesco Pilastri, Magdala Excavation Project; © Kinneret Regional Project).

4. MORDECHAI AVIAM'S INTERPRETATION

Let us now examine Aviam's argumentation more closely. In his 2016 article, he concludes that the Horvat Kur stone table was the 'base for a Torah reading table' (Aviam 2016: 81*). In contrast to the Magdala table which supposedly had four legs to support a hypothetical flat top on which the scroll would have been rolled out to be read, Aviam proposes that the Horvat Kur table had the form of a 'monopodium (a table with one leg)' (ibid.). To support his argument, Aviam claims that the 'sunken area (namely, on the top of the stone table) was not decorative but was designed to receive the base of the leg that supported a flat slab on top'. Although the 'sunken area' was no deeper than 2.5–3.0 cm, Aviam believes 'that the size of the depression, together with the steps around it, create enough friction to make the table steady' (Aviam 2016: 81*). Aviam is certainly right that one-legged tables were known in Roman and Byzantine Palestine, both as domestic furniture and for ritual purposes like altars. It is also theoretically conceivable that the Horvat Kur stone table's height of roughly 35 cm could easily have been expanded up to a level of perhaps 80 cm to allow comfortable reading, e.g., by adding a wooden or stone leg. The only question is how to fix the leg to the base to create the necessary stability. Here, Aviam states more than that he proves what he wishes us to accept.

I seriously doubt that the ‘sunken area’ on top of object no. 21200/1 alone would have provided enough stability, even if a pillar or column would have ended in a flat foot to fully fit into the stepped cassette. The leg and its presumptive flat top to roll out the scroll would inevitably wobble, slide out its socket and fall over. There is no sign of a slit or a hole for a peg or any trace of other fittings to hold a hypothetical flat foot in place. Lacking such a provision, it is doubtful if the flat area on the top of object no. 21200/1 was meant to serve as pedestal for any additional construction / installation at all. To the contrary, the entire surface of the ‘sunken area’ was carefully smoothed out (in fact it is the only area on the whole table surface to have received such a treatment). Moreover, there is no sign of wear and tear on this surface that one could expect if a heavy wooden or stone foot was standing to the stone table’s top (cf. Aviam in Aviam and Bauckham 2018: 138, 147–48 on how Aviam supposes that the corners of the Magdala table might have been prepared to support legs). Nothing of that sort of preparation can be found on the Horvat Kur block.

To support his interpretation of the Horvat Kur table, Aviam refers to a number of objects. It is important to note, however, that all these objects either have pegs and / or holes to receive pegs, and therefore a clear constructional connection with each-other (Aviam 2016: 81*, apparently referring to Geva 2010: 179–82, 203 pl. 5.16), or are simply inconclusive: The ‘square hole in the center of the apse’ at the Monastery of Horvat Zaggag, ‘probably to hold the leg of the altar table’ is not visible on fig. 5 in Aviam and Ashkenazi 2014: 165, neither is the crucial foot/base-connection of the altar table in the Myra church in the photograph that Aviam mentions (see Aviam 2016: 82* n. 2, referring to <http://frstephensmuts.wordpress.com/2013/01/08/sealed-under-turkish-mud-a-well-preserved-byzantine-chapel/>).²

Aviam’s next supporting evidence, the beautiful, complete stone table from room L.203 (Area B, Stratum 2) of the Burnt House in Jerusalem’s Jewish Quarter, is indeed very illuminating because it allows us to study the only type of connection between a stone table-top and table leg attested in archaeology so far: Both on the bottom of the pedestal, as well as on the upper side of the capital and the round bottom of the column-like leg we find deep, square depressions to receive corresponding pegs / knobs that connect the leg to the table top and have joined the foot of the leg to some sort of stand (Geva 2010: 203 and pl. 5.16). The stand, however, was apparently not preserved, so the table leg seems to have been simply set onto the beaten earth floor: see the description of the table from L.203 in Geva 2010: 181 and his description of rooms L.213 and L.203 where this and another table were found fallen to the ground (ibid., 40–54); [note that there was a hole in the ground at Horvat Zaggag to receive the foot of a one-legged altar, according to Aviam and Ashkenazi 2014: 165]. The specific find situations of the Burnt House tables in rooms L.203 and L.213 suggest that stability of the tables might have been generated by leaning them against the neighbouring walls (cf. Geva

2010: 168, fig. 5.3). If the Horvat Kur stone table had indeed served as foot for a comparable leg-pedestal combination as Aviam implies, we would not only expect a similar depression on its top to receive a peg extending from the foot of a leg (or a peg to be received by a corresponding depression in the foot), but also perhaps a similar position close to a supporting architectural feature like a wall or a column. Nothing of that kind is present; what we have instead on top of the Horvat Kur table is a shallow, flat and smoothed-out area that would have been incapable of supporting any superimposed installation. Without a peg-hole-arrangement similar to the tables in the Burnt House, the supposed table-top on the Horvat Kur stone would not have stood firm when used as reading table. Furthermore, the table's find position does not suggest that additional stability might have been created by leaning the 'reading table' against any architectural feature in the synagogue. Standing free as it is, Aviam's one-foot reading installation would be utterly instable. There is, therefore, little reason to assume that the Horvat Kur basalt table was used as base for a 'reading table'.

5. TIBOR GRÜLL'S INTERPRETATION

Tibor Grüll (2008) collected textual and archaeological evidence about Torah reading in the 1st century CE and also commented on the synagogue and finds from Horvat Kur. Here, too, a few remarks seem appropriate. After discussing the square platform of the Torah shrine attached to the southern wall of the Horvat Kur synagogue and briefly describing the limestone seat, Grüll continues with the – in his words – 'most spectacular object unearthed in the excavations', i.e. the basalt stone table, no. 21200/1. Grüll further explains: 'Although Jürgen Zangenberg in his preliminary reports warns us against prematurely judging the possible function of the decorated stone found at Horvat (Horbat) Kur, to the best of my knowledge nothing precludes the possibility that this was the same type of lectern as the Migdal stone, but later, when it fell into disuse because of the building of the permanent Tora shrine, the stone was built-up into the wall' (Grüll 2018: 144).

According to Grüll, who is apparently unaware of Zangenberg 2016a with its full pictorial documentation of the Horvat Kur stone table, the object 'is also carved with images of the Temple' which was nowhere said in the publications he quotes (Grüll 2018: 143). Moreover, Grüll's interpretation is put forward with little consideration for chronological questions. It should be noted that Grüll's article concerns 1st-century evidence for reading the Torah in synagogues. While a 1st-century connection of the Magdala synagogue and the stone table is a reasonable proposition, he fails to produce evidence why the Horvat Kur stone table should also be relevant for his topic. Chronology does not seem to be a major point of Grüll's concern; he rather argues in what might be called typological terms. Be that as it may, for the interpretation of the Horvat Kur stone table, chronology *is* an

issue, even if our grip on the object is still hampered by lack of clear information on crucial periods of its existence. First, we do not have any firm evidence about when the Horvat Kur stone was made, nor on when it was brought into the synagogue (at the time of placement in the secondary bench around 600 CE, or earlier, as part of the synagogue's inventory?). Second, there is no evidence of a 1st-century CE synagogue at Horvat Kur. So, even *if* object no. 21200/1 *had* existed at Horvat Kur at such an early date to be comparable to the Magdala stone, it could not have functioned in a synagogue contemporaneous to the one at Magdala. Without a chronological connection, however, linking the Horvat Kur table with the Magdala stone only on the basis of similarity of size and shape, as implied by Grüll, is problematic, at the very least. The earliest point in time when object no. 21200/1 *could* have been part of the synagogue's inventory on Horvat Kur is sometime in the late 1st half of the 4th century CE (c. 330 CE). At that time, according to recent analysis of pottery retrieved in probes under the lowest plaster floor in area A (l. 7629; l. 7665; l. 7667; l. 7670=7674=7700 and l. 7486), the first building under the later broadhouse synagogue was built (i.e., the eventual find spot of object no. 21200/1).³ It is possible, but far from proven, that this earliest floor had also belonged to a synagogue, although the exact size and layout of this building are still subject to further research. So far, we do not know where the stone table was at that time, the first direct evidence for the table in the synagogue is the refurbishment of the broadhouse synagogue shortly after 600 CE.

Grüll's statement, that 'later, when it fell into disuse because of the building of the permanent Tora shrine, the stone was built-up into the wall' (Grüll 2018: 144, referring to the secondary bench in which it was found), is indeed interesting in several respects. Grüll rightly suggests that the table no longer served as lectern after having been integrated into the bench. This is indeed plausible, since the location, in which KRP found it, would be very awkward and uncomfortable for any sort of reading. Whoever might have read from the lectern (either kneeling or standing, if one accepts Aviam's hypothesis of a wooden superstructure with foot and horizontal top) would need to do so from a bench inserted between two columns in the eastern aisle of the synagogue, and address the congregation from the side. I, at least, do not know any parallel for such a practice.

Another observation is in order. Because the 1st-century CE Magdala synagogue had no fixed receptacle for storing scrolls and reading, some sort of mobile device is indeed plausible in this particular case. The Byzantine broadhouse synagogue at Horvat Kur, however, *did* have a prominent, two-phase *bemah* attached on the southern wall (Zangenberg 2016b). This is the only place from which Torah reading could have plausibly been performed in the broadhouse — to a congregation that faced Jerusalem (i.e., south) when listening to the person reading from the *bemah*. Grüll is therefore right when he says that the existence of a *bemah* excludes the necessity of an additional 'reading table'. Since the first *bemah* in the synagogue

of Horvat Kur was very likely to have been built during the first phase of the broadhouse synagogue type, around 450 CE at the latest, but is found integrated only with the *second*-phase bench dating to c. 600 CE, the question arises where the stone table was during the first broadhouse phase. How should this chronological gap be filled? Parallels with Qazrin, Kh. Shema' and Deir Aziz, where similar spolia have been integrated into benches, remain too vague to substantiate Aviam's claim that 'the decorated stone of H. Kur was an important object in an earlier stage of the building and was therefore concealed (...) near the location where it was in use' (Aviam 2016: 81*).

My impression is that object no. 21200/1 was not yet part of the synagogue's inventory during the first broadhouse phase, i.e. between c. 450 and c. 600 CE. If this is correct, which is hard to prove at the present time, it is less likely that the stone table already had any function in the pre-broadhouse period, which lasted from c. 330 to c. 450 CE. It is true, however, that the pre-broadhouse period synagogue had no fixed *bemah*, but — at least in its latest phase — a mosaic menorah on the floor instead marked the liturgically relevant southern wall. In this context, a mobile reading table would at least theoretically have made sense. Gröll's remark is, therefore, worth keeping in mind for future research, but it is doubtful that object no. 21200/1 fulfilled that function. Both the difficulty of how to reconstruct a stable reading table on top of the stone table, and the likelihood that the stone table was only brought into the synagogue in the latest phase of its existence — and then with the immediate purpose to use it as stone seat in a secondary bench — precludes object no. 21200/1 having had anything to do with a 'Torah reading table'.

6. A TENTATIVE CONCLUSION

So far, the arguments put forward by Aviam and Gröll do not seem strong enough to demonstrate that Horvat Kur object 21200/1 really served as 'Torah reading table'. Apart from the issues addressed in this article, two main problems remain to be dealt with in future research. First, we still do not know enough about 'reading tables', their appearance and how they were used in the context of ancient Palestinian synagogues. The second problem is the small number of archaeological parallels which complicates comparisons of the Horvat Kur table in form, style and function with similar objects. Both desiderata put the 'Magdala stone', interpreted as 'Torah reading table', into the almost unique position to serve as a paradigm for understanding the Horvat Kur stone table. Although this approach might seem comfortable, it actually limits our heuristic options, and I am not convinced that it is certain or necessary. For the moment, the evidence does not require me to go any further than what I have already proposed in Zangenberg 2016a and what I also repeat here: In its *secondary* context, object no. 21200/1 was part of a bench,

likely marking a special location (VIP seat, or ‘treasury’) while the *primary* context necessarily remains much more uncertain, though form and decoration perhaps point to a dining context. This seems all we can safely say for now, and so long as we do not know more about ancient Torah reading habits and devices, or have more archaeological parallels with which to compare the Horvat Kur stone. Only time will tell.

Notes

- 1 I wish to thank my colleagues Philip Bes, Raimo Hakola, Byron McCane, Stefan Münger, Annalize Rheeder and Anna Lena for very fruitful discussions.
- 2 The reference Geva 2010, 111 fig. 3.75b refers to a plate showing Iron Age Pottery and therefore is not relevant.
- 3 It should be noted that the lowest floor above the probes is not identical with the floor that bore the mosaic fragment published in 2017 (Zangenberg 2017), but *predates* it.

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