

## **Klei Kodesh and Parochoth in the Ownership of Bavarian Synagogues<sup>1</sup>**

By Theo[dor] Harburger (Munich)

As already seen, Jewish communities in the present Free State of Bavaria, as well as in the rest of southern Germany, have only been able to live in safety and in peace in the past few centuries. In the Middle Ages, Jews were just able to hold their own in the face of continuous persecution and threats with the greatest difficulty. As the middle classes gained strength, Jews were squeezed out as financial competitors, and to avoid expulsion largely had to move to the Free Imperial Cities where the co-governing guilds had a determining influence. In the face of such measures, which were extremely rigorously carried out, non-Catholics were not tolerated and faced persecution after the Counter-Reformation in the Duchy or Electorate of Bavaria as well. In the regions of former Swabia and Franconia, which are now part of Bavaria, the situation was more favorable as it lacked a powerful central government, especially since the many small and even smaller lordships and ecclesiastic possessions enjoyed significant economic advantages from the right of residence granted to Jews and from the presence of Jews as a whole. After the Thirty Years' War in particular, when reconstruction work started following years of destruction, small traders who supplied goods to the remotest settlements became a much-needed economic factor. The easing of their material situation contributed first and foremost to the awakening of a feeling of security among Jews, although the constitutional foundation for their existence had by no means been established. Apart from purely pecuniary aspects to "protect" the exercising of power anchored in the more or less good will of the rulers, other factors which could not be influenced always played a role of course. This meant that the prolongation of the "Judenschutz" protection contracts for Jews always threatened or at least unsettled the existence of Jewish communities.

The sense of greater stability, of a more definite permanence, permitted Jews to organize their lives with some comfort following the major wars of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Not least of all this included a certain pleasure in aesthetics that emerged in place of the lack of ornamentation in rituals as was earlier the case. Where previously a bare room had been sufficient to serve as a meeting place for a congregation—which frequently only just comprised the minimum ten participants required—this period saw endeavors to build or decorate dignified synagogues once again. This went hand in hand with the joy for the decorative design of ritual objects whereby objects intended for celebrations in the home were also artistically embellished. As a result, this desire for beautiful things was transferred to individual families as well.

### Torah Ornaments

Even in small private synagogues, which served the religious needs of the congregation, the veneration of the holy symbol, the Torah scroll, gained expression through outer decoration.

---

<sup>1</sup> Harburger, Theo[dor]: K'le Kodesch und Parochoth in bayerischem Synagogenbesitz, in: Bayerische Israelitische Gemeindezeitung, vol. 5 (1 April 1929), pp. 101–103 and (15 April 1929), pp. 119–121.

Just as the importance of the prayer room is visibly heightened through the frequently added inscription “Know before whom you stand,” so is the sanctity of the ritual item to be grasped simply through its appearance through the use and crafting of precious materials. The “holy vessel,” however, does not only testify to the Jews’s use of the decorative arts for religious purposes, as far as their personal circumstances permitted. These objects also provide a means to historically understanding past eras and family ties.

Of the large number of objects on hand, owned by congregations or sometimes still in the possession of the descendents of the devout benefactors, several, which clearly show the influence of developments in European styles on the functional form, are worthy of mention.

A characteristic feature of the Torah shield is a rectangular field in the center, or slightly below the middle, with an exchangeable plaque bearing the name of the feast day on which the Torah is to be used. In older works, this central field is dominant. However, through the inclusion of a number of additional elements later, this field became increasingly secondary. Decorative garlands of fruit and flowers, tendrils, and ribbons commonly found in art in general toward the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century appear specifically as ornamentation, with columns arranged on both sides on pedestals or supports which recall the two pillars Boaz and Jachin in the vestibule of the Temple, along with the crown above the central field as the “Crown of the Torah” and animals, generally lions, which flank the crown-like supports.

By comparison with a number of such figures, one *tass* (Torah shield), now in a private collection in Gunzenhausen, is particularly idiosyncratically chased (fig. 1).



fig. 1. Torah shield, late 17<sup>th</sup> century, private collection, Gunzenhausen.  
(The individually variable letters on the shield have been added at random).

Silver-gilt animals, including mythical creatures such as a unicorn, have been added to a pewter plate, along with set stones, giving the whole a fantastic appearance. Unlike other objects found, the central field here is not occupied by one single plaque. Instead, the letters that make up the word have to be added individually. While only stylistic characteristics point to the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century as the date of this Torah shield, we can date the creation of another *tass*, owned by the Gunzenhausen congregation, more precisely thanks to a stamp. The object which is not very large (height 22, width 19 cm) was made in a goldsmith's workshop in Nuremberg between around 1675 and 1680 (fig. 2).



fig. 2. Torah shield. Nuremberg, between 1675 and 1680.  
Owned by the Gunzenhausen congregation.



fig. 3. Torah shield. Augsburg, between 1723 and 1735.  
Owned by the Dettingen congregation.

The somewhat heavy style found in the Franconian city of the arts can be seen in the squat execution of the twisted pillars which flank the sides of the rich tendril ornamentation. The overall shape, to a rigidly square design with the exception of the segmental arched upper part, goes back one no longer adopted in southern Germany but frequently encountered in Torah shields from central and northern Germany. The unity of its appearance is unfortunately broken by two inorganic lions added later. The more fluid design preferred in artworks from Augsburg can be seen in an object from the Fischach congregation of around 1700. Its imposing effect comes from the two mighty, rampant lions next to the pillars which are covered in a profusion of tendrils in a rich variety of forms.

A *tass* from the Oettingen congregation, made in Augsburg between 1723 and 1735 (fig. 3), has a particularly elaborate design. This impression is dominated by the flowing, tent-like baldachin with its heavy folds, which rests on two small projecting alcoves, each with three turned miniature pillars. With the Rococo's growing influence on the art of southern Germany, goldsmiths executed Torah ornaments in a more delicate shape in keeping with the changing taste of the times. The Torah ornaments made by Johann Carl Stiebeldey in 1751/53 (fig. 4) that include an ornamental depiction of the main synagogue in Munich, are also from Augsburg which increasingly played a leading role.



fig. 4. Torah scroll with ornamentation. Augsburg, c. 1751/53 by Joh. Carl Stiebeldey. Owned by the Munich congregation.

The *rimmonim* (Torah finials) screwed onto the “Trees of Life,” the wavy wooden shafts, are a lively ornamentation. A Torah shield (fig. 5) still held by the Kriegshaber congregation, which, according to the inscription, was donated to that same community by R. Isaak, son of the deceased head of the congregation Seligmann S’gal of Steppach and his wife Edel, daughter of the deceased head of the Baruch congregation in 1761, is intricately designed. In the lower cartouche the very slender object

(height 41.5, width 27.5 cm) includes an outstretched hand emerging from the cloud that is pouring water from a jug into the basin used by the *kohanim*, thus indicating the donor's Levitical heritage. A large number of attractive silver ritual objects from the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century still in existence show to what extent the Rococo delight in form also became an integral part of Jewish religious art.



fig. 5. Torah shield. Augsburg, 1761.  
Owned by the Kriegshaber congregation.

With the emergence of Classicism, Jewish ritual objects were also influenced by this artistic style. One of the prettiest Torah shields of this period can be found in a private collection in Memmingen which was fashioned by an Augsburg artist in 1824 (fig. 6).  
(To be continued.)

*(Translation: Christopher Wynne)*

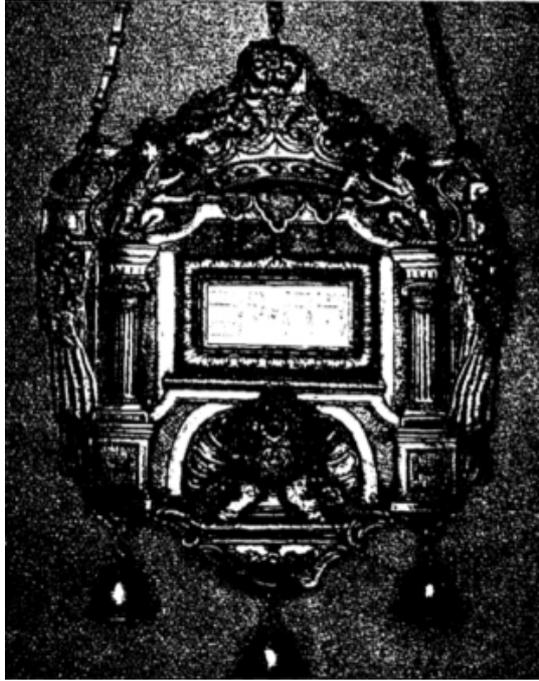


fig. 6. Torah shield. Augsburg, 1824.  
Private collection, Memmingen