

The Jordan Lead Books: Artistic and Textual Contents

To an extent the lead books' mixture and unique modulations of epigraphy can be explained not only by the pluriformity and plasticity of all revived forms of Paleo-Hebrew, but also by the lead books' attempts to portray pictorially and epigraphically in a summarizing and synthesizing fashion nearly three centuries of Jewish history from the Maccabees to Bar Kokhba (167 BCE-136 CE). The lead books can in this way be compared to a 21st-century artistic booklet that combines and occasionally even slightly transforms the various West European forms of not only art, but of epigraphy as well, from Blackletter (Gothic) to modern scripts. The lead books' overview of nearly three centuries of Jewish artistic and epigraphic history helps explain the mixed epigraphy that has troubled some experts in their analyses of the Jordan lead books.

On one of the lead books, the politically "safe" place names of "Jerusalem" and "Zion" are in plain text, while the politically seditious slogans invoking "freedom" and "redemption" are encrypted. The necessary use of ciphers for seditious content could explain the strange mixture of scripts, which in this instance includes two styles of yod, three styles of waw, and almost identical coinciding forms of waw and alef. The mixture of epigraphy arguably reflects a double encryption method, making the decipherment of seditious content difficult even for ancient readers of Paleo-Hebrew script.

A notable aspect of the lead books is their mystifying ciphers and codes. These bring to mind, to a degree at least, later kabbalistic preoccupation with letter mysticism. One cannot but think of the fact that kabbalah is intimately associated with the figure of Rabbi Shimon bar Yoḥai, the most prominent student of the Rabbi Akiva who according to tradition proclaimed Shimon bar Kokhba messiah. In this way it would seem that the lead books are indeed old, they might confirm that there could be at least an historical kernel of truth behind the traditions that link kabbalistic-like proclivities with Bar Yoḥai.

The imagery in the lead books mixes elements stretching from the Maccabean to the Bar Kokhba revolts, giving us a terminus a quo of ca. 136 CE for many of the items. Although the metallurgical tests conducted so far cannot be said to prove the lead books' antiquity, most of the test results at least tend to confirm consistency with antiquity. Because metallurgical tests consistently indicate the lead books are consistent with antiquity ~~ancient~~, a reasonable terminus ad quem for at least some of the exemplars would be closer rather than further from the time of Bar Kokhba's demise in 136 CE. However, one of the lead books apparently alludes to Emperor Commodus (180-192 CE) and to Publius Septimius Geta (whose father Commodus had appointed governor of Pannonia Superior), which indicates some of the artefacts may be from the late 2nd century or early 3rd century at the earliest. Future Carbon-14 testing of organic materials trapped in the lead books might be able to narrow down a range for the terminus ad quem.

Although some of the Jordan lead books may have been created around the time of the Bar Kokhba revolt or its ending, their production may have continued for quite some time thereafter, perhaps as memorial objects manufactured on an annual basis in a context such as the Ninth of Ab lamentations. This may account for some lead books which have come to the attention of the Centre's scholars, objects that have never had any connection at all to Mr Hassan Saeda and his collection, and which bear different

designs and Paleo-Hebrew inscriptions than those found on the lead books at the Department of Antiquities of Jordan.

One of these may be termed The P Lead Codex, and contains designs matched in a series of Paleo-Hebrew gold books recently documented by the Centre's scholars. The P Lead Codex was purchased by Mr P, an American tourist, in 2015 in Jordan in a cave souk for the price of a simple tourist trinket. An initial evaluation suggests that this particular codex may be quite old, apparently bearing an original compact patina that has been covered over by a very loose modern repatination. Repatination is an ancient practice, and in this case it was not used to deceive or to make an exorbitant amount of money. The codex was given to the souk proprietor by a Bedouin who reported that he had found it near local Crusader castle ruins.

It may even be the case that a small number of the lead books seen in Mr Saeda's later images not belonging to his original hoard of lead books may nevertheless be quite old, although it must be stressed that none of them has been tested metallurgically. Additionally, it is not unlikely that some of the possibly recently manufactured lead books may have been produced with authentic ancient stamps, moulds, and/or cylinders that might have been stored in the same Paleo-Hebrew inscribed lead chest in which some of Mr Saeda's original hoard of lead books were originally reportedly found. Others were reportedly found stored near the lead chest in small shallow niches on a wall of the same cave.

It is thus known that some modern imitations of the ancient Jordanian lead books may be circulating on open and black markets in the Middle East, but these are easily distinguishable from the older specimens.

The lead books' imagery pertains principally to the Temple, synagogal Torah shrine designs, and to various Jewish festivals, especially Sukkot, while some of the texts relate to the Shema¹ and Amidah prayers. Included are possible allusions in various forms to personages such as Antiochus Epiphanes, John Hyrcanus, Jesus, and Bar Kokhba.

While some of the imagery/text is similar to ancient coinage, in other instances some of the images are not paralleled on coins. The images of palm trees on the lead books, for example, are paralleled on coins, but we do not necessarily know the direction of influence in every case, because the coins may be using already well known images. The coins in these instances would be proof only that the images were used by coin makers, not that they created the images.

In some cases, ancient coins are the inspiration for some of the lead books' imagery and even text, e.g., there is a design that is based on text and image present on a Hyrcanus prutah. A second design contains Greek letters that copy the epigraphy of Antiochus Epiphanes coins, which use a connective dot rather than crossbar for alphas. One of the artefacts even shows the outer beading of the coin used to produce the image on the codex. Lastly, some of the lead books' peculiar arrangements of Shimon bar Kokhba's name are matched on Bar Kokhba coins.

That coinage imagery is represented in the lead books is an example of one way they portray the history of Israel, a significant part of whose artistic traditions is represented

precisely on Israel's coinage. That the lead books' creators had access to coins stretching over two centuries could conceivably be explained if the lead books had been made by surviving members of Bar Kokhba's government, which would have had access to all sorts of collections of metals, conceivably including coins.

Ancient artists were not motivated by creativity, but by tradition. E. J. Bickerman explains in an insightful article on the Dura Europas synagogue murals: "The provincial craftsmen, who did such a job, did not invent the themes and their treatment. They used some copybook of designs and repeated the borrowed motifs with varying degrees of accuracy and comprehension. Sometimes, they also used more than one model. In the same scene figures may be borrowed from originals created centuries apart."¹

Thus it comes as no surprise that in a recently discovered first-century CE mikveh in the Arnona neighbourhood of Jerusalem images are found of objects attested on ancient coins. As Nir Hasson and Ruth Schuster comment on this find: "The symbols we see are familiar to us from coins, sarcophagi and graves. . . ."² In contrast to claims presented in an online Thomas Verenna video about the lead books (see Fig. 1), the fact that imagery on the Jordan lead books is inspired by art attested on ancient coins says very little if anything about the matter of modern origins or forgery:



Fig. 1³

Indeed, among the recently discovered mikveh's images are a palm tree and a palm frond in forms more or less similar to those found in the Jordan lead books (Fig. 2):

¹ E.J. Bickerman, *Jewish and Christian History: A New Edition in English including The God of the Maccabees*. Volume One (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2007), p. 904.

² Nir Hasson and Ruth Schuster, "Mysterious Ancient Mikveh With Aramaic Graffiti Found While Building a School in Jerusalem," *Haaretz*, Tuesday, August 05, 2015, at <<http://www.haaretz.com/life/archaeology/1.669678>>, accessed 1 September 2015.

³ From Thomas Verenna, *Jordan Lead Codices: Exposing the Fakes* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGw0orL78I4>). Accessed 1 September 2015.



Mikveh, Palm Tree



Codex, Palm Tree
Fig. 2⁴



Mikveh, Palm Frond



Codex, Palm Frond (?)

⁴ Image details excerpted from Nir Hasson and Ruth Schuster, "Mysterious Ancient Mikveh With Aramaic Graffiti Found While Building a School in Jerusalem," *Haaretz*, Tuesday, August 05, 2015, at <<http://www.haaretz.com/life/archaeology/1.669678>>, accessed 1 September 2015.