

RESEARCH NOTES: Ottoman Forms to Meet Jewish Needs

In the 17th century, Ottoman art and culture began having a significant and, thereafter, increasing influence on the important Jewish community of Istanbul. This is the conclusion of Israel NSF grantee Mina Rozen based, in part, on her extensive study of burial practices and artistic motifs in the centuries-old Jewish cemetery at Hasköy, Turkey. Some borrowings were mere artistic vogues adopted by Jewish funerary masons, often centuries after their popularity among the Turks had waned. One example is the prismatic shape of some 17-18th century Jewish gravestones, a style popular among the Seljuk Turks in the 13-15th centuries. Other borrowings and syntheses go much deeper and involve the use and reinterpretation of Moslem religious motifs and artifacts.

For example, many 17-18th century Jewish gravestones have a sunken, inscribed central portion covering most of the stone. This innovation has the shape of the Moslem mihrab, the prayer niche in the wall of the mosque which faces Mecca. Jewish mihrab-motif gravestones were usually laid flat on the ground, with the tip of the mihrab design pointing southward to Jerusalem. In that sense, the stones resemble contemporary Turkish prayer

rugs, which also contained mihrab motifs, were used horizontally and were pointed in the direction of Mecca.

Moslem water niches were apparently borrowed and transformed for Jewish use

These Jewish gravestones also have two depressions at the top, one on each side of the mihrab-design's peak.

for memorial candles. Instead, they were used to gather rainwater for the birds, as an act of kindness. These Moslem water niches were apparently borrowed and transformed for Jewish use. Indeed, prayer rug and mihrab designs on ark-covers were used (and occasionally banned) in synagogues from the 14th century onward.

The Jewish memorial candle and Moslem Gate-of-Heaven mihrab motifs are found combined, both artistically and symbolically, in many of the richly decorated Jewish gravestones at Hasköy. In the elaborate gravestone of 1773 shown at left, the sunken mihrab motif especially its pointed peak which has been replaced with a floral arrangement has been obscured by a Turkish Rococco design and embellishments (with some Western influence as well).



The water niches on this elaborate 18th small century Jewish tombstone stem from earlier Ottoman forms.

These were filled with oil and lit as memorial candles. The lack of such candle holes before 1600, and the absence of any such custom in early Jewish sources, including the Shulchan Aruch, suggests that the custom began only in the 17th century.

Ottoman gravestones had similar depressions, but they were not used

Still, the double candle niches remain in their usual position, on each side of the Jerusalem-pointing top design. Both of the examples shown involved the elaborate, and expensive, preparation and decoration of Marmara marble, indicating the high economic and social status of the Jewish magnates they memorialized in such an eclectic way.