

Marmara Island Synagogue

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District of Marmara, Merkez Neighbourhood	Construction period/date: 1893-1908
	Current status: Abandoned
GPS: 40°35'10.9"N 27°33'14.3"E	Ownership status: Private ownership
Registration date and number: Bursa KTVKBK 15.01.1996 - 4904	

History

According to Galanté, there has been a synagogue on Marmara Island since 1872 (1986, Vol.4, 336). It is known that there were occasional tensions between the Jewish and Rum communities on the island in the 19th century, just like in other places in the Ottoman Empire. Jews were held responsible

for the disappearance of a Greek youth named Panagiotis in 1872, so their shops were looted, the rabbi was imprisoned, and the synagogue was burned. Soon, it was understood that Panagiotis was alive and those who provoked these incidents were sent to trial in Istanbul. The complaints sent to the Chief Rabbi mention



Fig. 1: General view from the southwest (2019)

that the Greeks plundered the wine cellars belonging to Jews and refused to pay their debts to members of the Jewish community (Gülyüz 2018, 70).¹

The reconstruction of the synagogue was permitted in 1893 (Galanté 1986, Vol.5, 186). According to Sema Calvo, a Sephardic Jew born in 1909 on Marmara, the Marmara Island Synagogue was completely built in marble and it was an Orthodox synagogue where men and women would sit apart (Papachristou, 2019a, 156).

The synagogue was damaged in the 1935 earthquake and left to its own fate after the Jewish community left the island. It fell into ruin after the 1950s. Although former Mayor Ahmet Enön invited the Eng. Architect Bülent Çetinör, MSc, for the restoration of the building, necessary funding could not be raised. The floor of the synagogue was unearthed as a result of Çetinör's efforts, revealing that the building dates to 1907/8 according to the Hebrew inscription reading *shanat 5586* on the marble doorsill (Enön 2003, 141 and Fig. 7). A report was prepared by Dr. Kani Kuzular, Dr. Gülsün Tanyeli and Dr. Yegan Kahya from Istanbul Technical University, Faculty of Architecture, Department of Restoration. Although the original report could not be reached, some of the photographs were obtained from Dr. G. Tanyeli (Figs. 5-7).

Architecture

The synagogue is located on the corner of Recep Gümüş Street and Kalyoz Street in the Merkez District on Marmara Island. The lot is 100 m away from the seashore. It is located on terrain descending from north to south and has an area of approximately 170 m². The building, which is thought to have a rectangular plan, is currently in ruinous condition. Only a small section of its main walls has survived (Fig. 1).

The northern façade of the building, facing Recep Gümüş Street, is approximately 12.3 m long. The rubble masonry wall has a thickness of 80 cm and rises about 1.5 m from the street level. There are not any openings on this

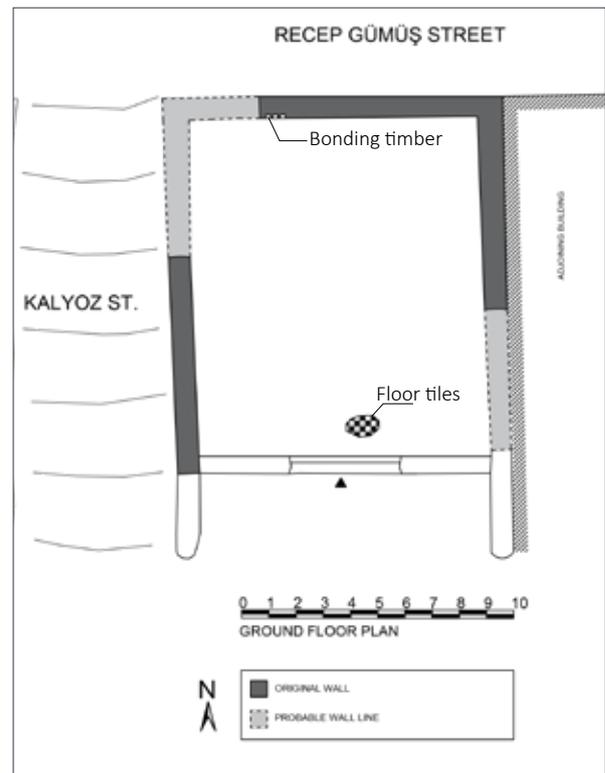


Fig. 2: Western façade detail and sill stone fragment (2019)



Fig. 3: Timber wall plate in the northern wall and beam holes (2019)

¹ Jews were accused of sacrificing Christian youth who have been missing since the Middle Ages ('blood libel'). Similar accusations continued throughout centuries in the Ottoman Empire. For example, the events that started in 1866 when the Rums in Istanbul claimed that a 12-year-old Christian child was kidnapped and sacrificed by Jews in the Kuzguncuk village, ended when Sultan Abdülaziz issued a decree that 'the Jews were under the guarantee of the Ottoman State' (Groepler 1999, 76-77).

façade. The 3.5-m-long section of the wall near the western edge is collapsed. On the inner surface of the wall, there is a timber wall plate with a course of rubble on top that has recurring beam holes (Fig. 3). These must either be related to the lost floor beams of the women's gallery (*mechitza*) or the timber trusses.

The western façade of the building that faces Kalyoz Street is approximately 13.7 m long. The northern end of the rubble masonry wall has fallen, while the remaining section in the south stands about 1-1.5 m above ground. Large stone blocks are used in the southern corner to reinforce the masonry (Figs. 1-2). On the western façade, the wall course continues from the corner to the neighbouring building –or possibly the courtyard– to the south with a level difference. Approximately 2-2.5 m of this wall remains.

Plant growth in the lot prevented detailed observations regarding the eastern and southern boundaries of the structure. There is a reinforced concrete apartment in the neighbouring lot to the east, which adjoins the main wall of the building (Fig. 1).

The space of worship can only be evaluated based on the photographs taken by Tanyeli and her team in 1999. According to these, the entrance –with an inscribed doorsill– is in the middle of the southern wall (Fig. 7). There are the traces of the holy ark (*hechal*), where the Torah scrolls were kept, with a marble step in its front on the interior of the eastern wall (Fig. 5). The *tevah*, which was once in the middle of the space, is surrounded by terrazzo tiles that have geometric and stylized floral patterns (Figs. 5-6). The void between western and



Fig. 4: Details of the terrazzo tiles flooring (2019)



Fig. 5: Tanyeli no.46 Prayer hall, looking east, the marble step in front of the hechal, terrazzo tiles flooring, and the vegetation on the left in the place of tevah (1999)



Fig. 6: Tanyeli no.40 Western half of the prayer hall, looking south, terrazzo tiles flooring (1999)

southern walls as well as the tile flooring in the western half indicate that there was a row of timber seating mounted on at least these walls, which is a common feature for such a small-scale building (Fig. 6). Since there are not any entrances despite the beam holes in the northern wall, the women's gallery (if there was one) would have extended along the northern and possibly the western wall, and access would be provided via an outdoor staircase to the south. According to the liturgical requirements of Judaism, every synagogue must have a courtyard. The courtyard of this building might have been to the south and its entrance could have been from the western or southern façades.

Current Condition

A type of volcanic rock is mainly used in the masonry. Horizontal levels are not formed in the irregular stone course; instead, terracotta pieces such as bricks and tiles are inserted among the stones of various sizes. There are traces of timber bands in the wall (Figs. 1-3).

Within the area defined by the main walls, there are improper additions, rubble filling of varying thickness, and trash brought over from elsewhere. In addition, vegetation covers the



Fig. 7: Tanyeli no. 45 Doorsill with Hebrew inscription (1999)

entire area. Flooring of 20x20 cm cement tiles is seen in a small area (Fig. 4). This flooring, which can be considered as modest, provides information about the original floor level and material.

There is a stone fragment on the pavement of Kalyoz Street, which probably belonged to the doorsill of the courtyard gate. The location of this fragment indicates that the original gate was probably located on the southern or western façade (Fig. 2).

Risk Assessment and Recommendations

The building is of importance for it provides information about the existence of a Jewish community on Marmara Island; however, it has mostly decayed and collapsed due to neglect. Except for the main walls of unknown original height, architectural-structural elements related to the building's plan or interior spatial arrangement could not be identified on site. New information about the building can be obtained through an excavation within the structure, conducted under the supervision of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. Access to the lot should be controlled and plant growth should be stopped to prevent further damage to the remaining elements of the building.