



Analysis and Reassessment of Double-Crescent Symbols Purported to Represent Jewish Menorahs in Olbian Rough Cilicia

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Abstract

The Olba region in eastern Rough Cilicia is replete with ruins exhibiting the distinct feature of symbols carved in relief on architectural surfaces, beginning in the Hellenistic period. These so-called "Olbian Symbols," associated with various deities, created a local tradition that continued through later periods until Christian crosses displaced the pagan symbols sometime in the Byzantine period. In this context, a unique symbol appeared between the late 2nd and early 5th centuries featuring a pair of lunate crescents supported by a stand and base, occasionally with a star above. Several scholars have interpreted this symbol, which we designate by the neutral term *semeion*, as a representation of a Jewish menorah and used its conjunction with other symbols to posit a Jewish-pagan syncretism in the region. This study presents the first systematic review and critical examination of the physical features, context with other symbols, and spatial distribution of all known *semeion* representations, including previously unpublished examples, to evaluate evidence for identification. Photogrammetric analysis conclusively demonstrates *semeion* reliefs do not conform to the shape nor function of a menorah. They invariably appear in pagan contexts, consistently in concert with the same two well-known symbols of Greco-Roman deities. Further, spatial analysis suggests they are distinct from the earlier "Olbian Symbols" both spatially and temporally. The re-evaluation and comparative evidence lead us to categorically reject the menorah identification and propose that the *semeion* represents a dual affiliation of two lunar deities sometime in the broad range of the late 2nd and early 5th centuries AD.

Keywords: Rough Cilicia, Olba, Reliefs, Photogrammetry, Crescent Moon, Menorah, Selene.



Dağlık Kilikia'daki Olba Bölgesi'nde Yahudi Menorahlarını Temsil Ettiği İddia Edilen Çift Hilal Sembollerinin Analizi ve Yeniden Değerlendirilmesi

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Doğu Dağlık Kilikia'daki Olba bölgesi, Hellenistik Dönem'den başlayarak mimari yüzeylere kabartma olarak oyulmuş sembollerin belirgin özelliğini sergileyen kalıntılarla doludur. Çeşitli tanrılarla ilişkilendirilen bu sözde "Olba semboller", Hristiyan haçları Bizans Dönemi'nde bir ara pagan sembollerinin yerini alana kadar sonraki dönemlerde devam eden yerel bir gelenek yaratmıştır. Bu bağlamda, MS 2. yüzyılın sonu ile 5. yüzyılın başı arasında, bazen üzerinde yıldız bulunan, bir stand ve kaide tarafından desteklenen bir çift hilalden oluşan benzersiz bir sembol ortaya çıkmıştır. Birkaç bilim insanı, nötr terim *semeion* ile belirttiğimiz bu sembolü Yahudi menorahının temsili olarak yorumlamış ve bu sembollerin bölgede Yahudi-pagan senkretizmi varsayımak için diğer sembollerle birlikte kullanmıştır. Bu çalışma ilk kez, daha önce yayınlanmamış örnekler de dahil olmak üzere bilinen tüm *semeion* temsillerinin fiziksel özelliklerinin, diğer sembollerle bağlamının ve mekânsal dağılımının sistematik ve eleştirel incelemesini sunarak tanımlamaya yönelik kanıtları değerlendirmektedir. Fotogrametrik analiz, *semeion* kabartmalarının menorahın şecline veya işlevine uymadığını kesin olarak göstermektedir. Bunlar her zaman pagan bağamlarda, iyi bilinen iki Greko-Romen tanrı sembolüyle tutarlı bir şekilde ortaya çıkmaktadır. Dahası, mekânsal analiz, bunların hem mekânsal hem de zamansal olarak daha önceki "Olba sembollerinden" farklı olduğunu göstermektedir. Yeniden değerlendirme ve karşılaştırmalı kanıtlar, menorah tanımlamasını kategorik olarak reddetmemize ve *semeion*un MS 2. yüzyılın sonu ile 5. yüzyılın başındaki geniş bir zaman aralığında iki ay tanrısının ikili bir ilişkisini temsil ettiğini öne sürdürmemize yol açmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Dağlık Kilikia, Olba, Kabartma, Fotogrametri, Hilal, Menorah, Selene.

Introduction

Eastern Rough Cilicia, in particular the area dominated by a Hellenistic and Early Roman temple state ruled from Olba, developed a local tradition of religious images carved in relief on architectural surfaces. The reliefs predominantly depict known symbols associated with Greco-Roman deities. This regional tendency continued through the early Roman Empire and well into Late Antiquity (4th-6th centuries), when the pagan symbols give way to the Christian cross. Hundreds of these reliefs are still visible, many still standing *in situ*, giving the area's ruins a distinct and fascinating aspect.

At some point, during the Roman Empire or early Byzantine period, a unique symbol appeared within a more limited area in the immediate Olba territory. It features a pair of lunate shapes supported by a stand consisting of a staff and base, only occasionally with a star above.

This symbol, which we designate by the neutral Greek term *semeion*, is now interpreted in a number of studies as a representation of a Jewish menorah, sometimes to support claims of Jewish-pagan syncretism in the region. We find equating the *semeion* with a menorah wholly unwarranted by the physical and spatial evidence. While Jewish presence in Roman-Byzantine Rough Cilicia is established beyond doubt, claims of Jewish-pagan interaction and syncretism are over-dependent on the presence of "menorahs" where only the *semeion* is found.

Some scholars have doubted equation of the symbol as a menorah, but this study presents the first systematic review and critical examination of the physical features, context with other symbols, and spatial distribution of all known *semeion* representations. This re-evaluation compels rejection of the menorah identification, while recent comparative evidence suggests association with certain lunar deities.

A History of (Mis-)interpretation

Initial identification

Initial identification of the symbol in question as Jewish occurs in publication of a small altar in the Silifke Museum on which the *semeion* is carved in bold relief (fig. 1). The 1987 corpus of Cilician inscriptions by Dagron and Feissel serves as the *editio princeps*. There Dagron opines that the sculpture is "without a doubt" (*sans aucun doute*) related to Judaism. The altar is thus listed as inscription number 14 with the heading "Jewish ex-voto"¹.

The altar also appears in subsequent inscription collections², most notably in Ameling's 2004 compendium of Jewish inscriptions of Asia Minor. Ameling is more cautious about its Jewish origin, noting that such depends entirely on identifying the symbol as a menorah. His listing reads simply: "a dedication to the God who hears"³.

Publication of other *semeion* representations begins with Serra Durugönül's 1989 monograph on rock reliefs in Rough Cilicia, including the important Athena Relief near

¹ Dagron and Feissel 1987, 38, no. 14: "Ex-voto juif," that Dagron is the contributor is indicated by "D" at the end of the entry. The identification also appears in a Turkish article summary of the compendium; Dagron and Feissel 1991, 332.

² SEG 37, no. 1298; listed in the online version (2008) as "37-1298. Diokaisareia. Jewish dedication, 4th-5th cent. AD;" IRWKil., 346, no. OID 104.

³ I.Jud.Or. II, 498-499; no. 230, "Eine Weihung für den erhörenden Gott."



Figure 1: Silifke Museum altar
(Daniel C Browning Jr, 2015)

Sömek. Several symbols appear alongside Athena, including a *semeion*, which Durugönül rightly links to the carving on the Silifke Museum altar. She notes Dagron and Feissel's identification but cautions against transferring the Jewish assumption to the Athena Relief example since other indications are lacking⁴.

In a 2006 study of cult symbols on graves in the region, Murat Durukan calls the *semeion* at the Athena Relief a "seven-branched candelabrum, the symbol of the Jews," but does not reference the Silifke Museum altar⁵. The number of examples doubles in 2010 with a pair of articles by Ümit Aydinoğlu on the region's rural settlements. Aydinoğlu identifies *semeion* reliefs adjacent to pagan symbols on lintels at Köşkerli and Örendibi and the Athena Relief example as representing "a simplified version of the menorah"⁶; also without connecting them to the Silifke Museum altar. Uncritical acceptance of the symbol on the Silifke Museum altar as a Jewish "menorah" appears in a pair of

articles reviewing Judaism in Cilicia by Sevim Ayteş-Canevello in 2011-2012, but without noting the occurrence of the symbol elsewhere⁷.

The key development in the *semeion*'s interpretive history is a 2012 article co-authored by Durugönül and Ahmet Mörel reviewing evidence for Judaism—and alleged interactions with paganism—in Rough Cilicia⁸. The authors initially introduce the *semeion* with its appearance alongside other symbols accompanying the Athena Relief. Now the *semeion* is assumed to be a "five-branched menorah," with the assertion that—apart from the usual seven branches—menorahs can be depicted with three, five, nine, or eleven arms⁹.

Durugönül and Mörel then introduce the two other *semeia* carved in relief along with Zeus thunderbolts, on lintels at Örendibi and Köşkerli, as five-armed "menorahs." They note the consistent two-legged bases of all three but without mention of Aydinoğlu's prior identification¹⁰. Indeed, the Örendibi and Köşkerli examples share the same essential

⁴ Durugönül 1989, 135-136.

⁵ Durukan 2006, 64 (Turkish "Musevilerin simbolü yedi kollu şamdan") and fn. 14, referencing Durugönül 1989 for a different interpretation of the symbols; but it is not clear if this refers to the *semeion* or the crescent and star, which is his main interest.

⁶ Aydinoğlu 2010a, 8; Aydinoğlu 2010b, 247-248.

⁷ Ayteş-Canevello 2011, 173-89; Ayteş-Canevello 2012, 119-39.

⁸ Durugönül and Mörel 2012, 303-22.

⁹ Durugönül and Mörel 2012, 309, citing examples in Hachlili 2001.

¹⁰ Durugönül and Mörel 2012, 311-12. Failure to mention Aydinoğlu is curious but also highlights the important

attributes of the *semeion* at the Athena Relief but are considerably less convincing as “menorahs” on their own merits (see below for each). Durugönül and Mörel continue their survey with two additional lintels that depict inscribed seven-branched apparent menorahs: in situ at Çatiören and a spolia example in the Corycus castle¹¹.

Beyond merely surveying evidence for Jewish presence and economic status in Rough Cilicia, Durugönül and Mörel’s article posits a cultural interchange between Jews and pagans to include exchange or borrowing of religious iconography and even practice. The assumed “menorahs” in conjunction with Zeus thunderbolts on the above lintels opens the question of the structures’ religious orientation. The authors then introduce the Silifke Museum altar as evidence for cultural borrowing. They accept the symbol on the altar face as a “menorah” without question, citing Dagron and Feissel (where that term is not used) and Ameling’s description as though it is in full agreement—which is questionable. Because the ear motif appears otherwise only in pagan contexts, they conclude “here we can see the Jewish adaptation of Pagan symbols;” again citing Ameling, who casts doubt on that very possibility, noting it as unprecedented¹².

Durugönül and Mörel support their claim of Jewish-pagan syncretism by referencing scholarly debate over the term *theos hypsistos* (Θεὸς ὑψιστος, “highest god”)¹³. This designation is used in both Jewish and pagan inscriptions elsewhere but does not occur in conjunction with the material at hand. Their main source is Paul Treblico, who denies any Jewish-pagan syncretism in the use of *theos hypsistos* but does provide (in a later context) five options for Jews faced with pagan religious activities in Asia Minor¹⁴. Durugönül and Mörel reduce these to four positions they judge as “largely speculative,” but which provide a framework including the full syncretism they suggest. Returning to the Athena Relief, the authors use the supposed “menorah” there to suggest that perhaps “Jewish neighbours made use of the same cult area, and the Pagans and Jews performed their worship in common.” They also conclude, “this menorah represents the adoption of a Jewish symbol by the Pagan patron of this relief”¹⁵.

To summarize; Durugönül and Mörel use the symbol in question as evidence for both Jewish borrowing of pagan motifs and pagan use of Jewish iconography. Identification of the *semeion* as a “menorah” is thus the artefactual lynchpin of their argument for Jewish-pagan syncretism in Rough Cilicia. Continued uncritical acceptance of this notion has guided subsequent research in the region to unwarranted conclusions.

fact that all the interpreters after Dagron to this point that identify the *semeion* as a menorah are affiliated with Mersin University and are, therefore, colleagues.

¹¹ Durugönül and Mörel 2012, 311-12.

¹² Durugönül and Mörel 2012, 313; see *I.Jud.Or.* II, 499: “Natürlich wird diese Begründung [the use of εὐχήν] einer Weihung nicht nur von Juden verwendet, und die Adaption der heidnischen Ikonographie (die Ohren) ist bisher einmalig.”

¹³ Durugönül and Mörel 2012, 313. It is worth noting that the authors incorporate the largely-dismissed *theos hypsistos* argument to introduce scholarly debate on Jewish-pagan syncretism when it does not impact any local archaeological realia, while not even mentioning the similar issues surrounding the “Sabbatist inscription” found at Çatiören, one of the sites under discussion! For this, see below.

¹⁴ Trebilco 1991, 142-44; 180-182.

¹⁵ Durugönül and Mörel 2012, 315.

Subsequent Application and Expansion

In a 2014 article, Mark Fairchild accepts the Silifke Museum altar symbol as a menorah without question¹⁶. He follows Durugönül and Mörel in accepting the Athena relief and Örendibi examples as menorahs. Like them, Fairchild cites Rachel Hachlili to justify accepting “five-branched” symbols as menorahs, adding the gloss: “though the five branched menorah was uncommon elsewhere, it seems to have been more popular in Rough Cilicia”¹⁷.

More importantly, Fairchild extends Durugönül and Mörel’s argument for Jewish-pagan syncretism by connecting it with the well-known “Sabbatist inscriptions” at Çatiören. Çatiören is an intriguing site of the Hellenistic through Byzantine periods featuring a well-preserved Temple of Hermes, a Byzantine church, and a small structure with an *in situ* lintel bearing an apparent seven-branched menorah (cited by Durugönül and Mörel, above). The site was first explored in 1890 by Theodore Bent, who found two damaged inscriptions near the church. These were first published from Bent’s squeezes by E. L. Hicks in a companion article to Bent’s report¹⁸.

The inscriptions were commissioned by a group called Σαββατιοτάι (“Sabbatists” or “Sabbath-keepers”) and the ἔταίροι (“associates” or “sympathizers”), making decrees including the crowning of a named individual as συναγωγέα, “leader of the assembly” or “leader of the synagogue.” The word Ἰουδαῖος (“Jew”) does not appear in either text. Unfortunately, the actual inscriptions are no longer extant—likely buried under the modern road¹⁹—and the squeezes also seem to be lost²⁰. Given these facts and the poor quality of the originals, questions remain about the transcription and translation. This complicates interpretations, in which identification of both the “Sabbatist” group and “associates” vary from completely Jewish to Jewish-pagan syncretism to completely pagan, in all possible combinations. The name and identification of the individual to be crowned varies similarly from Jewish person to pagan deity. Over the last century, the most common view interprets the Σαββατιοτάι as Jewish sympathizers, while a recent trend is to deny any Jewish connection at all²¹.

The apparent menorah-inscribed lintel at Çatiören, however, has only recently come to light²². Fairchild identifies the building as a Hellenistic period synagogue and associates it with the Sabbatist inscriptions²³. A second symbol appears with the supposed menorah on the outer face of the lintel. Fairchild originally identified it as a *lulav*, the closed palm frond

¹⁶ Fairchild 2014, 207, citing *I.Jud.Or.* II, despite the latter’s caution (for which, see above, fn. 12). Fairchild makes no reference to Dagron and Feissel 1987.

¹⁷ Fairchild 2014, 207; oddly, however, not mentioning the Köşkerli *semeion*, also put forth by Durugönül and Mörel 2012, 311-12, fig. 11.

¹⁸ Bent 1891; Hicks 1891.

¹⁹ A conclusion reached by us after visits to the site and echoed by Pilhofer (personal communication) and Mark Wilson (personal communication, also Ogden 2019, 13).

²⁰ Maltsberger sought them unsuccessfully on visits to the British Museum and Pitt-Rivers Museum in May 2016; see also Ogden 2019, 13, fn. 29.

²¹ Harland 2014, 126-434 covers the range of interpretations, including Harland’s own shift to the view holding no Jewish connection. For a different view, and most recently with full references, see Ogden 2019.

²² Not mentioned by Bent 1890b or Bent 1891; the first two published references to the inscribed lintel appear in 2012: Durugönül and Mörel 2012, 312, fig. 12; Fairchild 2012, 38-40. Neither work references the other.

²³ Fairchild 2012, 39-41; 2014, 212-214. Fairchild uses tenuous observations to support his identification of the small structure as a synagogue and bases his Hellenistic dating solely on the polygonal masonry of the building.

used in Jewish *Sukkot* celebrations, occasionally pictured with menorahs. The symbol, while crude, also bears similarity to the Zeus thunderbolts that appear beside *semeia* on the lintel reliefs at Örendibi and Köşkerli. Noting this, Fairchild later suggests that it may represent a thunderbolt. He couples this implication of syncretism with a particular reading of the Sabbatist inscriptions to claim artefactual and textual evidence for Jewish-pagan “religious interaction”²⁴.

Meanwhile, the 2015 season of excavations at the Olba monastery recovered a battered and incomplete object, interpreted as a small altar by Murat Özyıldırım. He argues that a damaged relief on one partially preserved face depicts a Jewish menorah. The menorah claim then leads to forced interpretations of two other partial faces as depicting Jewish religious symbols related to the *Sukkot* festival²⁵. However, nothing about the excavated altar alone evokes a menorah. As demonstrated below, this conclusion is based solely on a comparison to the Silifke Museum altar and awareness of the other *semeia* so identified.

Doubts and Synthesis

The earliest doubts about identification of the *semeion* as a menorah were expressed by Maltsberger in a 2015 conference paper, elaborated by us again in 2017²⁶. The first published concerns about menorah identifications at the Athena Relief, Örendibi, and Köşkerli appear in 2018 monographs by Philipp Pilhofer²⁷ and Hachlili²⁸. In both cases, the issue is somewhat tangential to the authors’ main purpose, but both deny that the *semeion* reliefs depict menorahs in combination with pagan symbols.

The following year saw publication of a book on Judaism in Cilicia, *Cilicia'da Yahudiler*, co-authored by Özyıldırım and Ayteş Canevello²⁹. Despite the limited audience imposed by its Turkish language text, this generally well-researched regional synthesis is important for bringing together the various arguments above for the first time. It also demonstrates the hazards of incorporating tenuous identifications.

In a chapter on possible synagogue structures in Cilicia, Özyıldırım and Ayteş-Canevello review lintels featuring seven-branched menorahs, followed by the assertion that the Örendibi and Köşkerli lintels depict four-branched menorahs. The Athena Relief is presented as additional evidence for the “menorah” depiction in conjunction with thunderbolts and shields. They carefully note Pilhofer’s and Hachlili’s rejections of these as menorah depictions. The authors, however, then focus solely on the argument that menorahs do not appear in context with pagan symbols by offering counter examples, including synagogue mosaics in Palestine that incorporate zodiacs and animal depictions at Beth Shearim³⁰. While expressing caution, they accept the *semeia* reliefs as representations of menorahs without further evidence. Based on this *a priori* assumption, they claim Cilicia as

²⁴ Fairchild 2014, 211-214. This argument will be analysed below.

²⁵ Özyıldırım 2016b.

²⁶ Maltsberger 2015; Browning and Maltsberger 2017.

²⁷ Pilhofer 2018, 86-89.

²⁸ Hachlili 2018, 199-200; who was first made aware of these examples by Maltsberger by email in November 2015.

²⁹ Özyıldırım and Ayteş-Canevello 2019.

³⁰ Özyıldırım and Ayteş-Canevello 2019, 127-131. Two of the supposed examples of menorahs together with pagan symbols are documented only by a link to a non-academic website that purports to compare the structure of the menorah with composition of the Christian Bible.

an exception to the observed rule, attributing the “menorah” combinations with pagan symbols on the influence of the Zeus cult at Diocaesarea. Recognizing the problem of these examples having only four arms, they suggest the possibilities of a regional variation or that they are a product of the Sabbatists, here assumed to be a group combining pagan and Jewish beliefs³¹.

Following a review of unambiguous evidence for Jewish presence in Cilicia, Özyıldırım and Ayteş-Canevello return to the issue of Jewish-pagan syncretism in a chapter on the Sabbatist inscription evidence. After a brief review of opinions, they conclude the Sabbatists must be either Jews or a community associated with Judaism but, inexplicably, do not relate the group to the supposed synagogue they propose at Çatiören, the site where the inscriptions were found³². In an earlier chapter, the authors briefly connect θεοσεβεῖς (“god fearers”) to the *theos hypsistos* argument without subsequent expansion³³.

In a final chapter on archaeological small finds related to Jews in Cilicia, Özyıldırım and Ayteş-Canevello present the Silifke Museum altar with the unqualified assertion that it depicts a menorah. It is then used as an analogue for their following claim that the Olba monastery object depicts a menorah and other Jewish features³⁴. The authors’ acceptance of the *semeion* as a menorah, especially on the Silifke Museum and Olba monastery altars, does not diminish the otherwise commendable *Cilicia'da Yahudiler*. It does, however, highlight the need for a complete critical review of the evidence regarding this fascinating and troublesome symbol. Hence our study.

Toward a Systematic Review

All published assertions that the *semeion* represents a menorah, surveyed above, are *a priori*; apparently based on a passing similarity in form. The only substantive arguments offered are responses to anticipated objections based on the *semeion*’s four arms instead of the seven in a conventional menorah. Even these are disingenuous and inconsistent, as we demonstrate below.

The above claims, individually and collectively, lack any systematic analysis of the symbol’s characteristics and components across all known examples. Unfortunately, the only previously published depictions of the rock relief examples are small monochrome photographs insufficient for certainty about details. We made several visits to each relief site between 2015 and 2022 and, while convinced in our rejection of the symbols as menorahs, found that the mottled colouring and texture of the weathered rock made exact details difficult to discern without physical contact and impossible to depict using standard photography.

³¹ Özyıldırım and Ayteş-Canevello 2019, 131.

³² Özyıldırım and Ayteş-Canevello 2019, 150-151. It is possible the authors were unaware of the inscriptions’ provenance: They refer to the two inscriptions “near Elaeussa Sebaste,” citing a footnote in Stern 1974 (wrongly as p. 117 instead of the correct 2: 107). Then, when giving a full translation of Bent 1891/Hicks 1891 no. 16, they indicate it was found in Kızılbağ, ruins which appear on maps of Bent’s journey as “Kizil-Bagh,” between Sebaste and his “Temple of Hermes” (which is clearly Çatiören); Bent 1891. It also appears in Hicks’ heading for inscriptions 1-11, but not for the inscriptions in question, Hicks 1891, 226. In *IRWKil.*, 157, the inscription is listed with their code for Kızılbağ as Kzb. 9, with others from Çatiören.

³³ Özyıldırım and Ayteş-Canevello 2019, 91.

³⁴ Özyıldırım and Ayteş-Canevello 2019, 155-161.

However, recent software developments created inexpensive application promise for this study using a remote sensing technique called close-range photogrammetry. As a test of this potential, Browning collected and processed non-contact photographic data of each rock relief using close-range photogrammetry. This yielded excellent and unambiguous representations of three previously published *semeion* reliefs and their contexts. Publication of the method, procedure, and results of this analysis appeared in early 2024 as our first step toward a systematic analysis³⁵.

We also became aware of and visited two additional sites with reliefs featuring *semeion* representations that have appeared in no previous publication. These join the previously published examples in our catalogue and evaluation of the full corpus of *semeion* representations that follow.

The Corpus: Examples and Sites

A proper evaluation of the *semeion* and its identification requires a systematic review of the nine now known examples, including analysis of feature details, context with other symbols, potential chronological data, and site information. They follow, beginning with those known in the foregoing interpretive history, followed by three heretofore unpublished occurrences. Each example will be referenced hereafter by the names given in the headings.

Silifke Museum Altar

The first identification of the *semeion* as a menorah occurs with initial publication of the Silifke Museum altar, on which it is the most prominent feature (fig. 1). The small altar stands 29 cm high with an 18 cm square base and is greatly damaged at the top so that an inscription on the top moulding is lost save three letters. The bottom moulding of the front face reads “EYXHN,” identifying it as a votive. Anthropomorphic ears appear on the left and right faces and a *semeion* in deep relief dominates the front face. This is the most balanced and artistically executed of the published examples and its identification as a Jewish symbol is arguably the primary reason other reliefs were so identified. Therefore, it logically serves as the baseline *semeion* for discussion. Components of the *semeion* (see fig. 28) will be analysed following the remainder of the corpus.

Provenance of the altar is slightly problematic; museum records, now possibly lost³⁶, indicate the object (inventory no. 138) was acquired on 3-3-1964 and was found at Diocaesarea (modern Uzuncaburç). Presumably on palaeographical grounds, Dagron dates the altar to the 4th-5th centuries, but with a question mark³⁷. This date is repeated by subsequent publications of the inscription without the doubtful punctuation³⁸.

Dagron first describes the symbol as a *four-branched* candlestick surmounted by a star globe³⁹. He provides no justification for the identification despite the lack of any clear candlestick or lampstand features. For example, the arms resemble a pair of crescents with typically pointed ends, rather than having positions for lamps. Dagron eventually declares the piece “undoubtedly related to Judaism.” In the same sentence he argues the

³⁵ Browning 2024.

³⁶ Özyıldırım and Ayteş-Canevello 2019, 158.

³⁷ Dagron and Feissel 1987, 38-39, no. 14.

³⁸ SEG 37, no. 1298; *IRWKil.*, 346, no. *OID* 104; *I.Jud.Or.* II, 498-499; no. 230.

³⁹ “Un chandelier à quatre branches surmonté d’un globe à étoile;” Dagron and Feissel 1987, 38.

“candlestick” would have five branches except that the middle branch is “replaced” with the globed star, inserting a claim that five branches is a “very frequent simplification”⁴⁰. This speculative reasoning is not supported by the physical evidence. Dagron’s interpretation of the symbol as any kind of candelabrum, let alone a menorah, is forced. Furthermore, there is no justification for ignoring the clear crescent shapes for consideration in light of the long history of crescent symbolism in antiquity (see below).

In addition to the form issues, the context of creating an altar to fulfil a vow does not suggest a Jewish origin⁴¹. Perhaps anticipating this unmentioned difficulty, Dagron compares the altar to four similarly sized examples seen at Silifke in 1914 which use εὐχῆν in dedications to θεῷ (“god”) and Δτι ὑψιστῷ (Zeus Hypsistos = “Zeus most high”), which he alleges are Jewish or Judaizing. This is done without argument, apart from the citation to Keil and Wilhelm, who vaguely note that worship of Zeus Hypsistos “has been connected” to Judaism⁴². Ameling rightly questions the connection, as well as emphasizing the difficulty of a supposed “menorah” coupled with the pagan representation of ears⁴³. Dagron admits to the lack of Jewish parallels for the latter and cites examples in pagan contexts from Egypt, but connects the ears with common consecrations to θεὸς ἐπίκοος, the “god who hears,” and extends it to Judaism by recalling passages from the Septuagint translation of Psalms appealing to the ear of the Lord⁴⁴. But this is a tenuous connection, as pointed out by Pilhofer, especially since ἐπίκοος is rare in the Septuagint, where forms of ἐπακούω dominate⁴⁵.

Regardless of the verb form, far more examples of appeals and dedications to a “listening god” occur in pagan than Jewish contexts⁴⁶. More importantly, there are now parallels in the Olba area. Surveys in 2004 discovered a cult cave in the Limonlu Valley with thunderbolt reliefs and inscriptions dedicated to a “listening god”⁴⁷. Of greater relevance are recently published inscriptions from a stoa at Kurşun Kalesi with dedications to Σελήνη Ἐπίκοος (“Listening Selene”)⁴⁸.

The Silifke Museum Altar—a typically pagan object depicting clear crescent shapes paired with ears, allegedly from Diocaesarea—should be reevaluated in light of dedications to a “listening” moon deity, found quite close by (for which, see below). Heretofore, however, the unwarranted conclusion that the symbol represents a five-branched menorah serves as the basis for identification of other *semeion* examples as menorahs and as a prime argument for asserting Jewish-pagan syncretism in Rough Cilicia⁴⁹.

⁴⁰ Apparently in reference to supposed menorahs, although the term is not used by Dagron; *ibid*.

⁴¹ As noted already by Pilhofer 2018, 87.

⁴² Dagron and Feissel 1987, 38; MAMA III, 10-11, pl. 11, fig. 29. The altars were apparently seen in 1914 but had disappeared by 1925. On the extensive Theos Hypsistos discussions, see Mitchell 1999, 2010, and now 2023, 285-91.

⁴³ *I.Jud.Or.* II, p. 499; see above, fn. 12.

⁴⁴ Dagron and Feissel 1987, 39.

⁴⁵ Pilhofer 2018, 87, and references there.

⁴⁶ Weinreich 1912.

⁴⁷ Sayar 2006, 2.

⁴⁸ Şahin and Özdzibay 2014, 96-98.

⁴⁹ *I.e.*, Ayteş-Canevello 2011, 184-85, “a five-candlestick menorah with humanistic ears demonstrates a combination of Jewish, Christian and Pagan themes”.

Koşkerli Lintel

The ruin called Koşkerli is first documented by survey in 1984. Early descriptions of the site focus on the unique church with a spolia-built chapel in the atrium area from which a single large column appears to have fallen⁵⁰. About 125 m southeast of the church lies a solitary large broken lintel with reliefs of a thunderbolt and *semeion*, each within an inscribed border (fig. 2).



Figure 2: Koşkerli lintel: Maltsberger indicating the *semeion* (Daniel C Browning Jr, 2015)

The lintel is first mentioned in a paper reviewing olive oil production in Rough Cilicia by Aydinoğlu at a 2008 conference and published in 2010. There, he describes the *semeion* as a “simplified version of a menorah-candelabrum”, and relates it to the next example, at Örendibi⁵¹. This appears to be the first unqualified identification of a relief-carved *semeion* as a menorah. Aydinoğlu introduces the reliefs at Koşkerli and elsewhere as support for an early dating of nearby olive oil production facilities by relating them to the Hellenistic so-called “Olbian Symbols”⁵². While we have no objection to a Hellenistic date for olive oil production in the region, in this case the argument is mis-founded. The lintel cannot be associated with any structure at all. The only part of the ruins that can be tentatively dated is the prominent 6th-7th century church⁵³. Furthermore, we argue below for the *semeion* and symbols accompanying it as distinct from the “Olbian Symbols.”

⁵⁰ Eyice 1988, 22; Hild and Hellenkemper 1990, 320, figs. 267-272; Hill, 1996, 197; Eyice 2011.

⁵¹ Aydinoğlu 2010a, 8, fig. 13.

⁵² Aydinoğlu 2010a, 8.

⁵³ Eyice 2011, 232; Hill, 1996, does not offer a date.

Durugönül and Mörel assume the Köşkerli *semeion* as a menorah along with the Örendibi example, asserting that they both “have five arms”⁵⁴. In fact, nothing about either relief suggests five arms. Both articles include the same black and white photograph from which the claimed descriptions can neither be verified nor refuted. The *semeion* at Köşkerli thus provides an excellent example for the value of non-invasive photogrammetric analysis.

Our photogrammetry-produced 3D model of the Köşkerli lintel relief removes ambiguity about the relief details and provides descriptive certainty. Three display options are given here⁵⁵ (fig. 3). These make it clear that the symbol features two nested crescent shapes on a column rising from a two-footed stand or base; the same elements as the symbol on the Silifke museum altar, but with differing proportions and lacking the globed star.

The upper part hardly resembles a menorah at all. The supposed “branches” are quite uneven in thickness, curvature, and height, but each taper to points as expected of crescents. The upper/inner one is slight and barely noticeable from afar but clearly defined when viewed up close. The column does not continue at full width above the lower/outer crescent and there is no evidence for a fifth “branch”, or any substitute for it in the form of a star. Furthermore, the outer crescent curves inward at the top so that the opposing tips are significantly closer together than their maximum spread. Menorah branches consistently terminate perpendicular to the base plane.

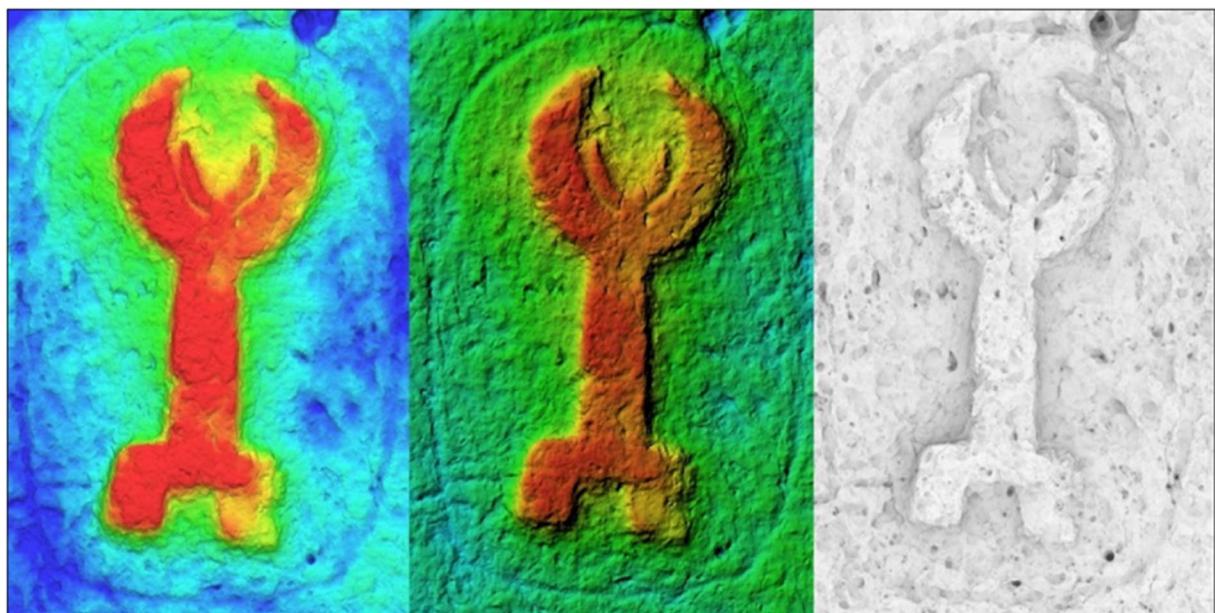


Figure 3: Köşkerli lintel *semeion* photogrammetric model displayed in: (l.) point cloud elevation, (c.) Digital Elevation Model (DEM), and (r.) 3D with occlusion texture

The Köşkerli lintel also depicts a thunderbolt, recognized as a symbol of Zeus⁵⁶. The two symbols are part of a set as indicated by the similar size, height of relief, and circumscribed frame around each. The lintel is broken right of the thunderbolt at about the same distance as separates its frame from that of the *semeion* to the left (see fig. 2, in which

⁵⁴ Durugönül and Mörel 2012, 311-12.

⁵⁵ For a full description of the options and more display views, see Browning 2024, 6-7.

⁵⁶ Dökü and Kileci 2023; Durukan 2023, 32-34.

the lintel is upside down). This leaves open the possibility of another symbol originally to the right.

The Zeus thunderbolt is well-executed in a vertical stance with three bolts bound at the centre. Symmetrical curved lines may represent loose ends of ribbons extending from the centre binding. In this case, curiously, they extend upwards rather than downwards as in the other examples below.

Örendibi Lintel

Ayşe Aydin surveyed two churches near the village of Sömek in 2003. A few meters southwest of the better-preserved “West Church” are some enigmatic remains, including a large single column shaft (seemingly fallen from a small structure) and, a little further, a standing door lintel with symbols in relief: a *semeion*, thunderbolt, and shield (fig. 4). Aydin identified the *semeion* as a candlestick (Turkish *şamdan*), but not as Jewish, even suggesting it as support for her supposition that a pagan temple existed on the site prior to the Christian church⁵⁷. She dates the church to the 5th-6th centuries AD, but argues for the lintel building as used from the Hellenistic Period to the Early Christian Period, by equating the symbols with the so-called “Olba Symbols” used in the early 2nd century BC and citing a fallen lintel nearby with both thunderbolt and cross motifs⁵⁸.



Figure 4: Örendibi: lintel with (l. to r.): *semeion*, thunderbolt, and shield motifs (Daniel C Browning Jr, 2023)

⁵⁷ Aydin 2004, 111-112; Aydin 2005, 86-91.

⁵⁸ Aydm 2005, 89. This is the lintel “about 1.2 km west-southwest of Sümek,” mentioned and pictured in MAMA III, p. 100-101, fig. 130. We have inspected this perplexing lintel, but there is no indication it belongs to the same building as the one treated here.

In his 2010 review of farms in Rough Cilicia, Aydinoğlu refers to these ruins by the name Sömek Örendibi and calls the *semeion* a “menorah-candelabrum”—as he does at Köşkerli (above)—making its Jewish identification specific. He includes it with symbols that appeared “in the region in the Roman and Hellenistic Periods,” an implied connection with the “Olba Symbols”⁵⁹. As noted above, Durugönü'l and Mörel simply assume the Örendibi *semeion*, with the Köşkerli specimen, as menorahs, stating both “have five arms”⁶⁰.

Only the latter publication contains a photo; again, with insufficient detail for judgement and without showing the full lintel. The *semeion* is somewhat smaller than the other two symbols (see fig. 4), slightly skewed on its cambered base, and seemingly less detailed than those at the other sites. It is the most difficult in the corpus to judge from typical photographs or even by viewing in person. A photogrammetric model, however, permits detailed assessment⁶¹.

A diffuse texture display of the model (fig. 5a) retains the difficulties of a photo, in this case complicated by lichen growth. The other display options (fig. 5b-d) reveal the *semeion* design clearly, with a two-footed stand and column supporting nested crescent shapes. As at Köşkerli, the column does not continue at full width above the lower/outer crescent, and the elements match those of the Silifke Museum Altar in different proportions but without the star. The lower crescent presents more of a wing-like than branch appearance. Also, both it and the upper crescent curve inward at the top so that their opposing tips are significantly closer together than their maximum spread.

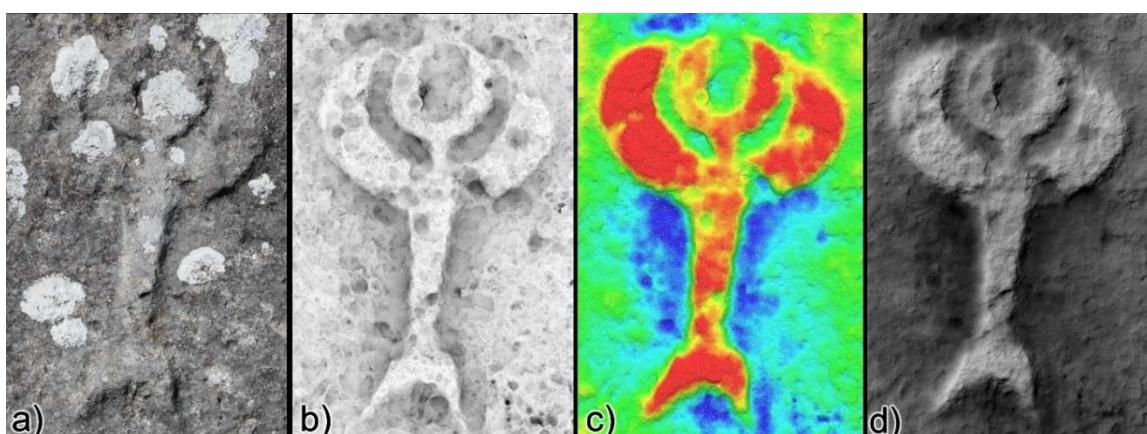


Figure 5: Örendibi lintel *semeion* photogrammetric model: a) 3D, diffuse texture; b) 3D, occlusion texture; c) point cloud, elevation; d) DEM grayscale

Some incongruities are notable in the field but not shown in the only previously published photo of the Örendibi lintel. The three symbols—*semeion*, thunderbolt, and shield—are not centred on the lintel; only the shield is. The right side of the lintel is quite rough, hinting that something was effaced in antiquity. As noted above, the *semeion* is significantly smaller than the thunderbolt and shield. If another symbol once existed to the right of the centred shield, separated congruently with the thunderbolt opposite, those three symbols (without the *semeion*) would compose a set appropriately centred on the lintel. A 3D model of the full lintel face provides easy access to data for discussion.

⁵⁹ Aydinoğlu 2010b, 247-248, fn. 6.

⁶⁰ Durugönü'l and Mörel 2012, 311-12; again, without reference to Aydinoğlu's identification.

⁶¹ Browning 2024, 7-9.

An orthographic view of the model illustrates the spacing of symbols and roughness on the right side (fig. 6). A digital elevation model (DEM) of the lintel face (fig. 7) highlights degradation on the right side and reveals that the smaller *semeion* symbol is executed in lower relief than the thunderbolt and shield. A section profile (fig. 7, top) further demonstrates the lower relief of the *semeion* and suggests a lowered background plane than for the other two symbols. It also underscores the extent of damage to the surface on the right side of the lintel. These details are consistent with the following suggestions: 1) an original third large symbol on the right side of the lintel was intentionally effaced; and 2) the *semeion* was added after the large symbols by lowering the background plane left of the thunderbolt and executing the symbol in much lower relief.

Like on the Köşkerli lintel, the Zeus thunderbolt appears vertically and with the pair of symmetrical lines, here descending to the bottom plane of the figure allowing their possible identification as legs of a stand in addition to the ribbon suggestion. The plain disk shield is conventionally taken as a symbol of Athena⁶².



Figure 6: Örendibi lintel 3D model in orthographic shaded view

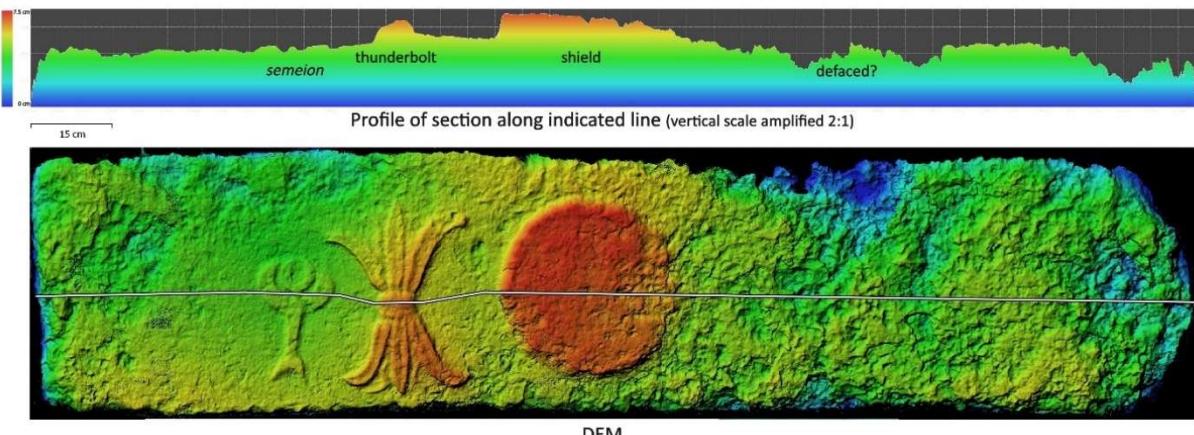


Figure 7: Örendibi lintel DEM with section line and profile (above)

Athena Relief

Perhaps the most perplexing appearance of the *semeion* is one adjacent to a rock-carved relief of Athena about 1.5 km north of the village of Sömek and not associated with any other obvious remains (fig. 8). Durugönül dates the Athena Relief on stylistic grounds to the 2nd or early 3rd century AD⁶³.

⁶² Şahin 2009, 221-227; Durukan 2023, 44-45.

⁶³ Durugönül 1989, 137.

The installation (fig. 9) consists of a relief carving of Athena under a scallop shell canopy in a niche framed by a pair of pilaster columns having rectangular cross-sections. The goddess appears in typical garb with her right arm holding a spear entwined by a snake against a column. Her left arm supports her shield with a horse behind. The pilaster on the viewer's right presents a series of symbols, vertically arranged and executed in relief. They are, from top to bottom: a crescent and star, a recently destroyed undecipherable image⁶⁴, and a thunderbolt. To the right of the pilaster, outside the frame of the composition, a *semeion* appears, roughly centred on the vertical span of the other symbols. A second possible out-of-frame symbol is suggested by another vandalized patch lacking patina outside the left pilaster.

With its two-legged base, staff, and nested crescents evident in person or in published photographs, the Athena Relief *semeion* is clearer than those at Köşkerli and Örendibi. Durugönül, in her 1989 publication, initially describes it as having two crescents on a stand. She later links it to the symbol on the Silifke Museum altar, noting Dagron and Feissel's

Jewish identification of the same, but with the caution against assuming this example as Jewish without other evidence⁶⁵. Nevertheless, Durugönül and Mörel use the Athena Relief *semeion* as their lead example. They present it without argument as a "five-branched menorah," although a fifth "branch" is not evident⁶⁶. Fairchild asserts that Athena Relief example "contains a star at the top centre of the menorah"⁶⁷.



Figure 8: The Athena Relief near Sömek (Daniel C Browning Jr, 2016)

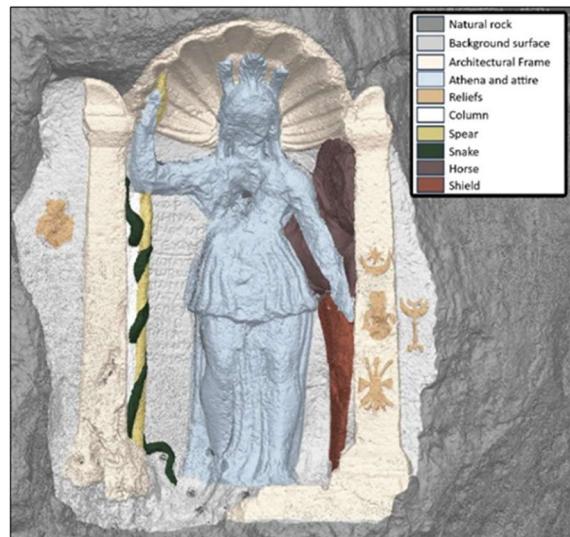


Figure 9: The Athena Relief: 3D model with key for discussion

⁶⁴ The centre relief is almost completely removed; most likely by modern iconoclasts—a problem that plagues many reliefs in Rough Cilicia and evidenced by the lack of patina on the damaged portion. This symbol may have been a bust of some kind which would be consistent with the shape of the damaged area as well as the reason for its destruction. Athena and the horse accompanying her are similarly damaged.

⁶⁵ Durugönül 1989, 50, 135-136, where the Sabbatist argument is briefly entertained but without conclusion. Pilhofer 2018, 88-89, equates the symbols on the Silifke altar and Athena relief and observes that an identification of one must apply to the other.

⁶⁶ Durugönül and Mörel 2012, 309.

⁶⁷ Fairchild 2014, 207. Durugönül 1989, 50, also initially describes the symbol as having a ball with a star.

The rock surface and texture allow an observer to imagine a much-eroded star above the crescents, but the photogrammetric model eliminates this speculation. Multiple views demonstrate that there is no fifth “branch” and no evidence of a star substituting for one⁶⁸. The 3D with occlusion map display and DEM views provide examples (fig. 10). Identification with the symbol on the Silifke Museum altar is apparent, apart from the lack of a star. As at Köşkerli and Örendibi, the two crescents are dissimilar⁶⁹. The two-legged base has a slight camber and a noticeable protrusion below the vertical staff/column.

Previous commentaries have assumed the symbols on the pilaster and the *semeion* were executed as part of the original work⁷⁰. Some details, however, suggest the possibility that the symbols were added later. Collectively, the symbols are more detailed and sharper than the Athena composition inside the pilaster frame, suggesting a different sculptor. Nothing in the inscription suggests deities other than Athena are honoured. More significantly, the pilaster surfaces are noticeably, even awkwardly, set back from their capitals and right surviving base. If symbols were added to the composition later, the pilasters would present the most convenient space to do so in relief, and cutting back the surface around the additions would create the current appearance.

The photogrammetric model of the Athena Relief highlights details not immediately obvious in the field or in photos. Figure 11 presents a DEM of the entire relief with the XY plane as the background surface behind the goddess, and the outer surface of the two pilaster capitals at the same z-elevation. The following observations stand out: 1) the left pilaster column surface is cut back more than the right; 2) the right pilaster column’s left edge is uneven adjacent to the symbols due to undercutting by the relief inside the frame; 3) the snake head, horse snout, and shield elements seem truncated where they extend out to the plane of the adjacent pilaster surface; 4) a small “channel” separates the rim of Athena’s shield from the right pilaster edge (left of the thunderbolt); 5) the natural rock falls away rapidly outside the right pilaster; and 6) the background surface for the *semeion* to the right inclines markedly inward towards the pilaster. Section profiles of the DEM enhance these observations.

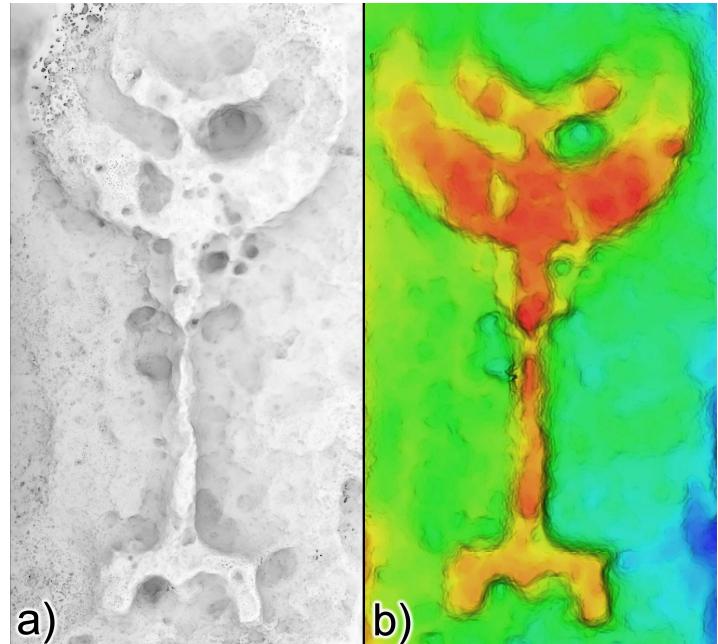


Figure 10: Athena Relief *semeion* model:
a) 3D with occlusion texture; b) DEM

⁶⁸ Browning 2024, 9.

⁶⁹ Zoroğlu 1988, 395, in a survey report just before Durugönül’s publication, records the Athena Relief *semeion* as a “bird-like creation” (*kuşlu bir alem*).

⁷⁰ Durugönül and Mörel 2012, 311, and implied in Durugönül 1989, 134-135; see also Pilhofer 2018, 88.

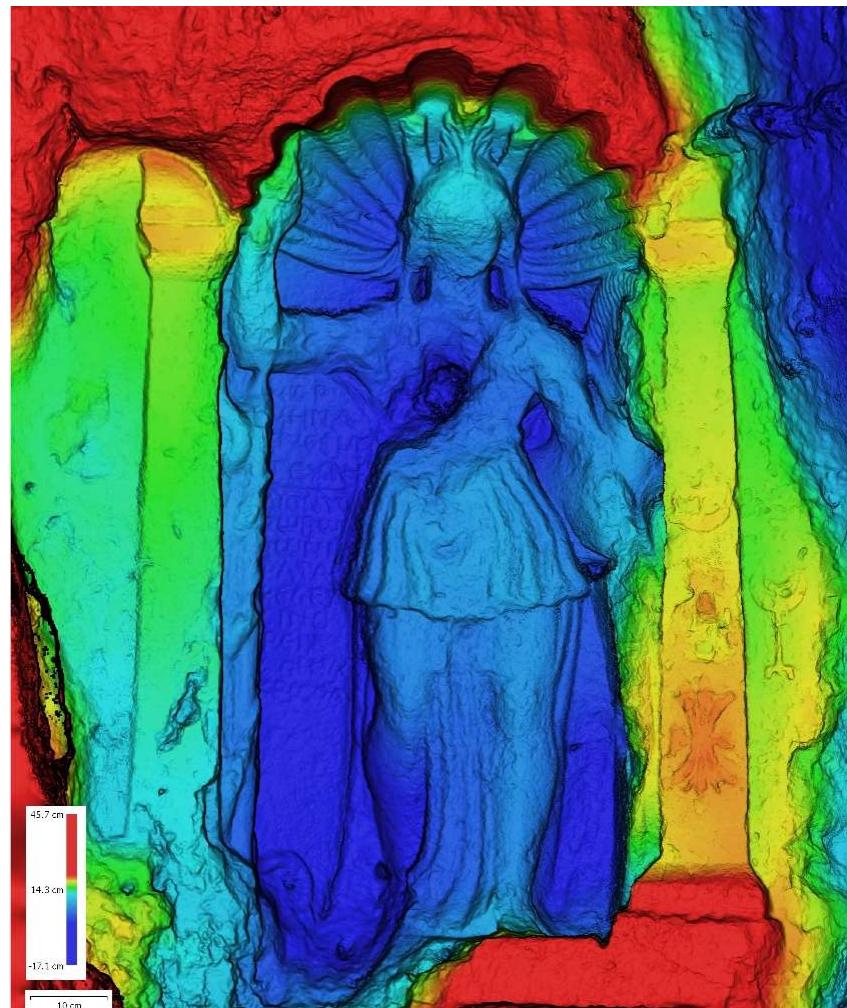


Figure 11: Athena Relief: photogrammetric model DEM

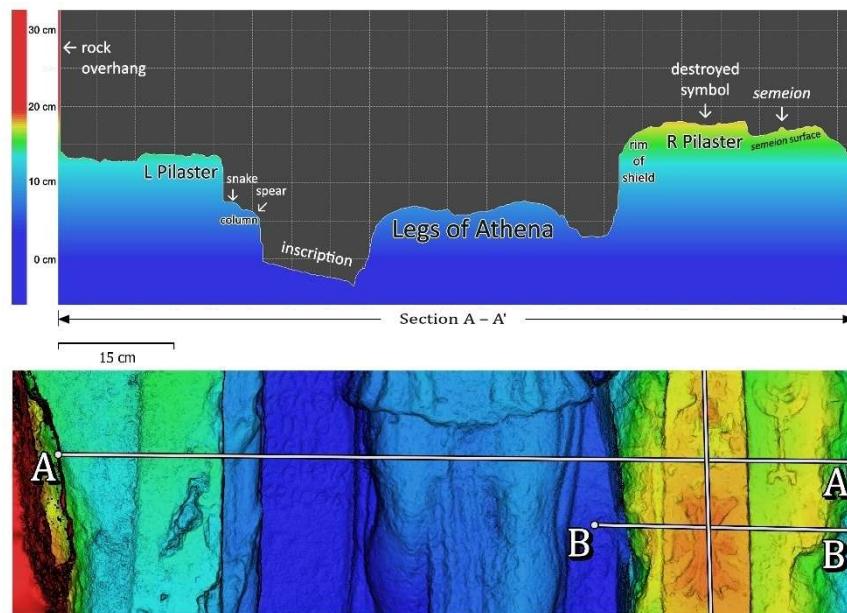


Figure 12: Athena Relief detail: DEM showing section lines (bottom) with section profile A-A' (top)

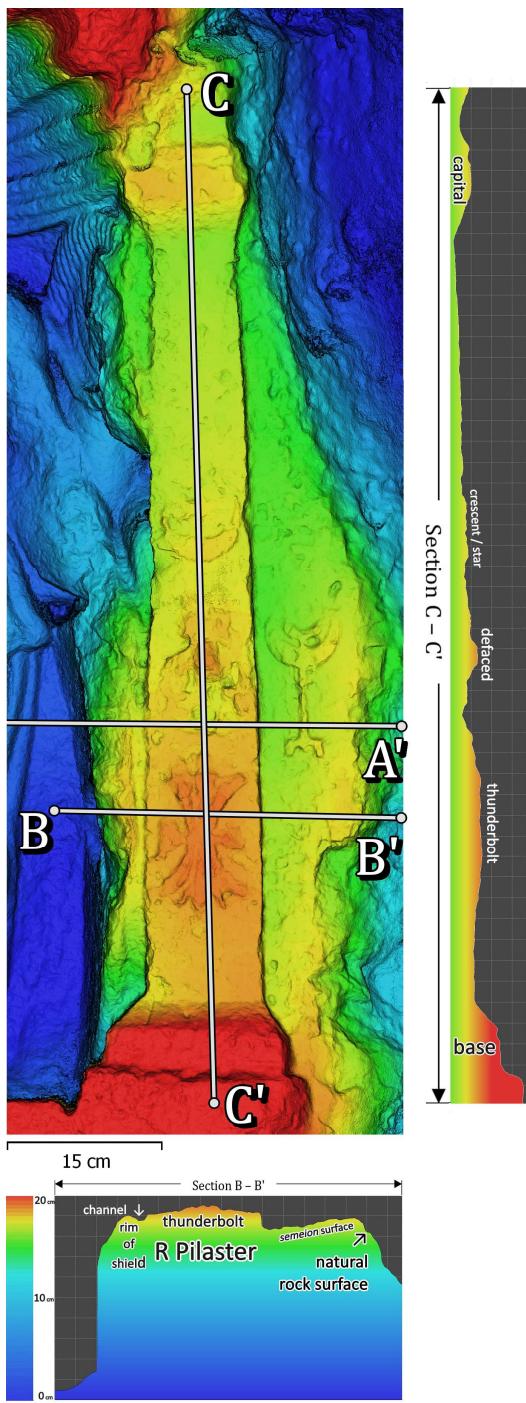


Figure 13: Athena Relief, right pilaster and symbols: DEM with section lines (top); section B-B' profile (bottom); and section C-C' profile (right)

but corrected as a crescent in the same year⁷¹. There is no indication of date in published descriptions. We have not been able to locate the site for an autopsy.

The overall low height of the column surfaces as seen in section A-A' (fig. 12, top) is consistent with the theory that they were cut back at a later period to allow addition of symbols. Vertical section C-C' (fig. 13, right) also supports that supposition. It seems unlikely that the snake's head on the upper left, the horse's snout on the right, and the rim of Athena's shield below the horse would extend beyond the frame of the pilasters in the original composition. Their truncation at the existing pilaster face planes (fig. 11) is thus also consistent with a suggestion that the symbols were added later. For the rim of the shield, reduction of the pilaster would also have created a need for the defining "channel" between it and the pilaster surface. Section B-B' (fig. 13, bottom) highlights that relationship.

Finally, sections A-A' and B-B' clearly demonstrate the inclined background surface for the *semeion* carved outside the right pilaster (figs. 12, 13). If the *semeion* was added after the other symbols on the pilaster itself, creation of such a surface would have constituted the most economical solution in the limited space still available.

Therefore, the accepted dating of the Athena Relief (2nd-3rd century AD) can only establish a *terminus post quem* for application of the symbols. Also, by this reasoning, the *semeion* need not be dated by the other symbols since it is on a different plane, seemingly added to the shrine at a later time.

Karahüseyin Alanı Relief

An area designated Karahüseyin lies about 2 km south of Olba, surveyed by Hamdi Şahin in 2006. The only published feature is a single rock relief combining the motifs of a shield, an apparent *semeion*, and thunderbolt. The *semeion* was first identified as a *kerykeion*

⁷¹ Şahin 2007a, 116 (as *kerykeion*), fig. 1; Şahin 2007b (as *hilal*, "crescent"), 128. The relief was also reported by Sayar 2007, 277, as a *kerykeion*. It remains the only previously published example not identified as a menorah.

The only previously published photograph⁷² of the relief is small, but the central symbol is clearly a *semeion*. Three excellent photographs kindly provided by Şahin (see fig. 14) provide the basis for the following observations⁷³. Like the other rock relief examples, the two clear crescents are nested and slightly dissimilar. There is no indication of a star above, and the points of the crescents terminate at the upper margin of the relief. The column/staff is thin and does not obviously continue above the lower crescent. The base is minimal and quite worn but seems to have two feet.

It is notable that at Karahüseyin Alanı the *semeion* appears alongside the Zeus thunderbolt as at Köşkerli, Örendibi, the Athena Relief, and with the Athena shield as at Örendibi (and at the Athena Relief in a different way). The thunderbolt has clear wings rather than fluttering ends of the binding ribbon found in some examples⁷⁴. This detail matches the thunderbolt on the Athena Relief.



Figure 14: Karahüseyin Alanı rock relief (photo courtesy H. Şahin)

Olba Monastery Altar

Ongoing excavations at Olba since 2010 include work at the Olba Monastery, located about 350 m south of the aqueduct remains at the beginning of the Şeytanderesi Valley⁷⁵. The 2015 season uncovered a battered limestone object in the rubble fill of the central part of the monastery, identified as the remains of a small altar bearing a “carved menorah”⁷⁶.

⁷² Şahin 2007a, 116, fig. 1.

⁷³ We thank Prof. Şahin for sharing the photographs; using just the three photos, rudimentary photogrammetry was possible which supports observations described in the text.

⁷⁴ For a recent treatment of the “winged thunderbolt” symbol, see Dökü and Kileci 2023.

⁷⁵ Özyıldırım 2020; Yegin 2019.

⁷⁶ Özyıldırım 2016a, 126. That the piece is not considered part of the monastery assemblage is indicated by its omission from both the season report (Özyıldırım 2016b) and from the catalog of objects in a PhD thesis on the

The object has carved decorations on three of four uneven sides (fig. 15). Face A, one of the longer, contains the alleged menorah representation. All that survives is an upper crescent, with a vestige of a central supporting stem, and the outer left remnant of an apparent lower crescent⁷⁷. While these traces bear no resemblance to a menorah, they correspond well with the rock-carved *semeion* examples surveyed above. Like them, the presumed upper and lower crescents appear more lunate than branch-like and there is no trace of a presumed “fifth arm” or a substitute star. In this case, moreover, there is not even the possibility of a star as the upper limiting band of the face is directly above the upper crescent. We have not been able to inspect the altar in person.

To support identification of the symbol as a menorah, Özyıldırım enlists the partial carvings on the other sides. The smaller side B retains the upper ends of three-pointed blade-like objects, he says represent a “lulav plant.” A curious design on the longer side C is interpreted as an inverted chalice. Özyıldırım constructs an ingenuous synthesis of the three partial faces by interpreting sides B and C as scenes of the Jewish Feast of Sukkot. The lulav is indisputably integral to Sukkot and the inverted chalice, he claims, represents a water libation performed as part of the rituals⁷⁸. Though inviting, this interpretation is rather stretched.



Figure 15: Olba Monastery Altar: sides A, B, and C (Özyıldırım and Ayteş Canevello 2019, Pls. 49-51).

The lulav identification of side B is forced. Most lulav depictions from antiquity show the palm frond as unfolded, as per the ritual requirement, and therefore represented with a single vertical point⁷⁹. On the other hand, as Özyıldırım and Ayteş-Canevello note in their book⁸⁰, the three blade-like points on side B correspond remarkably well with Zeus thunderbolts accompanying the *semeion* at the Athena Relief, Köşkerli, and Örendibi. In each of those depictions the thunderbolt is depicted vertically and with individual bolts outlined in relief rather than by a simple solid raised surface. The remaining part of the side B relief presents a perfect match for that convention.

monastery; Yeğin 2019. Yeğin briefly mentions the object in his summary, but does not cite Özyıldırım's publication; although it is listed in the thesis' references.

⁷⁷ Özyıldırım 2016a, 126-127; 131, pl. 5-6. An autopsy could not be arranged during our visit to the area in December 2023, but we thank M. Özyıldırım for kindly sharing the photos in fig. 15.

⁷⁸ Özyıldırım 2016a, 127-128; 131, pl. 5-6.

⁷⁹ See, conveniently, Shanks 1979, 37 (Gaza), 41 (Jerash), 87, 92 (Dura-Europos), 114-15, 126-27 (Hammath Tiberias), 115 (Ashdod), 118 (Ashkelon); and for counterexamples: 40, 98, 169.

⁸⁰ Özyıldırım and Ayteş-Canevello 2019, 159.

More difficult to evaluate is the interpretation of side C. While the surviving image does have a resemblance to chalice bases on coins of the First Jewish Revolt⁸¹, it is cut off by a broken edge. Unlike a hemisphere representation, whatever was carved appears to be an outline, which would be unprecedented as a chalice depiction. The “inverted” position, moreover, is awkward and unlike any expected libation scene. It seems far more likely that side C is a depiction of the shield of Athena with a bordered rim and that the supposed chalice stem and base are rather the hilt of a sword, which often appears behind the shield motif extending downwards at an angle. Examples with this combination are known in the region⁸². Indeed, we present one hitherto unpublished relief below featuring such a depiction in concert with a *semeion*.

Unfortunately, the intriguing Olba monastery altar is incomplete. Our suggestions for identification of the remaining decorations, however, correspond perfectly with the *semeion*, Zeus thunderbolt, and Athena shield depictions appearing together in the above reliefs. The same combination is found in previously unpublished reliefs at two sites, documented below to complete the corpus.

Aslantaş

The locality called Aslantaş takes its name from a large stepped sarcophagus with a lion relief lid⁸³, two kilometres north of Keşliktürkmenli. About 500 m southeast of the sarcophagus a cluster of ruins include a monumental tomb and a few buildings. Agricultural use of the area has modified the state of the remains. On the western edge of the visible ruins, the left end of a broken lintel (Lintel A) rests upside-down in a line of rubble demarking the south edge of a small agricultural plot⁸⁴. A finely-executed *semeion* appears in relief near the break (fig. 16). Twenty-three meters to the northeast, between identifiable building remains, a second broken and heavily weathered lintel (Lintel B) with a relief lies in two parts⁸⁵. The left relief face has a *semeion* relief, and the remainder displays a thunderbolt and shield with sword (fig. 17). Aslantaş is thus the only site with two *semeion* reliefs.

The Aslantaş Lintel A *semeion* is the clearest and most finely executed of the rock relief examples. While obvious in person, the details are best demonstrated here through photogrammetry of photos taken on site. A DEM (fig. 18) highlights the workmanship of this relief. Of the rock relief examples, it is the most like the Silifke Museum Altar depiction, having similar proportions, relatively congruent outer and inner crescents, and it is the only other *semeion* in the known corpus with a star at the top.

The star is four-rayed, as in the Silifke Museum Altar, but without a globe. This suggests that the globe on the altar is an accommodation to its much deeper relief and three-dimensional intent. The DEM also shows that the star on Aslantaş Lintel A projects at lower

⁸¹ As shown by Ozyildirim 2016a, pl. 7.

⁸² Bent 1890a, nos. 10, 11; Durugönül 1998b, 88, 100.

⁸³ Çalışkan et al. 2009, 203.

⁸⁴ We only became aware of this lintel (Lintel A) through Piero d’Altan, who saw it during a brief visit to the site in 2008. We are very grateful for his acute observation, recollection, and directions, as well as continued collegiality and friendship.

⁸⁵ We noticed this second lintel (Lintel B) while searching for Lintel A on our first visit to the site in June 2019. The *semeion* was barely visible, inverted and partly covered by the lintel’s other section, all under heavy foliage. In December 2023, the scrub and brush had been cut away from that section of the ruins and only then could we see that the full relief contained the three symbols.

relief than the crescents and column, allowing the possibility for a later addition of the star, but the evidence is not overly suggestive. It is also noteworthy that the background plane inside the lower/outer crescent remains higher than the background outside the figure.



Figure 16: Aslantaş: partial Lintel A, with *semeion* relief, inverted, on left (Daniel C Browning Jr, 2023).



Figure 17: Aslantaş: Lintel B; left section at right, right section at left—both inverted (Daniel C Browning Jr, 2023)

The base differs from the *semeia* above in being solid, rather than depicted as a two-legged stand. The other example from Aslantaş has a similar base. Both Aslantaş lintels also have an angled moulding at the top of the cornice. The *semeion* extends up to the bottom of this moulding on Lintel A, as seen in the DEM. A wider view of the 3D model makes this feature clearer (fig. 19). Both views show damage to the column between the base and lower crescent and to the left arm of the latter.

The remainder of Lintel A is not identifiable among the visible ruins. If additional symbols were carved on the missing section, as seems likely, the *semeion* would be the left-most one.

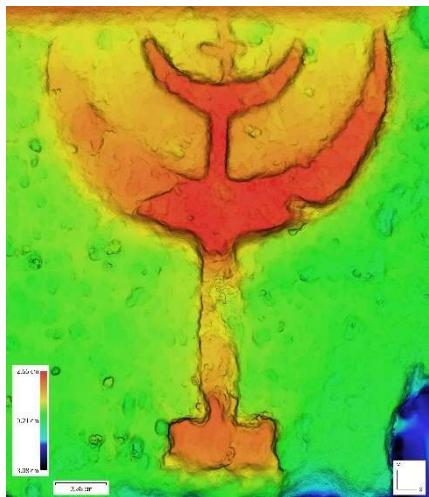


Figure 18: Aslantaş: Lintel A *semeion*, DEM of 3D model



Figure 19: Aslantaş: Lintel A with *semeion*, 3D model with occlusion texture

The heavily weathered Aslantaş Lintel B lies awkwardly in two major pieces. The left section rests upside down with the relief *semeion* actually leaning against the upper left corner of the larger right section, which lies face up (see fig. 17). The *semeion*, thunderbolt, and shield are easily discerned in person, but photogrammetry reveals interesting details. Photography, especially of the *semeion*, was limited by the position of the lintel sections without disturbing them, so the resulting 3D model contains unavoidable gaps. However, photogrammetry does allow manipulation and alignment of models. The two sections of the lintel face were modelled separately. The resulting “chunks” were rotated and aligned, showing conclusively that the two sections complete a single lintel (fig. 20).

This solid model display also reveals that the reliefs of the *semeion* and thunderbolt were apparently unfinished. The expected dual crescent section of the *semeion* stands in relief with no details distinguishing the upper and lower crescents. Unfortunately, the *in situ* position of the lintel parts described above leaves a partial gap on this part of the model, but visual inspection confirms the lack of finished detail. The base appears at first to be solid, like the one on Lintel A. However, the DEM of the *semeion* (fig. 21) hints that slightly angled dual feet may be intended. The unfinished form might provoke the suggestion that it is a completely different symbol. Against such a view are: 1) the nearby clear *semeion* on Lintel A; 2) the similarly unfinished thunderbolt; and 3) its combination with the thunderbolt and shield, as appears to be the normal pattern.

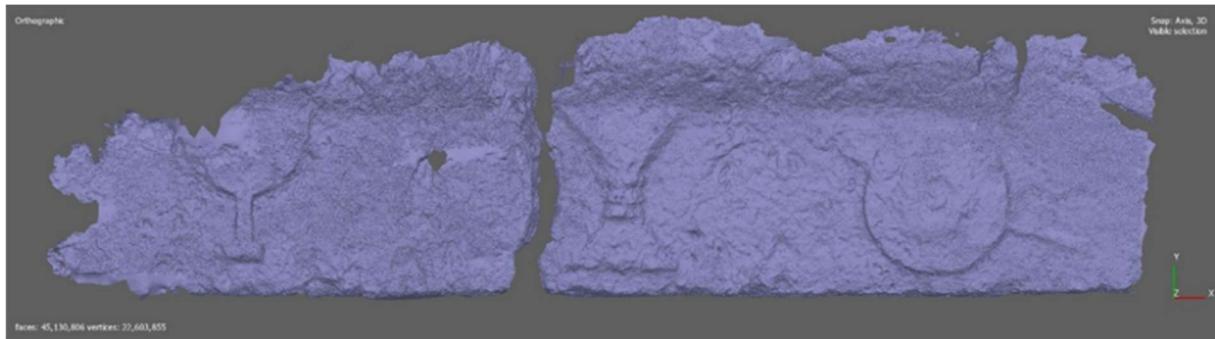


Figure 20: Aslantaş: Solid 3D model “chunks” of left and right sections of Lintel B, nearly aligned to show the positive match

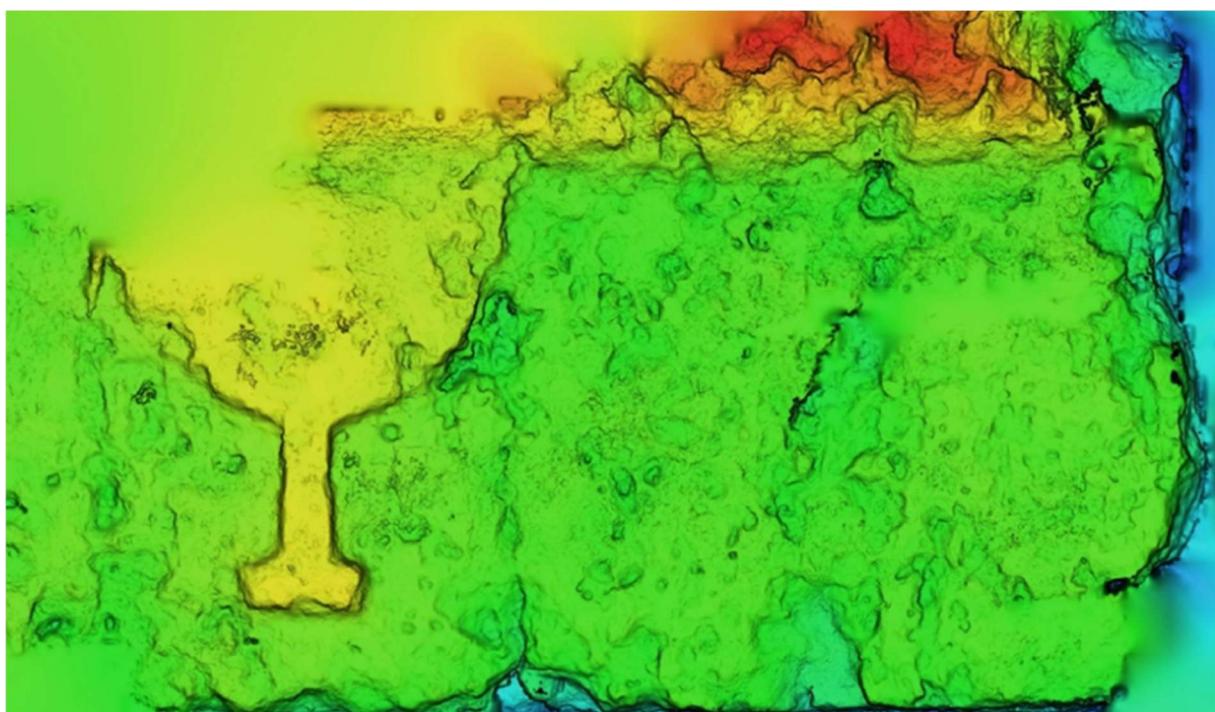


Figure 21: Aslantaş Lintel B *semeion*: DEM

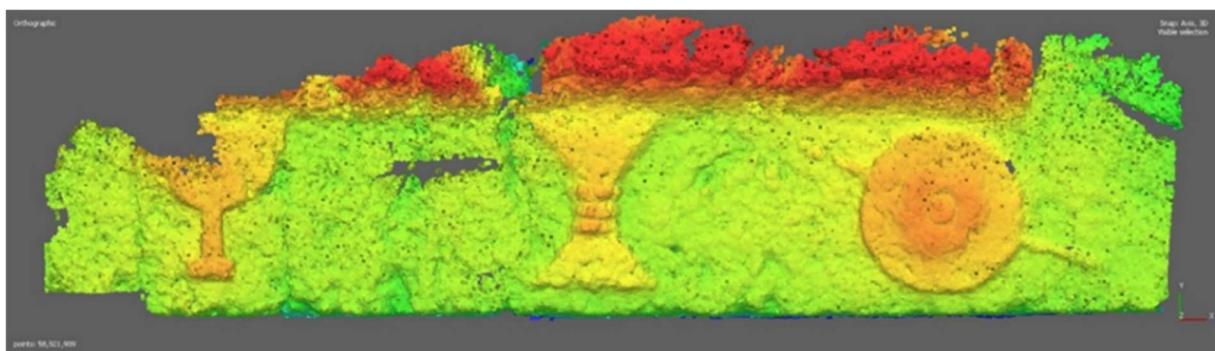


Figure 22: Aslantaş Lintel B: aligned 3D model point cloud with elevation display

The whole lintel composition appears most clearly via a point cloud elevation display of the two sections fully aligned (fig. 22). Analogous to the unfinished *semeion*, the “hourglass” shape of the thunderbolt is outlined in raised relief, but individual lightning bolts are not defined. The binding cord around the usual three bolts is detailed, but trailing ribbons do not appear. More complete is the shield, in this example with a sword behind. Though badly worn, the shield is obviously finished with a central boss in a concave indentation, surrounded by a slightly concave border and edged rim. The sword and rim are precisely the details we think are intended in the Olba Monastery Altar side C depiction, above.

Tapureli

Tapureli denotes an ancient site west of the modern village of that name, overlooking the Lamus Valley from its east rim. Extensive ruins across three hills indicate it was one of the largest settlements in the Olba region, occupied from the Hellenistic period through Late Antiquity⁸⁶. About 500 m northeast of the eastern hill acropolis, a large gateway with an *in situ* lintel marks the remains of a significant extramural building. On visual inspection, the lintel has apparent reliefs of a shield and club above the left and right jambs, respectively – the latter a common sign of Herakles. Between them, but closer to the shield on the left, a much less distinct relief seems to represent a *semeion*⁸⁷ (fig. 23). A gap with no obvious relief separates the probable *semeion* from the club. The height of the lintel and encroaching foliage make direct examination of the reliefs extremely difficult. Therefore, close range photogrammetry is especially helpful for evaluation⁸⁸.



Figure 23: Tapureli: doorway and lintel of extramural building with reliefs (Piero d'Altan, 2007)

⁸⁶ Aydinoglu and Mörel 2018, 555-556.

⁸⁷ Again, we thank the very observant Piero d'Altan for noticing the relief in 2007 and bringing it to our attention later. His photo (fig. 12) remains the best conventional image for discerning the reliefs, due its lighting, the height of the lintel, and excessive foliage growth since that date.

⁸⁸ See Browning 2024 for the general procedure.

A 3D model shows the *semeion* and a previously-undetected thunderbolt⁸⁹. Both symbols, however, have almost no detail and stand in much lower relief than the shield and club, as shown in DEM and point cloud views of the full lintel (fig. 24). Unlike the lintel at Örendibi, a DEM of the relief only (fig. 25) does not indicate lowering of the base plane for symbols to be added after the original composition. This evidence suggests that, at least, the *semeion* and thunderbolt were effaced after their creation, removing all surface detail. It is also possible the shield was ground down, but because shield reliefs are often plain, the lack of detail cannot be relied on as evidence for defacing. The DEM shows, however, that its relief is not appreciably higher than the other two, and significantly lower than the club. Since combinations of *semeion*, shield, and thunderbolt emerge as a norm in this corpus, it is significant that those three appear likely effaced, while the club symbol clearly remains intact.

Because of the defacing, the Tapureli *semeion* cannot be analysed on details. The base is rather broad and appears to be solid, as at Aslantaş, but a larger scale DEM (fig. 26, left) permits speculation that the complete figure showed legs. The column tapers and may continue above the lower crescent, although the latter is far from clear. The expected gap between the two crescents can only be detected on the right. The lower crescent is broken away on its lower left side, but its left tip may partially survive. No details survive of the upper crescent region, to say nothing of a possible star.

The much-destroyed thunderbolt also lacks detail, notably the usual outlining of each individual bolt. One surviving feature is the clear outline of wings (fig. 26, right), as in the Karahüseyin and Athena Relief thunderbolts.

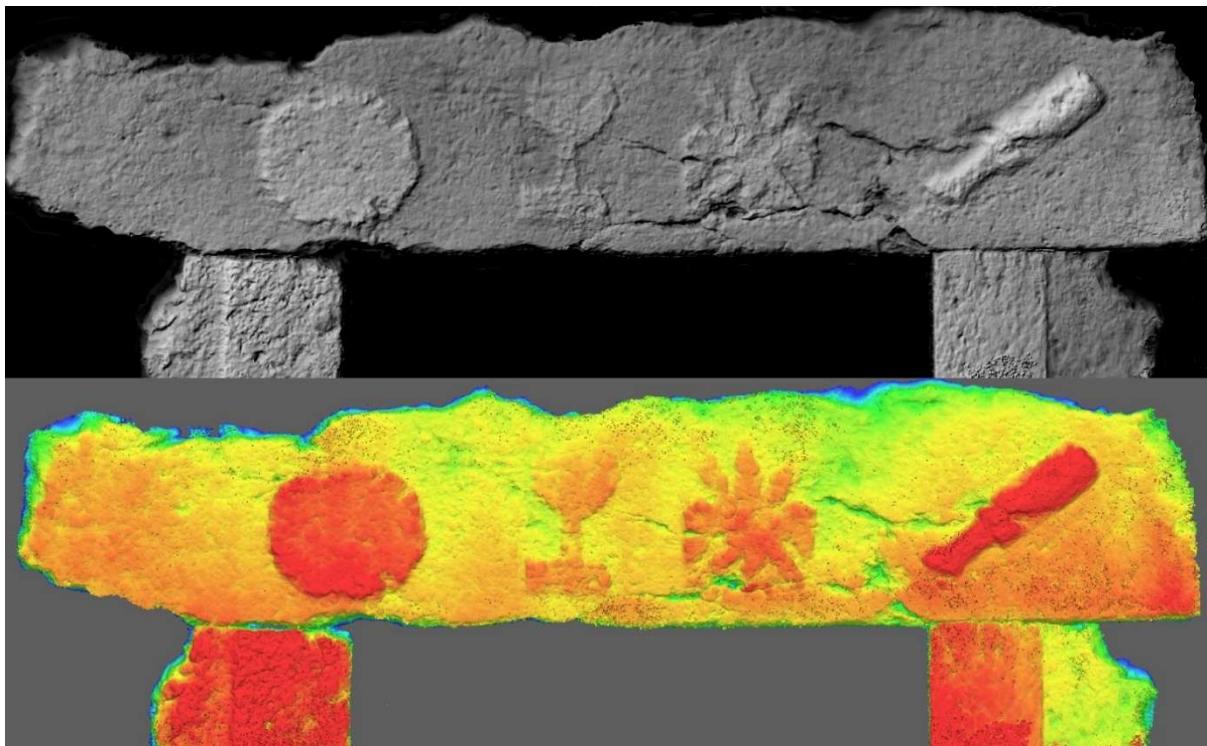


Figure 24: Tapureli relief lintel model views: grayscale DEM (above); point cloud with elevation display (below)

⁸⁹ While the empty space suggested a missing symbol, we did not identify the thunderbolt visually or with conventional photography in four visits to the site between 2017-2024.

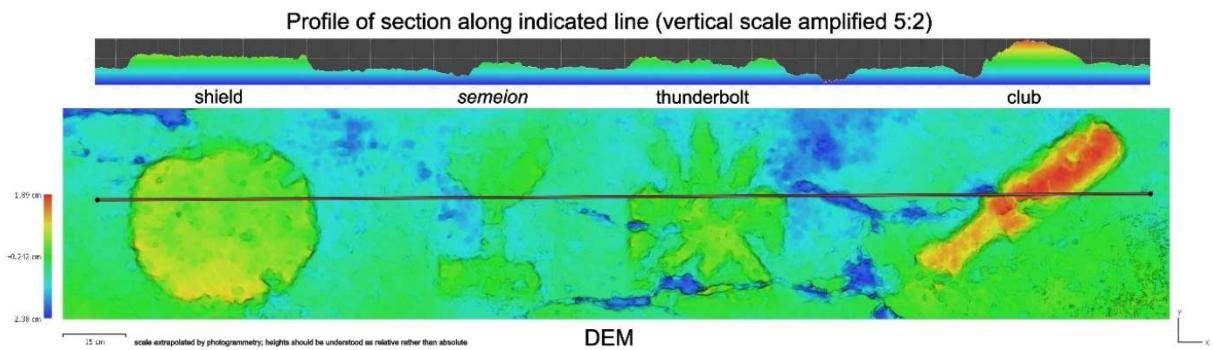


Figure 25: Tapureli lintel relief symbols: DEM (below) and section profile (above)

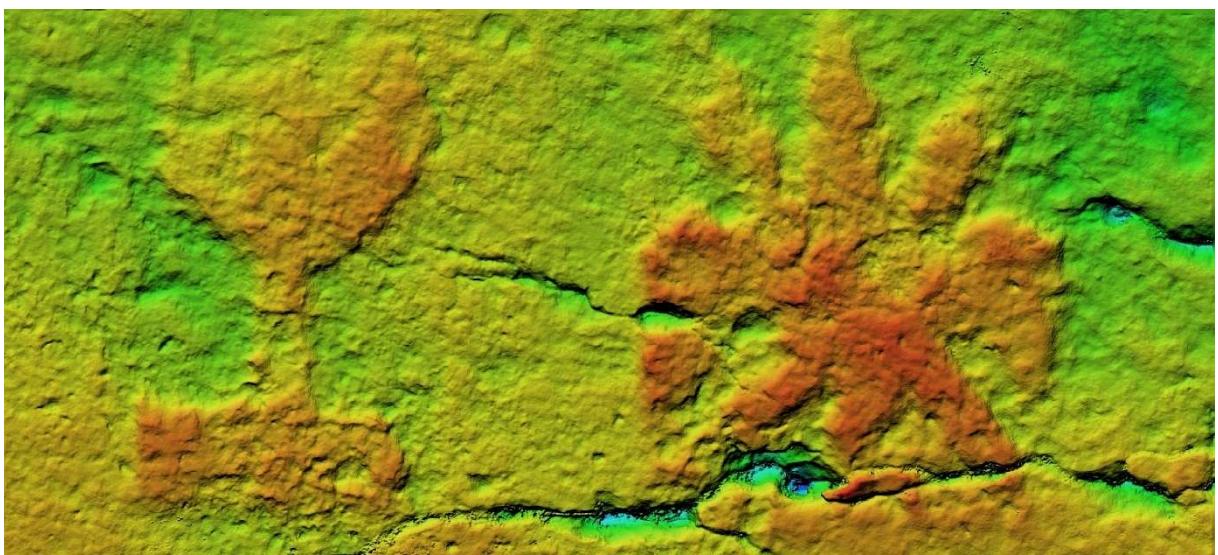


Figure 26: Tapureli lintel: DEM of *semeion* and *thunderbolt* relief remnants

Arguments against a Jewish Origin for the *Semeion*

Form and Function

Early identifications of the *semeion* as a menorah were based solely on a passing resemblance and assertions that the symbol has “five arms,” coupled with the claim that five-armed menorahs were common⁹⁰. Neither can be sustained.

In our review of examples above, photogrammetric analysis demonstrates conclusively that no *semeion* exhibits five arms. It also shows that the star assumed to “substitute” for a fifth arm by Dagron in the Silifke Museum Altar was never present in other published examples. Furthermore, Hachlili, whose monograph is cited for the existence of five-armed menorahs, repudiated these claims in her more recent publication on the subject⁹¹. Hachlili also points out that the menorah is consistently pictured with a tripod base in Jewish sources. All previously published *semeion* representations have two-legged bases. Perhaps more importantly, the arms of menorahs are of equal diameter and regularly

⁹⁰ Dagron and Feissel 1987, 38; Ayteş-Canevello 2011, 184-85; Durugönül and Mörel 2012, 309-12; Fairchild 2014, 207.

⁹¹ Hachlili 2018, 199-200.

terminate evenly-spaced on a plane parallel to the ground⁹². *Semeion* representations are wildly inconsistent in uniformity of size and termination of arms.

The consistent *semeion* form also precludes function as a menorah; that is, providing a stand for seven lamps. In every instance, *semeion* “arms” terminate in points without any platform or other indication of a support function. Rather than providing support, it seems the “arms” are actually supported by the stand. Their universal pointed ends and regular shape, even when radically different in size (as on the Köşkerli lintel), require identification as a pair of crescents instead of four arms⁹³.

Context

In no instance does a *semeion* appear with a demonstrable connection to Judaism. No examples occur in context with bona fide menorahs or any other indication of Jewish ownership or practice, despite the ample presence of such evidence in the region⁹⁴. The arguments put forth for individual examples are conjured from tenuous or imagined links. The most egregious relate to the two altars (see treatments above); which is unsurprising, as Judaism does not feature the use of votive altars!⁹⁵ As emphasized above, identification of rock relief *semeion* examples ultimately rely on the Silifke Museum Altar to justify a supposed Jewish connection.

On the other hand, all known *semeion* depictions occur in demonstrably pagan contexts. The Silifke Museum Altar is a pagan object by definition and features human ears, a device known only from pagan contexts. The other examples combine the *semeion* with established pagan symbols⁹⁶. Moreover, the symbols are far from random; the same combination of *semeion*, Zeus’ thunderbolt, and Athena’s shield occur regularly and nearly exclusively, as shown in Table 1.

Only the Silifke Museum Altar definitively depicts a lone *semeion*. Another appears on the left side of Aslantaş Lintel A while the rest of the lintel, with other likely symbols, is missing or buried. In every other case, the *semeion* accompanies Zeus’ thunderbolt, and almost always Athena’s shield. The Köşkerli lintel has the *semeion* and thunderbolt but is broken off where a third symbol is expected. The Athena Relief is a unique scene in the corpus, but the goddess herself supports a shield, making an added one unnecessary. Every other rock relief example features *semeion*, thunderbolt, and shield, supporting our identifications of the Olba Monastery Altar symbols. Among the five lintels, only Tapureli preserves an additional symbol: the club. Perhaps significantly, the *semeion*, thunderbolt, and possibly the shield, are effaced on this outlier (see above and fig. 24). The Örendibi lintel evidently contained another symbol, destroyed in antiquity, while the *semeion* is a later addition (see above and fig. 7). The Athena relief contains the only other symbol, a crescent/star combination. We argue this symbol is an addition to the shrine, added on the pilaster with the thunderbolt and an obliterated symbol, likely prior to the addition of the *semeion* outside the frame (above and figs. 12-13).

⁹² See Fine 2015, 39-40, on consistency of menorah depictions in late antiquity.

⁹³ As in Durugönül 1989, 50, in her first description of the Athena Relief example.

⁹⁴ For reviews of evidence not involving *semeia*: Durugönül and Mörel 2012; Özyıldırım and Ayteş-Canevello 2019.

⁹⁵ Shanks 1979, 44; Pilhofer 2018, 187.

⁹⁶ As previously noted by Hachlili 2018, 200; Pilhofer 2018, 86-89.

Example	Format	Context with other symbols; left-to-right order Key: Symbol – Unfinished – Effaced; ? = not extant				Star
Athena Relief	Addition ? to relief	Shield (part of main relief)		Crescent/Star, ?, Thunderbolt (on pilaster)	Semeion (outside frame)	-
Karahüseyin Alani Relief	Relief	Shield		Semeion	Thunderbolt	-
Silifke Museum Altar	Votive altar	-				Yes
Olba Monastery Altar	Votive altar?	Semeion		Thunderbolt	Shield-sword	-
Koşkerli Lintel	Lintel	Semeion		Thunderbolt	?	-
Aslantaş Lintel A	Lintel	Semeion		?	?	Yes
Aslantaş Lintel B	Lintel	Semeion		Thunderbolt	Shield-sword	-
Örendibi Lintel	Lintel	Semeion	Thunderbolt	Shield	[destroyed]	-
Tapureli	Lintel	Shield	Semeion	Thunderbolt	Club	-

Table 1: Summary table of *semeion* examples in context with other symbols; by presentation format

The order of the symbols may also be significant. The *semeion* is always left of the thunderbolt when they share the same plane, and the shield is right of the thunderbolt except for the Karahüseyin Alani and Tapureli reliefs, where it appears left of the *semeion*. In any case, the consistent combination suggests an emphasis on a triad or consortium of deities represented by the symbols.

Spatial Distribution

Archaeology demonstrates the presence of Jews in the larger region of eastern Rough Cilicia through inscriptions and unambiguous menorah examples on lintels and tombs, but this evidence does not coincide with *semeion* distribution. *Semeion* relief examples do not occur in any locations where other Jewish indications are known.

A map (fig. 27) demonstrates that all examples of the *semeion* and combinations with the thunderbolt and shield occur in a relatively small area, dominated by the city Olba. The well-documented Teukrid dynasty ruled a temple-state from Olba in the Hellenistic-Early Roman periods extending from the Calycadnus to Lamus Rivers. Symbols in relief found across that region on architectural elements from the same period are known as “Olbian symbols”⁹⁷.

However, the *semeion* and combinations are found in a far more limited range, corresponding only to the χώρα (territory) of the πόλις Olba in the later Roman and Byzantine period⁹⁸. Significantly, no *semeion* is known within the χώρα of other πόλεις of the region; Seleucia ad Calycadnum, Corycus, and Sebaste, all of which have significant epigraphic evidence for Jews⁹⁹. In contrast, the evidence for Jews in Olba and Diocaesarea is relatively minimal.

⁹⁷ Bent 1890a; Durugönü'l 1998b, 85-89.

⁹⁸ Durugönü'l 1995, 79-80; on χώρα/πόλις relationships in eastern Rough Cilicia, see Şahin 2007b.

⁹⁹ Durugönü'l and Mörel 2012, 305-308; Özyıldırım and Ayteş-Canevello 2019, 137-147.

To summarize, the *semeion* does not resemble a menorah and as depicted, cannot function like a menorah. It is found only in pagan and never in Jewish contexts, and its distribution does not match the extent of known Jewish presence in Rough Cilicia. The *semeion* is not a Jewish symbol. But what is it?

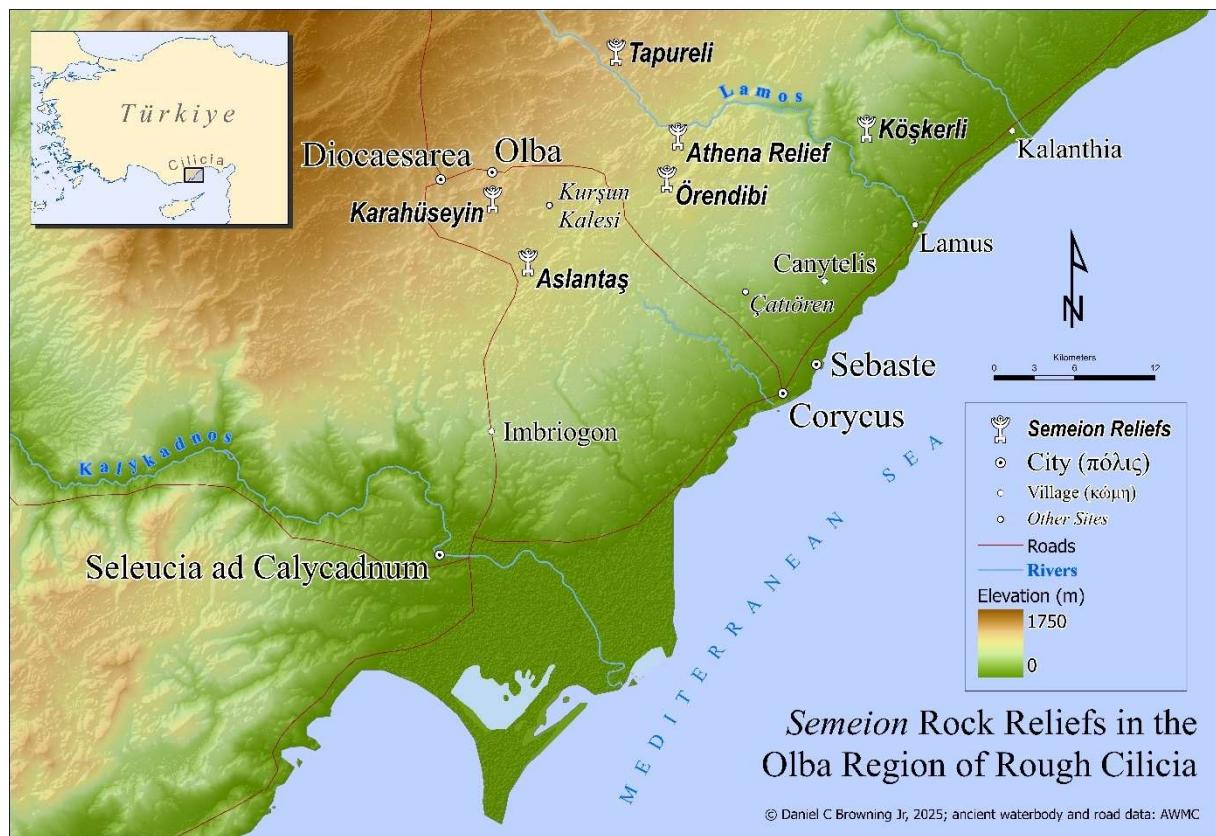


Figure 27: Map of *semeion* distribution in the Olba region

Towards an Identification

The consistent appearances (tab. 1) with symbols associated with Zeus (thunderbolt) and Athena (shield) imply the *semeion* also represents a deity (or deities). Having rejected the menorah hypothesis, it becomes necessary to identify relevant contexts in which to propose an identification. Those contexts necessarily include chronology.

Date Range

Chronological context is difficult to establish for the corpus of *semeion* representations, as none of the rock relief sites have been properly excavated. The only one from a controlled excavation, the Olba Monastery altar, is a small find recovered in fill material. Broad chronological limits for *semeia* can be inferred, however, in several ways.

As outlined above, *semeion* distribution lies strictly within the territory of the πόλις Olba of the Roman Empire, most clearly defined from the Flavian period¹⁰⁰. This indicates a date range and purpose different from the “Olbian symbols” of the Hellenistic-Early Roman period. Furthermore, no *semeion* comes from a context with clear Hellenistic indications.

¹⁰⁰ Magie 1950, 576; Mitford 1990, 1246-1248.

In two cases (Köşkerli and Örendibi; see above), *semeion* reliefs were used to posit Hellenistic site occupation by incorrectly connecting them to the Olbian symbols. We submit that the term “Olbian symbols” be restricted to symbols known on indisputably Hellenistic monuments¹⁰¹. No doubt those Hellenistic markers established a regional distinctiveness and tendency to indicate associations similarly in subsequent periods. Nonetheless, symbols from later contexts should be considered on their own merits (as is conventionally done for Christian crosses on lintels, for example) rather than automatically assumed as “Olbian symbols.” Thus, the distribution of *semeion* reliefs in the territory of the πόλις Olba implies a chronological range only beginning in the late 1st century AD, when Roman provincial norms extended across the region.

A brief review of the corpus follows with that perspective. Tapureli has Hellenistic presence on the acropolis, but the *semeion* lintel is 500m from the built-up area on an extramural building with no visible Hellenistic indications. As for Köşkerli and Örendibi, both sites are dominated by Byzantine churches with no indication of earlier structures. Discounting the “Olbian symbol” inference, it is difficult to assume for either site any occupation prior to the Late Roman period without excavated evidence. We know of no attempts to date remains at Aslantaş which contain a small monumental tomb but no church.

Earlier studies assigned tentative dates for two *semeia*. Dagron and Feissel’s tentative 4th-5th century date for the Silifke Museum altar¹⁰² continues without challenge. Durugönül’s 2nd-early 3rd century date for the Athena Relief cites support from palaeography¹⁰³. However, as argued above, photogrammetry reveals probable later addition of symbols to the shrine, with the *semeion* likely post-dating ones added on the right column. This permits a date range for the Athena Relief *semeion* more aligned with that for the altar.

The foregoing implies to us a likely but broad chronological range of 2nd to 5th century for all *semeion* representations. This range incorporates the two paleographically determined dates. It also conforms to a period of repeated political and religious changes that may have produced a regional emphasis on a triad of pagan deities.

The lack of direct epigraphical evidence for such a regional emphasis, or to the symbol itself, renders any identification tentative. Because no exact parallels exist for the *semeion*, a logical approach to this complex symbol should find antecedents for its component parts.

Semeion Components

The *semeion* can be broken down into distinct elements (fig. 28): a base, a column or staff, two crescent shapes, and—optionally and rarely—a star.

Semeia have two-footed bases except for the Aslantaş and Tapureli examples, which are flat. This appears unremarkable, apart from the contrast with tripod-based menorahs. The universal presence of a base, however, indicates a display function in conjunction with the column or staff component.

¹⁰¹ As the ones cataloged by Durugönül 1998b, 85-89.

¹⁰² Dagron and Feissel 1987, 38-39; the date, presumably paleographically determined, appears with a question mark.

¹⁰³ Durugönül 1989, 137; and 192, fn. 556, where S. Şahin is credited with paleographical confirmation.



Figure 28: The *semeion*, based on the Silifke altar

strongly hints that two gods are referenced by the *semeion*. Lunar crescents might quite reasonably apply to different deities, but the possibility that one of the crescents depicts horns¹⁰⁴ should be kept open. Regardless, any proposed identification must make sense for a pair of deities in a likely combination.

The star is another widely used symbol across periods and places with multiple applications. Only two *semeia* (Silifke Museum Altar, Aslantaş Lintel A) feature a star, both simple four-pointed and cross-like. In earlier periods of the Near East, the number of points or rays could be indicative of the deity¹⁰⁵, but this becomes inconsistent by the Roman period. Furthermore, as an “optional” feature of the *semeion*, the star could either represent an additional deity or simply a sub-component supplementing one of the crescents.

Comparative Archaeological, Epigraphical, and Literary Evidence

We are aware of no direct parallels to the *semeion*. On the other hand, parallels for components of the symbol abound. Our approach identifies such analogues with logical, epigraphical, or literary support for their combination.

Crescent Display on Staffs

The display of crescents on staffs, both hand-held and mounted in stands, is widely attested across Mesopotamia and the Levant in the Bronze and Iron Ages as a symbol of the moon god¹⁰⁶. In terms of consistent iconography, geographical proximity, and continuity up to chronological relevance for the *semeion*, the most significant parallels begin with several Neo-Assyrian stelae in eastern Anatolia that depict a crescent mounted on a staff, usually in a base with suspended tassels. These certainly relate to the Semitic moon god Sîn¹⁰⁷, whose

¹⁰⁴ Green 1992, 25-26.

¹⁰⁵ Eight-rayed stars, for example, are typical of the goddess Ishtar/Astarte; Keel and Uehlinger 1998, 45, 290.

¹⁰⁶ See Colbow 1997 for a review of early periods.

¹⁰⁷ Körögü 2018, 174-177.

The staff is rendered variously; some thick (Köşkerli), some thin (Karahüseyin). A few have a noticeable taper (Silifke Museum Altar, Örendibi). In most examples, its continuation above the lower crescent is minimized, sometimes significantly so, or essentially absent (Köşkerli, Karahüseyin). This suggests that the staff is mainly associated with the lower crescent and that the upper crescent is an added symbol.

Crescents rank among the most ancient and frequent symbols in religious iconography, so a myriad of potential deity associations exist. The obvious connection of the crescent to lunar imagery does little to reduce the possibilities since the phases of the moon invite the shape to symbolize light and darkness, birth and death, and even rebirth or resurrection.

The combination of two incongruent crescents,

strongly hints that two gods are referenced by the *semeion*. Lunar crescents might quite reasonably apply to different deities, but the possibility that one of the crescents depicts horns¹⁰⁴ should be kept open. Regardless, any proposed identification must make sense for a pair of deities in a likely combination.

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cult center Harran became important for Neo-Assyrian kings. The crescent standard of Sîn became a common symbol on stelae and seals in the late Iron Age, especially west of Assyria. At Tel Sera' in Palestine, a bronze crescent was uncovered complete with rings for tassels and a socket for mounting on a staff¹⁰⁸. The temple at Harran continued well into Late Antiquity¹⁰⁹. Unfortunately, remains of the renowned temple there are not extant.

Chronologically relevant parallels survive at Harran's satellite cult centre Soğmatar (Sumatar Harabesi). A cult site, called "Pognon's Cave," in the present village features two reliefs of crescent standards mounted in two-footed bases flanking a cult niche. These have dangling tassels, and above each crescent an inscribed four-point star appears¹¹⁰. Several larger-than-life reliefs of human figures flank the crescent standards with dedicatory inscriptions dated to AD 165. Another inscription dated 165 by the same named dedicant appears on a rocky promontory above the village. It accompanies reliefs of a standing figure and a bust with a crescent protruding behind the shoulders. An adjacent inscription identifies the bust as Sîn, with the title *Mārilāhā*, "lord god"¹¹¹. These monuments bring the long-established crescent standard of the moon god Sîn to at least the mid-second century AD. Soğmatar lay on the fringe of the Roman Empire most adjacent to Cilicia. But what of Rough Cilicia itself?

Two depictions of complete crescent standards appear in eastern Rough Cilicia. An unadorned crescent with a straight pole and flat base was inscribed between relief decorations on a sarcophagus of the 2nd-3rd century AD at Sînabiç (perhaps ancient Dalisandus)¹¹². Another appears at Keçiliköy, within the known *semeion* distribution some 7 km south of Olba. The walls of a workshop there display several symbols in relief, including a crescent, a *kerykeion*, and a thunderbolt atop individual ornate columns¹¹³. The Sînabiç and Keçiliköy crescent standards show the long-established symbol of the moon god in the period and region of the *semeion*. But what god was symbolized by them?

Which Moon God?

The lunar god Mên was widely worshiped across central and western Asia Minor in the Roman period, attested by epigraphic evidence, explored sanctuary remains at Pisidian Antiochia, and literary references. This deity was consistently depicted wearing a Phrygian hat, holding a pinecone, frequently astride a horse, and with the horns of a crescent moon emerging behind his shoulders¹¹⁴, as seen for Sîn in the bust at Soğmatar.

¹⁰⁸ Keel and Uehlinger 1998, 51, 296, ill. 295a; Moriconi 2018.

¹⁰⁹ See the excellent survey in Green 1992, 19-73.

¹¹⁰ Pognon 1907, 24-25. Pognon describes and sketches the staffs of the crescent reliefs as having an elongated humanoid-like shape; but this is an illusion created by the tassel pendants hanging below the crescent, damage to the reliefs, poor lighting, and severe discolouring of the cave walls by smoke from fire and other activities. This error is repeated by Segal 1953, 103, fig. 2. Careful inspection reveals a uniform staff below the tassels down to a broad two-footed base for each mounted crescent. Pognon notes that the stars are incised rather than in relief and opines they may represent later additions. Analysis by photogrammetry or other 3D imaging technique would help to understand this important site.

¹¹¹ Segal 1953, 101-104, 115; Albayrak 2015.

¹¹² Mitford 1980, 1246, fn. 69, pl. IV, no. 7.

¹¹³ Şahin 2007b, 131, figs. 77-78; without interpretation. There may be other symbols on poles, but it is difficult to tell from the published photos; we have not inspected this site in person.

¹¹⁴ Lane 1990, 2161.

Many inscriptions do not reference Mēn by name, rather only by adornment with crescent moons¹¹⁵. A relevant potential example from the mid-second century in east Rough Cilicia records the *kome Imbriogon* (the village of the Imbriogoi) granting permission to build a *heroon*, and a reciprocal gift for a *pannychis* festival; according to Keil and Wilhelm, “no doubt” for the unnamed Mēn, as indicated by a crescent with a “socket” for placement on a staff¹¹⁶. While Keil and Wilhelm cite no evidence for the claim, their assumption provides justification for identifying other crescents in the region as pertaining to Mēn. For example, the Sınabiç sarcophagus crescent standard is deemed “the emblem of the Anatolian god Men,” despite an inscription invoking the lunar goddess Selene¹¹⁷. Another crescent with a “socket” appears inverted on a tomb façade in the west necropolis of Diocaesarea. Investigators cite Keil and Wilhelm in connecting the crescent to Mēn but note that Selene appears in tomb inscriptions of the region¹¹⁸.

No direct evidence suggests that Mēn was symbolized by a crescent mounted on a shaft, as was certainly true for the semitic Sîn. None of the known crescent standard depictions occur in clear Mēn worship contexts. Also, the assumed “sockets” in crescent reliefs do not obviously serve that function. Many examples of crescents in relief with similar tabs on the bottom are found in dedications at the temple of Men Askaenos near Pisidian Antiochia, but the projections resemble the tenons on the bottom of votive plates also found there¹¹⁹. Both appear designed to facilitate mounting in slots for display in the sanctuary. The reliefs of crescents with tenons must depict the actual votive offerings: perhaps metal crescents mounted on benches or platforms¹²⁰.

The two complete crescent standard depictions at Sınabiç and Keçiliköy in Rough Cilicia can therefore be separated from other crescents, and the only parallels for them are representations of Sîn. The non-mounted crescents remain more likely indications of Mēn. But this is still problematic, since no inscription explicitly references Mēn south of the Taurus range¹²¹. One relief bust of a deity with a crescent, found in Tarsus and dated to the last two-thirds of the 2nd century AD, has been plausibly identified as Mēn, despite its flowing hair and lack of the traditional Phrygian cap¹²². The bust of Sîn at Soğmatar dating to the same period also seems to emphasize the hair and cautions that the Tarsus bust could represent Sîn¹²³.

¹¹⁵ Lane 1990, 2173; followed by Linnemann 2013, 97.

¹¹⁶ MAMA III, 26-27, no. 50; Mitford 1990, 2148, fn. 88.

¹¹⁷ Mitford 1990, 2150, citing MAMA III, 27, fn. 1 (see above, fn. 116), and without photo. For the apparent inscription, see Headlam 1892, 29, no. 23, where there is no description or photo of the sarcophagus, and the text does not include Σελήνην. It is amended, however, by Bean and Mitford 1970, 228, to include the goddess based on their inspection of *shedae*; they include the note “not seen,” and no further description or photo provided. This remains the only inscription at Sınabiç mentioning Selene, per Mitford 1990, 2150; but is difficult to reconcile with Mitford 1980, pl. IV, no. 7, where the photo clearly shows the crescent standard symbol. In December 2023 we were unable to find this sarcophagus, but the site has been ravaged by looters as noted already in 1966 by Bean and Mitford 1970, 225.

¹¹⁸ Linnemann 2013, 97, pl. 54, 1-3; Er-Scarborough 2017, 37, 39, fig. 3.35. Both tacitly allow that this crescent may refer to Selene.

¹¹⁹ For recent examples of both, see Özhanlı 2023, figs. 4, 7-9. The last one is remarkable for depiction of two nested tabbed crescents.

¹²⁰ See Belayche 2009, 344-345, fn. 92.

¹²¹ Elton 2019, 241.

¹²² Durugöntü and Durukan 2008, 199-206.

¹²³ See above, fn. 111. One might propose that Mēn and Sîn were identified as the same deity, but no inscriptions name Sîn in Rough Cilicia either. The origin of Mēn remains an open question. Lane argues for a Persian

Gender Issues

Another complication arises in terms of gender. The Tarsus bust's flowing hair and expression give it a feminine quality¹²⁴. Therefore, the bust can be justifiably identified as Selene, the female moon goddess, especially when epigraphic evidence in the region is taken into account.

Where the crescent appears in east Rough Cilicia, Selene is often invoked as a protector of tombs; sometimes in combination with Helios and underground gods. Two well-known examples occur at Canytelis¹²⁵. Numerous tombs without crescent reliefs also call on Selene as guardian¹²⁶. Mēn, in contrast, is never named in inscriptions in the region, apart from possible Mēn elements in personal names¹²⁷.

Two inscriptions of the 1st-2nd centuries AD with dedications to Selene at Kurşun Kalesi further highlight her prominence in the Olba territory. Both call her Selene Epekoos, "listening Selene"¹²⁸. They come from a stoa adjacent to ruins of an impressively situated building identified as a temple of the same date range¹²⁹. H. Şahin and A. Özdzibay argue that Selene was worshiped there and that crescents on tombs in the region should be attributed to the goddess rather than Mēn¹³⁰.

Though not epigraphically attested, Mēn is not completely absent in the region. Two coins from relatively distant Coracesium depict Mēn on the reverse; one with Marcus Aurelius (161-180) on the obverse, the other with Geta (211)¹³¹, both within our period of interest. But adjacent to the Olba territory, a coin from Corycus has a bust of Mēn on the obverse and Selene on the reverse¹³². This could signal an equating of the two deities as one¹³³ or indicate their joint worship.

Strabo, writing in the first century AD, describes a temple of Men Pharnaces at Cabira (Kabeira) in Pontus and says it "is also the sanctuary of Selene"¹³⁴. Neocaesarea (the renamed Cabira) minted 3rd century coins showing a temple with two statues, probably Mēn and Selene, implying longevity of the dual worship¹³⁵. Strabo avers the same occurred at other Mēn sanctuaries, including that of Men Askaenos near Pisidian Antiochia¹³⁶.

antecedent while others see an indigenous god of central Anatolia. Surprisingly, a semitic origin has not been fully explored.

¹²⁴ Durugönül and Durukan 2008, 203; for the same observation on another capless analogue, cf. p. 201.

¹²⁵ Heberdey and Wilhelm 1896, 58-60, nos. 133, 134; for a crescent without named deity, 81, no. 157; Cumont 1966, 206; Durugönül 1989, 31, 35, s.v. KF4; Er-Scarborough 2017, 39.

¹²⁶ For a convenient listing with texts and references, see Şahin and Özdzibay 2014, 101-102.

¹²⁷ MacKay 1990, 2101, fn. 220.

¹²⁸ Σελήνη Ἐπίκοος; Şahin and Özdzibay 2014, 97-98.

¹²⁹ For earlier assessments of the structure as a temple and its dating, see Söğüt 1998, 101-13 and Durugönül 2001, 157-158. Durukan 2024, argues that the ruins are a later "temple tomb" rather than a sanctuary; but see also Evgen 2021, 17-28 for a defense of the earlier date.

¹³⁰ Şahin and Özdzibay 2014, 101-105; also, with evidence that elements in personal names taken as evidence for Mēn veneration can be attributed to alternate names for Selene.

¹³¹ Şahin and Özdzibay 2014, 104, with references.

¹³² MacKay 1990, 2101, fn. 220.

¹³³ Some ambiguity surrounds the gender of the moon god in antiquity, especially at the junctures of east and west; see Lane Fox 1986, 535-536; Green 1992, 27-28.

¹³⁴ Strab. 12, 3, 31.

¹³⁵ Lane Fox 1986, 535-536.

¹³⁶ Strab. 12, 3, 31. For the site itself, see Mitchell and Waelkens 1998, 37-90, and Mitchell 2023, 76-83.

As already noted, the sanctuary of Men Askaenos has preserved many dedications to the god. Some Latin examples include the abbreviated formula LVS, a variation from the usual VSLM, used in the discharge of vows. A proposed reading of *L(unae) v(otum) s(olvit)*¹³⁷ makes the Roman Luna, equivalent of the Greek Selene, the object of the dedication. An honorary Latin inscription¹³⁸ in Antiochia reveals that *Luna* was the official name used by the Roman colonial magistrates for the established local god Mēn. Thus, they retained the lunar essence of the deity but glossed over the gender difference with the ambiguous LVS. In this way, Latin dedications—the language chosen by public officials—could use the abbreviation L to substitute for the name of the god and avoid the gender contradiction¹³⁹. Relief crescents in dedications, often multiple in number according to the number of dedicants, also could be replaced. Thus, one dedication has Μηνὶ εὐχήν followed by three names in Greek and the Latin letters LLL, one for each dedicant¹⁴⁰. The local male Mēn is named but symbolized by an abbreviation for the more official Roman goddess *L(unae)*.

Evidence for conflation or joint worship of lunar deities also occurs for the great sanctuary of Sīn at Harran in the 3rd-4th centuries. In 217, the Emperor Caracalla was assassinated near Carrhae (Harran). The contemporary Herodian reports (in Greek) that he was enroute to the “Temple of the Moon” to sacrifice to Selene¹⁴¹. The reference may indicate confusion of the cults of the Semitic male Sīn and the Greek female Selene, but this seems unlikely for the Syrian Herodian. The enigmatic 4th century *Historia Augusta* adds to the confusion by saying that Caracalla intended to honour *Luni/Luna*¹⁴². The author then adds the amusing note:

“Now since we have made mention of the god Lunus, it should be known that all the most learned men have handed down the tradition, and it is at this day so held, particularly by the people of Carrhae, that whoever believes that this deity should be called Luna, with the name and sex of a woman, is subject to women and always their slave; whereas he who believes that the god is a male dominates his wife and is not caught by any woman’s wiles. Hence the Greeks and, for that matter, the Egyptians, though they speak of Luna as a “god” in the same way as they include woman in “Man,” nevertheless in their mystic rites use the masculine “Lunus””¹⁴³.

The name Lunus was perhaps coined by the Latin writer to emphasize the male gender of the god¹⁴⁴. If the tradition has any element of truth, it may reflect local angst against a Roman policy—like the one posited for Mēn above—of referring to the male Sīn in feminine terms; perhaps even a subtle distancing from Rome at a contested border area. Whatever the case, Julian also offered sacrifices to Luna at Carrhae in 363 on the outset of his campaign against Sassanid Persia, according to Ammianus Marcellinus¹⁴⁵.

Thus, we have evidence from the 1st through mid-4th centuries for worship of female lunar deities at three different sanctuaries nominally for male moon gods. Therefore, it

¹³⁷ For an example, see Levick 1970, 49-50, and pl. Va, with the usual crescent identified with Mēn.

¹³⁸ CMRDM I, no. 178 (= CIL III no. 6829).

¹³⁹ See the developed argument by Belayche 2009, 336-342.

¹⁴⁰ Hardie 1912, 136, n. 42, who interprets *L(ibentes)*, followed by CMRDM I, 128-129, no. 220; but see Levick 1970, 50, and Belayche 2009, 340.

¹⁴¹ Herodian. IV, 13, 3.

¹⁴² Hist. Aug. *Caracalla*, 6, 6.

¹⁴³ Hist. Aug. *Caracalla*, 7, 3-5.

¹⁴⁴ Magie 2022, 17, n. 44.

¹⁴⁵ Amm. XXIII, 3, 2.

should come as no surprise to find, in the same date range, between and somewhat equidistant from all three, a similar enigma. East Rough Cilicia has symbols usually associated with the male gods Sîn (the crescent standard) and Mêñ (the crescent alone), but with inscriptional evidence only for the female Selene. Furthermore, in the Olba territory of Rough Cilicia there is an apparent temple with dedications to Selene in an adjacent stoa. Also, exclusively in the same area, the *semeion* appears; a previously unknown symbol that combines established motifs of the various lunar deities.

The Second Crescent and Star

The crescent standard of Sîn contains all elements of the *semeion* except the second crescent and very occasional star. As noted above, crescents might represent bovine horns rather than lunar shapes, and examples occur in the pre-classical world¹⁴⁶. Continuation of these motifs is quite rare in the Roman Empire and Late Antiquity, however, and none provide close parallels for this study¹⁴⁷.

Lunar crescents might represent any number of deities having associations with the moon or concepts such as light and dark, birth and death, etc. The goddesses Artemis, Selene, and Hecate were all associated with the moon in their various capacities and, in later times, identified with each other¹⁴⁸. Crescents sometimes adorn Artemis in artistic representations, but only Selene is identified with the crescent as a representative symbol.

The star, which only appears in the *semeion* on the Silifke Museum altar and Aslantaş lintel A, is a puzzling variant. Both occurrences are four-rayed stars, which are unusual¹⁴⁹. Eight-rayed stars were the symbol of Ishtar in the ancient Near East, with occasional six-rayed variants, but not four-pointed. Pairing the star with the upper crescent would invite comparison with the many crescent-and-star symbols found on coins of the period in both the Roman and Sassanid realms, but those always have eight- or six-rayed stars. Without further examples, we must consider the star an optional and occasional embellishment.

Possible Identifications

The most economical interpretation of the *semeion* would use parallels extant for the period and/or the region in question. For the two crescents, then, we have evidence for four named lunar deities in the period: Sîn, Mêñ, Selene, and Luna. Of these, only Selene is attested in inscriptions of the region, and prominently in association with temple ruins in the Olba territory. Luna is established as the Latin equivalent of Selene. As shown, literary and archaeological evidence confirms Selene/Luna was worshiped in at least three sanctuaries of the male moon god.

Of the male gods, Sîn is not at all attested in Rough Cilicia, but is the only god connected certainly with the crescent standard, which appears in the region and seems to be the basis of the *semeion*. Mêñ is only minimally attested, but maximally assumed by previous

¹⁴⁶ For a treatment of this issue, see Ornan 2001.

¹⁴⁷ Mêñ is sometimes pictured with a bull, often reduced to a bucranium, Lane 1990, 2161; but in a submission role and not with a simple crescent icon; for examples: CMRDM I, nos. 123, pl. LVIII; 137, pl. LXII; and the most crescent-like, no. 142, pl. LXVI.

¹⁴⁸ A fascinating mid-second century inscription from Castabala in "Smooth" Cilicia addresses a goddess, "Either Selene or Artemis or you, Hecate..." (IGR III, no. 903.B.1-4); translation, Elton 2004, 238.

¹⁴⁹ But consistent with the pair of crescent standards having (possibly later) inscribed four-rayed stars in Pognon's cave at Sögmatar; see above, and fn. 110.

researchers; reasonably so, given his association with crescent symbolism. A potential identification of Sîn with Mêν, or a semitic origin of the latter, represents an underexplored but viable area of research.

Considering all of the above, the *semeion* must have emerged in the broad range of the late 1st through 5th centuries in the territory of the city Olba. It must have functioned as part of a triad with symbols representing Zeus and Athena, representing a deity or deities. The symbol appears to add a second crescent, occasionally embellished with a four-rayed star, to the established emblem of the male moon god. Two possible identifications for the *semeion* are reasonable: 1) it represents the identification of two male lunar deities, Mêν and Sîn; or 2) it represents joint veneration of male and female lunar deities, with a crescent standard for the male (whether Mêν or Sîn) and another crescent for the female (Selene/Luna).

The second option seems far more likely in light of the epigraphic evidence and the probable sanctuary for Selene at Kurşun Kalesi. If the latter is true, we can add the observation that the region around Olba includes a major temple of Zeus (at Diocaesarea), a temple to a moon deity (or deities), and a cult installation for Athena (the Athena Relief). The triad of thunderbolt, *semeion*, and shield symbols corresponds to the known cult centres in the Olba territory.

Conclusions

Our analysis of the known *semeion* representations definitively refutes claims that the symbol is a menorah or modification of a menorah. Photogrammetry conclusively shows that no *semeion* reliefs conform to the form or function of a menorah.

The *semeion* always appears in pagan contexts, consistently in concert with the same two pagan symbols. The *semeion* is composed of two crescent shapes with a supporting shaft and base. Both the crescent on a staff and crescent alone are symbols with a long history of representing pagan moon deities. Examples of both are found in the geographical and chronological range of all known *semeion* representations; namely in the territory of the *polis* Olba of the Roman Empire through Byzantine periods. That much is certain.

Other conclusions remain less certain because of limited data. Based on the current state of knowledge, we propose that the *semeion* represents a dual worship of moon deities, most likely a male god (Mêν or Sîn), epitomized by a crescent on a staff, with the second crescent signifying the goddess Selene, the name attested widely in the region.

Any conclusions as to why this symbol appears and is used in a triad with the thunderbolt of Zeus and the shield of Athena would be far more speculative. It suffices for us to point out that the region of eastern Rough Cilicia saw many changes and crises from the 2nd to 5th centuries. Any of these political and religious events could have served as a catalyst for Olbians, whether magistrates or populus, to emphasize the deities with cult centres within the city's territory.

As *semeia* appear on the latest remains of sites where they are found, sometimes on still-standing lintels, it is tempting to suggest they arise towards the end of the established date range, when cultural and political change was more intense. However, only continued field research can expand our knowledge and further define the scope for this fascinating local phenomenon.

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