



[A God-Fearer and the Menorah of Sardis](#) [1]

A god-fearer called Aurelius Hermogenes donates a menorah to the synagogue of Sardis in response to (the gifts of) providence.

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Votive inscription

Original Location/Place: South-western corner of the synagogue of Sardis

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Museum of Manisa (Turkey)

Date: 212 CE to 400 CE

Physical Characteristics: Plate broken in two panels. Letters are irregularly carved but with clear traces facilitating the reading. The stone is damaged on the right top and bottom sides.

Material: Not provided by the editors

Measurements: 57 centimetres high, 20.5 centimetres wide, and 13.4 centimetres thick. Letters are 3 centimetres tall.

Language: Greek

Category: Roman, Greek, Jewish

Publications: *SEG* 46.1518 [*IJO* II.132]

Commentary:

This inscription is one of the many texts discovered in the synagogue of [Sardis](#) [2] (Asia Minor). It is principally selected for our collection because it records the donation of a menorah (or “7-lampwick” = ??????????) by a god-fearer (????????/theosebês). The brief message will also allow us to explore the interaction of the Jewish population with the context of this Greek city in Late Antiquity.

The Jews of Sardis are one of the better-attested communities in the Diaspora. Traditionally, the origin of the group is attributed to the colonists that the king Antioch III sent from Babylon to Lydia and Phrygia as recorded by a letter dispatched to Zeugis, the Seleukid representative in Sardis (Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XII.147-153). In the 1st century BCE and already under Roman rule, Flavius Josephus also records two decrees in which the Jews are reported “to have an association from the earliest times in accordance with their native laws and a place for their own” (*Jewish Antiquities* XIV.235) in addition to other privileges (*Jewish Antiquities* XIV.259-261). This special status would have been confirmed by Augustus who ordered the proconsul of Asia not to forbid the Sardian Jews from assembling together and sending money to Jerusalem (Flavius Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XVI.171). Our sources for the early imperial period are virtually non-existent (see Trebilco, *Jewish Communities*, p. 38-39), and the only secure indication of a Jewish community comes from an inscription listing several urban landmarks of the city, including a synagogue, which has been securely dated to the early 3rd century CE (*I. Sardis* 17 = *IJO* II.53; see Herrmann, “Inscripfen von Sardeis,” p. 257-263). Beyond these ancient testimonies, our knowledge of the Jews of Sardis greatly advanced in the mid-20th century when the excavators of the site discovered a new grand structure that could be identified as a synagogue (see Mitten, *The Ancient Synagogue of Sardis*). The archaeological works yielded new inscriptions and mosaics from an early stage (see Robert, “Nouvelles inscriptions,” p. 37-58), and allowed the researchers to determine that the synagogue was the result of several construction phases (see Seager and Kraabel, “The Synagogue”). The building is flanked by the city’s main palaestra and it consists of a colonnaded entrance court and a long assembly hall. Even if the magnificent gymnasium-bathhouse is known to be fully functioning and completed by the 3rd century CE (*SEG* 36.1094; see Yegu?l, *The Bath-gymnasium*, p. 9-16), the chronology of the synagogue is much more complex and debated. Most of the aforementioned phases were dated to the 4th century CE on the basis of coin finds beneath the floors of the halls. This chronology has recently been challenged due to the presence of coinage up to the 6th century CE (see Magness, “The Date”). Considering that the building certainly had several construction phases – as mentioned above – I do not consider the arguments for the late dating of the entire complex authoritative enough. This shall be shown by the abundant epigraphic evidence found at the site, written mostly in Greek (see Kroll, “The Greek Inscriptions), but also some in Hebrew (Cross, “The Hebrew inscriptions”). Indeed, the word for renovation (????????/ananeôsis) is recorded in this material (*IJO* II.119).

The inscriptions are mostly concerned with the donations that financed the fine decorations of the synagogue. In



addition to the mosaics which were common in other Late Antique synagogues of the Mediterranean (see Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art*, p. 198-236), the walls were also clad in marble including those of the Torah shrine, referred to as *nomophylakion* (*IJO* II.129). The menorah was an even distinct object of Judaism in Diaspora communities (see Hachlili, *The Menorah*) and several remains of the symbol were found during the archaeological excavations (Seager, Kraabel, “The Synagogue,” p. 171). The inscription of Aurelius Hermogenes must be understood in the same context of embellishing the synagogue through individual contributions. The expression that this man from Sardis (*Sardianos*) uses for the dedication of his vow (*euxamenos*) is slightly abbreviated. The formula alluding to the intervention of providence (*pronoia*) was generally completed by a reference to the gifts (*domata*) attributed to the divine force (e.g. *IJO* II.82-84). God is not directly addressed and this absence might be related to the condition of god-fearer (*theosebês*) bestowed upon Aurelius Hermogenes. Our knowledge of this group of gentile sympathisers of Judaism was substantially improved after the discovery of an illuminating inscription from Aphrodisias. This subscription list shows that god-fearers, while participating in the activities of the Jewish community of the Carian city and contributing to its charitable association, still retained distinctive features. For example, they mostly kept Greek/native names instead of the Semitic ones preferred by the Jews and the proselytes. The god-fearers also appeared as members of the city-council (*bouleutai*), but not the other members of the decany. In Sardis, city-councillors are also attested and they mostly followed the formula attributing their donations to providence (*IJO* II.72, 77, 78). As for the names, Aurelius Hermogenes showed nomenclature typical of the Greek East after the *Constitutio Antoniniana*. His Roman citizenship was still worth stating and many other *Aurelii* are recorded making donations for the synagogue (*IJO* II.67-70, 78, 91-93, 133, 136, 138). This aspect argues against a dating after the 4th century when single names were generally preferred as illustrated by the inscription from Aphrodisias. Indeed, the use of biblical onomastic – more common in Late Antiquity (see Williams, Margaret, “Semitic Name-Use”) – is only scarcely attested in Sardis (e.g. *IJO* II.63). In this last inscription, a certain Samoës is said to be priest (*hiereus*) and “teacher of wisdom” (*sophodidaskalos*). The Jewish association of Aphrodisias also considered themselves “learned-men” (*philomatheis*), so significant similarities existed between both Diaspora communities in Asia Minor despite the onomastic differences. For example, gold-smiths (*chrysochooi*) are attested both among the Aphrodisian members of the decany and the synagogue donors in Lydia. The one from Sardis is called Aurelius Hermogenes, a city-councillor, but his identification with our homonymous benefactor cannot be certain given the common occurrence of the name in Greek contexts.

To sum up, this inscription illustrates a god-fearer maintaining his gentile nomenclature but contributing to the embellishment of the place where the long-lived Jewish community of Sardis convened. This combination of collaboration and distinction was also present in Aphrodisias and can be also be found in Philadelphia – also in Lydia – where the *theosebês* Hermophilos offered funds for the “very sacred synagogue of the Hebrews” (*IJO* II.49). In Miletus, even a seat in the theatre was dedicated to the Jews together with the god-fearers (*IJO* II.37). Responding to the gifts of providence, Aurelius Hermogenes provided a *menorah* as a vow and the epigraphic visibility of such actions in Late Antiquity – either in the 4th or the 6th centuries CE – sheds light on a high degree of interaction in the Diaspora which is not very well attested during the previous Roman imperial period.

Keywords in the original language:

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- [????????](#) [4]
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Thematic keywords:



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- [god-fearer](#) [8]
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- [Late Antiquity](#) [16]
- [Roman citizenship](#) [17]
- [Constitutio Antoniniana](#) [18]

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Other sources connected with this document: Inscription

[The Jews, Proselytes and God-fearers of Aphrodisias](#) [33]

Subscription list of an organised group of Jews in Aphrodisias (Asia Minor) including proselytes and god-fearers.

- [Read more about The Jews, Proselytes and God-fearers of Aphrodisias](#) [33]

Inscription

[The Katoikia of Jews Inhabiting Hierapolis](#) [34]

A funerary inscription sets fines to the community of Jews residing in Hierapolis (Phrygia). A copy was to be deposited in the archive of the Jews.

- [Read more about The Katoikia of Jews Inhabiting Hierapolis](#) [34]



Inscription

[Donation of Claudius Tiberius Polycharmus to the synagogue of Stobi \[35\]](#)

A Roman citizen is considered “father of the synagogue” in Stobi (Macedonia) and donates rooms after conducting his life “according to Judaism.”

- [Read more about Donation of Claudius Tiberius Polycharmus to the synagogue of Stobi \[35\]](#)

Inscription

[A Jewish Vow for the Salvation of the Severans from Qazion \[36\]](#)

A group of Jews dedicates a vow to the salvation of Septimius Severus, Caracalla, Geta and Iulia Domna. It belongs to a building project of controversial nature.

- [Read more about A Jewish Vow for the Salvation of the Severans from Qazion \[36\]](#)

Inscription

[Nomenclature and Constitutio Antoniniana in Aphrodisias \[37\]](#)

A funerary text inscribed on a sarcophagus of Aphrodisias records the change of nomenclature caused by the *Constitutio Antoniniana*.

- [Read more about Nomenclature and Constitutio Antoniniana in Aphrodisias \[37\]](#)

Papyrus

[P.Giss. 40 and the Constitutio Antoniniana \[38\]](#)

An edict issued by the emperor Caracalla records a universal grant of citizenship as an expression of magnificence and gratitude to the immortal gods.

Language English

- [Read more about P.Giss. 40 and the Constitutio Antoniniana \[38\]](#)

Inscription

[Sardis sends an embassy to Augustus \[39\]](#)

The League of Greek Cities in Asia and the assembly and elders of Sardis honour Menogenes for conducting a diplomatic mission in Rome. Augustus acknowledges the receipt of the embassy carrying a local decree which celebrated Gaius Caesar's coming of age



- [Read more about Sardis sends an embassy to Augustus](#) [39]

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