Understanding the Jewish Menorah
Does this ancient menorah graffito show the Temple menorah?

The Jewish menorah—especially the Temple menorah, a seven-branched candelabra that stood in the Temple—is the most enduring and iconic Jewish symbol. But what did the Temple menorah actually look like?

In early August 2011, the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) issued a press release announcing the discovery of “an engraving of the Temple menorah on a stone object” in a 2,000-year-old drainage channel near the City of David, which was being excavated by Professor Ronny Reich and Eli Shukron. (An unusually well preserved iron sword in its leather scabbard, which presumably belonged to a Roman soldier, was also found there.) The IAA release went on to say that “a passerby who saw the [Temple] menorah with his own eyes … incised his impressions on a stone.” The excavators were quoted as saying that this graffito “clarifies [that] the base of the original [ancient] menorah … was apparently tripod shaped.”

But does it?

Depictions of the Jewish menorah with a tripod, or three-legged, base were indeed quite popular in late antique Judaism (fourth–sixth centuries C.E.). This can be seen clearly on the mosaic floors of several synagogues (Hammath Tiberias, Beth-Shean, Beth Alpha and Nirim), not to mention inscribed plaques, oil lamps and even a tiny gold ring from the fifth century.

Although there is thus later artistic support for a tripod-based Jewish menorah, the evidence from the late Second Temple period, when the ancient menorah was still standing in the Temple, is rather different. The handful of contemporaneous depictions we have seem to show the Jewish menorah with a solid, usually triangular base. These include the fragmentary ancient menorah graffito discovered by the late Israeli archaeologist Nahman Avigad in his excavation of the Jewish Quarter in Jerusalem, multiple coins of the last Hasmonean king Mattathias Antigonus (40–37 B.C.E.) and the decorated stone table discovered at Magdala. (The Temple menorah pictured on the Arch of Titus in Rome has an unusual octagonal tiered base that is usually rejected as unrealistic.) Therefore this recently discovered crude drawing of a Jewish menorah hardly settles the question of what the Temple menorah’s base looked like.

Another glaring problem is that this ancient menorah has only five branches. The Temple menorah had seven branches, as did the ancient menorah in the desert Tabernacle described in Exodus 25:31–40. Although the rabbis prohibited making seven-branched menorot like the one in the Temple, some
Second Temple Jewish menorah depictions (including those referred to above) do contain seven branches. So was this ancient menorah with five branches meant to represent some other Jewish menorah? Or was the artist simply in a hurry or confused? And would it have been possible for a Yohanan Q. Public to come in from the streets of Jerusalem, walk into the Temple and see the Jewish menorah?

The answer to that last question is: It depends on what time period we’re talking about. According to Professor Victor Hurowitz of Ben-Gurion University, the priestly laws of the Pentateuch prohibited viewing the menorah because the entire inside of the desert Tabernacle was off-limits to commoners (only priests could enter), and when moving the Tabernacle, the vessels (including the menorah) were covered. These restrictions continued in the First Temple period (1000–586 B.C.E.), Hurowitz explained.

But things may have changed in the Second Temple period (538 B.C.E.–70 C.E.). Hebrew University professor Israel Knohl contends that the Mishnah and the Temple Scroll indicate that in the late Second Temple period the usual purity laws related to Temple rituals were loosened somewhat during the three major pilgrimage festivals of Sukkoth, Pesach and Shavuot. To encourage popular participation in the Temple rites and the festival service, the ritual purity laws that normally constrained common Israelites to the outer Temple courts were relaxed: In “a two-way movement,” ordinary Israelites were permitted to enter the inner courts, and the sanctified ritual objects, including the menorah, were moved from the Temple to the inner courts.

It is therefore possible that the artist of this recently discovered graffito could have gotten close enough during a pilgrim festival to see the menorah brought out by the priests and displayed before all the people, but the rough drawing he etched into the stone is far from giving us a clear view of what the Temple menorah looked like.
A bronze Lepton coin from the reign of Hasmonean king Mattathias Antigonus of Judea (40–37 B.C.E.) bears a seven-branched menorah.

The Temple Menorah appears in the fragment of a first-century graffito etched in plaster found in excavations in Jerusalem’s Jewish Quarter merely a few hundred feet from the Temple Mount. It is one of the earliest depictions of the candelabra that illuminated the Jewish Temple. The seven-branched Menorah rests on a triangular base.
A newly discovered graffito on stone found during the excavation of a 2,000-year-old drainage channel near the City of David shows a five-branched menorah with a tripod base.

This engraved stone with an early depiction of a seven-branched menorah (facing panel) was discovered in the central hall of the Magdala synagogue, which dates to the first century C.E. or earlier. The stone may have served as a table on which Torah scrolls were rolled out.
As they huddled in the cistern of their Nahal Mikhmas cave, in a last-ditch effort to hide from Roman soldiers, Jewish refugees from the Bar-Kokhba Revolt (132–135 C.E.) drew messages in charcoal on the plastered walls, including this seven-branched candelabrum, or menorah, which may resemble the menorah that stood in the Temple.

A bas relief on the Arch of Titus in Rome depicts the celebratory procession of Titus’s victorious troops after defeating the First Jewish Revolt (66–70 C.E.). They carry the spoils of the Temple on their shoulders: the Menorah, the Showbread table and the trumpets. The unique tiered octagonal base of the Menorah is considered unrealistic by many scholars.
A flame lights each of the seven branches on this 1-by-1-inch carved menorah on top of a stone oil lamp that had been declared a forgery but was recently defended as authentic in a journal publication by several eminent scientists.

Jews who fled Jerusalem after the First Jewish Revolt settled in the south and created oil lamps showing the menorah, as one expression of their yearning to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. The menorahs on these lamps all had more branches (such as this one) than the seven-branched Temple menorah because of the Talmudic prohibition against depicting the Temple menorah.
This early-fourth-century C.E. Roman gold glass (formed by laminating both sides of the base of a glass bowl with sheets of gold) bears images of seven-branched menorahs, a lulav (palm branch), an etrog (citron) and a shofar (ram’s horn)—all ritual objects used in Temple services. In its upper register, the gold glass depicts not the Temple but an open Torah ark with its scrolls displayed.

Two seven-branched menorahs flank a gabled ark in this scene decorating a floor in the fourth-century C.E. synagogue at Hammath Tiberias, on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee. A lulav, or bound palm branch, and an etrog, or citron, both associated with the holiday of Sukkoth (Tabernacles), are shown to the left of each menorah, while a shofar, the ram’s horn sounded on Rosh Hashanah, lies below an incense shovel to the right of each menorah.
The seven-branched menorah was one of the typical Jewish symbols often found on Jewish grave markers from the Hellenistic through the Byzantine periods (300 B.C.E.–500 C.E.), most of which were written in Greek.

This tiny, 24-karat gold ring, only one-quarter inch in diameter, was probably made for a newborn infant. It is the only example from its period—c. 5th century C.E.—of a gold ring with a depiction of the seven-branched menorah. However, a number of contemporaneous bronze and silver rings with menorah depictions have been found.
One of two seven-branched menorahs on the mosaic floor from the fifth-century C.E. synagogue at Beth-Shean.

This damaged panel from the Sepphoris synagogue mosaic (fifth–seventh centuries C.E.) features an ark (or perhaps the Temple) flanked by menorahs.
The Ark mosaic from the sixth-century C.E. synagogue at Beth Alpha, which was located directly in front of the synagogue’s actual Torah shrine, contains depictions of sacred vessels and objects used in the Temple, including two seven-branched menorahs that flank the Ark.

A menagerie of roaring lions, doll-like elephants, caged birds and free, and even a hen laying an egg surrounding the central menorah enliven this sixth-century C.E. floor mosaic from a Jewish synagogue in Nirim, Israel.

Built in the eighth century A.D., the Jericho synagogue featured an elaborate mosaic carpet that included this famous medallion depicting, from left to right, three Jewish symbols: a palm frond (lulav), a menorah and a ram’s horn (shofar). The inscription below reads “Peace unto Israel” (Hebrew, Shalom al Yisroel).

A nine-branched menorah, flanked by an incense shovel on the left and a shofar on the right, appear in relief on this arch stone (likely belonging to a synagogue) from the Jewish village of Yahudiyye.