

Birds, Lions and Elephants: Memories of A Glorious Past in Tras-os-montes Portugal.
By Joseph Shulam

On a visit to the village of Carcao in the area of Tras-os-montes a very big lintel made from a very old stone was resting on two old walls. The stone lintel was actually turned on it's side and the first visible thing on that old stone lintel was a cross deeply carved into the face of that stone. Looking more carefully one could see a bird like figure and even another cross with two birds flanking each side of the cross. It was clear even at first sight that this big stone lintel was actually used in secondary use in that old building. The underside of the stone had a animal figure that at first looked like a lion but after a more careful examination it actually looked much more like an elephant. My curiosity was immediately kindled to find out more about this big stone lintel and the meaning of those symbols carved on it.



The big stone lintel in the village of Carcao, Tras-os-montes, Portugal.

In many of the ancient cities and villages of Portugal there is the Juderia, the Street of the Jews, and when one walks down these streets the old gray granite stones that make the doorways still carry the scars of the mezuzah scrolls that at one time adorned these doorways of Jewish homes. In some cities the old synagogues that were used by the Jewish communities before the inquisition are now being discovered excavated and restored. Crosses carved on the doorways are not so silent witnesses of the horrors of the Inquisition. These crosses were carved on the doors of the “New Christians,” those Jews who were forced to convert to Catholicism to mark these homes as homes of “New Christians” that need to be watched and observed to see if they are actually practicing anything of their old faith, Judaism. The old buildings of the Jews at times were decorated with symbols particular to the Jewish

Community, birds were often used and strange crosses were used and at times crosses and ladders and Hebrew letters were used and at times lions or Elephants had special meaning. The meaning of these symbols was essentially a mystery a secret that the Jews did not want to share with their Christian neighbors for the fear of the auto-de-fe of the “holy office of the Catholic church.”

This big stone in Carcao is particular because of several reasons. It is very big and it is carved on at least two sides, it has at least three birds, two crosses with special basis for these crosses and it also has a very special animal that some say it is a lion and it actually might be an elephant.



A bird on the big stone in the village of Carcao



Two birds and a cross with a base from the village of Carcao



The Garca bird and a cross with a triangular base



The Elephant / Lion that is actually under the big stone in the village of Carcao



The Hebrew Letter "Het" = 8 carved on the big stone in the village of Carcao

These symbols have special meaning and that was intended for the "New Christians" to understand and for others not to understand. For this reason they are enigmatic symbols that need special explaining.

First let me deal with the birds because in many Medieval documents and architectural elements there are birds depicted and in some places it is clear that there is a bird head on top of a human body.



The Birds' Head Haggadah, the oldest surviving Ashkenazi illuminated manuscript (S. German, c. 1300)



This Jewish figure wearing a Jewish hat, in a detail of a medieval Hebrew calendar, reminded Jews of the palm branch (Lulav), the myrtle twigs, the willow branches, and the citron (Etrog) to be held in the hand. The face of this Jew is a face of a bird with a beak.

Now why are bird representation popular in Jewish Medieval art and especially in Synagogues art? I suggest that these birds are a play on words between Spanish and Hebrew. The birds that we see on the big stone in the village of Carcao are very likely birds called “Garca” in Spanish and Portuguese. The name “Garca” is cut from the Spanish/Latin word “Gracia” grace. In Hebrew “Gracia” is “Hessed” - and one of the biggest birds that passes over the land of Israel and is a type of “Garca” is the Hassida, or the stork / crane. So we have the word “Garca” that reminds us of “Gracia” that in Hebrew is Hessed and the crane/stork is Hassida and a righteous and God fearing person is called in Hebrew a Hassid from the same root as the Hassida – the bird. The whole thing in the Jewish mind set of Medieval Europe was connected with the 8th chapter of the book of Jeremiah:

*“Why has this people slidden back, Jerusalem, in a perpetual backsliding? They hold fast to deceit, They refuse to return. I listened and heard, But they do not speak aright. No man repented of his wickedness, Saying, ‘What have I done?’ Everyone turned to his own course, As the horse rushes into the battle. **“Even the stork in the heavens Knows her appointed times; And the turtledove, the swift,***

and the swallow Observe the time of their coming. But My people do not know the judgment of the LORD. "How can you say, 'We are wise, And the law of the LORD is with us'? Look, the false pen of the scribe certainly works falsehood. The wise men are ashamed, They are dismayed and taken. Behold, they have rejected the word of the LORD; So what wisdom do they have?" (Jer. 8:5-9)

Also the text of Deuteronomy 33:8-9, "And of Levi he said: "Let Your Thummim and Your Urim be with *Your holy one [your righteous ones] - (hassidecha – in Hebrew, which can be understood as your storks or cranes "Garca" in Portuguese)*, Whom You tested at Massah, And with whom You contended at the waters of Meribah, Who says of his father and mother, 'I have not seen them'; Nor did he acknowledge his brothers, Or know his own children; For they have observed Your word And kept Your covenant."

These birds on the walls of Synagogues and on the big stone in Carcao are a kind of statement of resistance symbolizing on the one hand hope for deliverance from Catholicism and Christian oppression and on the other hand a acknowledgement of brotherhood and a common destiny with the rest of the Jewish people.

It is clear that the play of words between "Grace" / "Hessed" and Garca and Hassida is one that makes sense that there is some kind of influence between the two languages in the name of this bird and the from there to point to the relationship between Hassidim (God Fearing) and Hassida is Graca is natural.



Two birds bowing down under the cross.
From the Lintel Stone in Carcao

The relationship of the Birds on the stone lintel and the cross is another question altogether. When you look at the stone it is clear that their heads are down and they are both in a position of submission or conformity. What kind of sign those this position convey? If you wish it could convey that these birds are worshipping the cross and are submitted to it? If you wish it could also convey that the birds are compelled to worship the cross and they are doing it because they are forced to do it and are in fact unhappily and depressed. Attention should be paid also to the stand on which the cross is standing. It is very similar to a Menorah stand which could in some way convey a message that although the cross is a symbol of oppression it too is a Jewish in the final count. This might be a way too sophisticated explanation, but under conditions of oppression people often have ambivalent attitudes even toward their oppressors.

Traditional animal symbols that accompany the Ark of the Torah in Synagogues both in Sefarad and in Ashkenaz are birds and lions. About the lions there is almost unanimity that it symbolizes the tribe of

Judah and the Davidic Kingdom. So there is little wonder that lions adorn synagogues from as early as the 3rd century in the synagogue of Dura Europus in the Syria.



The floor Mosaic from the Hammat Tiberia Synagogue.

In the synagogue of Hammath Tiberia, south of the city of Tiberias on the shores of the Sea of Galilee there are several mosaics of lions. This synagogue is from 1380 A.D. Lions appear in the mosaic floors of Synagogues because they are a symbol of tribe of Juda and also they have a prophetic significance indicating the fulfillment of the prophecies to the house of King David. The date of the Synagogue in Tiberias is just a few hundred years preceding the period of the Spanish and Portuguese Inquisition. These pictures of lions do show that even in the land of Israel during a period of Arab occupation in Tiberias synagogues lions were used as decoration. The fact that lions were used in Synagogues all through the land of Israel and over a prolonged period of time is an indication that lions had a particular importance to the Jewish population over the ages. In the Synagogues of Bar-Am, Beit Alfa, Chorazin, Beit Shean, Ein Samsum, and Jericho, that were all built during the Byzantine period or earlier lions probably had a special significance because during that period lions were also a symbol of the hope of Israel and the revival of the Davidic / Messianic Kingdom promised by the prophets. Lions connected the setting of the Synagogue with the story of Daniel the prophet inside the Lion's den, as a symbol of resistance and survival in front of the challenges of the oppressors.¹ This motif becomes very important when it is used in a situation of oppression and discrimination and persecution like in the period of the inquisition both in Portugal and in Spain.

Lois Whitmore in her review of Marc Epstein's book says: *“The juxtaposition of animal symbols frequently compounds the difficulty of decoding their meaning. For example, what does it mean when a unicorn and a lion battle, as they do on the ceiling of the Hodorov synagogue? Lions have a long*

¹ As an Example of such texts in the Bible See: [Gen. 49:9](#) “Judah is a lion’s whelp; From the prey, my son, you have gone up. He bows down, he lies down as a lion; And as a lion, who shall rouse him?” [Jer. 49:19](#) “Behold, he shall come up like a lion from the floodplain of the Jordan Against the dwelling place of the strong; But I will suddenly make him run away from her. And who is a chosen man that I may appoint over her? For who is like Me? Who will arraign Me? And who is that shepherd Who will withstand Me?” [2Tim. 4:17](#) “But the Lord stood with me and strengthened me, so that the message might be preached fully through me, and that all the Gentiles might hear. And I was delivered out of the mouth of the lion.”

Jewish history, as a second messianic symbol of the world to come, as Judah, the leader of the tribes, as “a visual homonymic pun ” equating with Torah? Of course for Christianity, the Lion represents Christ. Epstein looks to historical functions of lion as a negative symbol, as in God in his anger, enemies of the Jewish people. Bust historical textual interpretation is not enough; he also stresses the importance of context, the history and culture of place, of setting , in furnishing interpretive clues. Local history for the seventeenth century Jews who worshipped in the synagogue, saw this lion and unicorn on their ceiling , are pogroms and false Messiahs. Epstein imagines that they saw in these symbols a sacred promise—the end of their travails with a simultaneous redemption.”² The view that Epstein brings here is a kind of a two edged sword, because these same animals have both positive and negative connotation and it depends on the context of the place and time as to how the Synagogue worshipers would look at it.

However, the carved animal on the bottom of the Corcao lintel stone might not be a lion at all. It at first sight seems like a lion because it has four legs and a head, but when I looked at picture again it looked to me much more like an elephant. It has a long nose and a head that looks much more like an elephant than like a lion. This totally surprised me to discover that it might not be a lion but an elephant. I did not remember any elephants in Synagogue decorations or for that matter I did not remember any elephants as Jewish symbols. In fact the word “elephants” in Hebrew “Pil” does not exist in the Bible. Elephants are not a part of the Biblical menagerie of animals mentioned. When I started to look at the possibility of elephants in synagogues I was surprised greatly to find elephants figuring in Rabbinic Literature.³ In the Bible elephants don't appear at all, but in some medieval synagogues elephants appear in a very prominent position right next to the Ark of the Torah. Although there are not many examples of elephants in the synagogues there are enough places that make it very plausible that the elephants in the synagogues had some very important meaning. In the Worms Mahzor, a festival prayer book completed in 1272 and now housed in the Hebrew University Library in



Jerusalem, there is a color plate (number VII) of a magnificent elephant right in the opening page. Jews were not so familiar with elephants. Christians in Europe were more familiar with elephants we

2 Marc Michael Epstein, Dreams of Subversion in Medieval Jewish Art and Literature, Penn State Press, 1997, Reviewed by Lois Whitmore, in Parshanot – commentary on Jewish Things, May 15, 2008.
 3 See the following references in Rabbinical Literature: B. T. Berachot 56b, 58b, Kidushin 25b, Baba Batra 22a, Menachot 69a, Midrash Leviticus p6:3, Psikta Rabbati p20, etc.

know this from medieval books dealing with animals as elements of teaching.

Yehudah Hadassi was a Karayt scholar who wrote the Eshkol HaKofer. Yehudah Hadassi lived in the 12th century (1184) and in his book he presents a kind of parable of Elephants that represents a kind of clear Christian influence on the 12th century Karayt community: *“The Elephant’s nature is that if he tumbles down he cannot get up again. Hence it comes that he leans against a tree when he wants to go to sleep for he has no joints in his knees. This is the reason why hunters saw partially through a tree, so that when the elephant leans against it, the tree would break and the elephant would fall down at the same time as the tree. As he falls, he calls out loudly; and immediately a large elephant appears, but it is not able to lift him up. At this they both cry out, and twelve more elephants arrive upon the scent: but even they cannot lift up the one who has fallen down. Then they all shout for help, and at once there comes a very Insignificant Elephant, and he puts his mouth with the proboscis under the big one, and lifts him up. When the Big Elephant arrive i.e. the Hebrew Law, and fails to lift up the fallen elephant, it is the same as when Pharisee failed with the fellow who had fallen among thieves. Nor could the Twelve Elephants, i.e. the Band of Prophets, lift him up, just as the Levite did not lift up the men we mentioned. But it means that Our Lord Jesus Christ, although he was the greatest, was made the most insignificant of All the Elephants. He humiliated himself and was made obedient even unto death, in order that he might raise men up.”*



Elephant in the decoration in the Synagogue of Chodorov in Poland. Dated to the 17th Century.

In the 13th century Rabbi Berechiah HaNakdan wrote a book called in Hebrew, Mishlei Shualim (fables of Fox').(12) Rabbi Berechiah writes a story of hunting elephants that has some very interesting elements relevant to our quest. The Elephant hunt fails in the first round and than the hunter covers the head of the elephant with his coat and brings the elephant to the village. The people in the village and in the fields fear the elephant because they believe that he is a demon and run away from the town. The man who came with the elephant calls his friends into the town and the loot the the town and pillage it. The city leadership brings the terrified people of city and offers them to be exorcised for half the riches of the city. The people agree to pay the price and their fate changes. According to Rabbi Brachiah and Rabbi Hadassi these stories about Elephants is actually told for the purpose of illustration and polemics of Christian doctrine dogma dealing with the nature of mankind. The Big Elephant is a symbol of the Torah / the Jewish Law that is capable of saving.

An early example of an elephant in a Jewish context is a mosaic floor in the synagogue of Ma'on at Nirin, Israel. This synagogue is from about 530 A.D. (Epstein 54) The elephants are featured among other familiar symbols from the natural world, and Jewish ceremonial symbols like a menorah, a lulav and ethrog and a lions, palm trees, birds free and in cages, and domesticated elephants wearing saddles appear in medallion like enclosed decorative shapes. In an eighteenth century synagogue in what was formerly Poland, now Lithuania, and in a seventeenth century synagogue at Hordova, (Ukraine) elephants are paired relative to a depiction of the Ark of the Torah. The paired animal motif is common but usually features birds or lions. When elephant appear it is such a rare occasion that it needs an explanation? However, explanations are difficult to come up with because elephants are so far from the cultural or geographic context of the Jewish community in Europe. Therefore what is left is only the possibility that an allegorical or a mystical consideration is the reason why Elephants are sometimes used in Synagogue decorations.



The Mosaic floor of the Synagogue of Maon in the Negev of Israel. Dated 6th Century.

On the large stone lintel stationed on old medieval walls in the small village of Corcao in the region of Tradosmontes in the north eastern corner of Portugal we find the birds the cross the lion or elephant on the under-side of the stone, all of these symbols must have had special meaning for the people who carved them on this large door lintel from stone. There is no doubt that people who decorate places of worship use only symbols that have a message and a meaning that will either encourage them or express their concern and pain for the purpose of giving them strength and hope.

In this article I ventured into an area far from home, far from the land of Israel, and into a period that is far from my own educational background, but I found that the study into the culture and symbols of the New Christians Jews in Portugal of the 13-16 century fascinating and enriching. I pray that the reading of the article will open curiosities that will inspire others to continue and challenge and innovate and discover much more than I did.

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