

Philip Davies Codices from Jordan: the mystery remains, Palestine Exploration Quarterly
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At the time of publication of the editorial 'Mysterious Books from Jordan' I was hoping, indeed expecting, that by now we should have known the answer to at least a few questions. Alas, most of them remain unanswered, but some interesting things have happened—and not happened! We are close to proving—depending who you read and what evidence you take—both that they are ancient and that they are modern.

So what do we know, what don't we know (and what do some people think we know)?

We know, as we knew almost from the beginning, how the lead sheets were imprinted: by casting. Because identical letter-forms and images appear on different sheets, stamps were apparently impressed on a number of different moulds: these included whole sequences of lettering which are in some cases repeatedly produced to form lines of text. The letters used are not consistent in form: they are from various old Semitic scripts used for dialects of Aramaic, with the odd letter inverted and some letters perhaps from Coptic. Steve Caruso, who describes himself as a 'Translator, Language Instructor, and Consultant from Highland Park, NJ' has claimed to identify the various letter forms from different periods and the different ways they were made (fig. 1). (For more information see <http://aramaicdesigns.blogspot.co.uk/2011/04/lead-codices-character-sheet.html>.)

At any rate, it seems so far that these are not 'texts', unless in some kind of as yet undeciphered code. Caruso has also published an analysis of an image that occurs elsewhere in the early first century (fig. 2). Other such parallels have been suggested, though not always so convincingly, though one sceptic, Thomas Verenna, in a nicely-produced but not altogether conclusive video called 'Exposing the Fakes' (<http://tomverenna.wordpress.com/2012/08/23/jordan-lead-codices-redux/>) has claimed a dramatic resemblance between one image on the codices and a coin of Herod the Great (see figs 3 and 4). Do these parallels not prove that the codices are modern? Not quite: we need an image from the recent past to prove that. The eclectic choice of script is consistent with a deliberately created similitude of an ancient artifact, i.e. a 'modern forgery'. But it's not proof. Other explanations are possible.

We don't know when these were made. Only analysis of the lead can give reliable answer, and so the scientific tests have shown, with a fair degree of probability, that the lead is old. But this is not absolutely certain, and anyway, old lead can be used for modern forgeries. The lead was melted in the process of producing the letters and images from a mould, and it may just be possible to determine scientifically the time elapsed since the lead was melted by a process similar to that of carbon-14 dating, but such a test has not yet been possible. Still, some of the corrosion has taken place since the images were produced (see fig. 5). If modern, the corrosion was artificially created. So the lead books, if modern, would be very modern and technically quite sophisticated. Except in the choice of different scripts (and reversed letters) for making the stamps that were pressed on the moulds. A half-decent forger will at least know his ancient alphabets. But what is such a forger trying to replicate?

However, as made clear in the Editorial, among the items found with the codices are some that are clearly fakes—one made of copper, for example and shown as fig. 3 in the editorial. Again, this proves nothing. Ancient relics might well be seeded with modern creations. It would be good to know in more detail the history of the finds. Of course, the ‘finder’ is a dubious character. But so was Kando, who hid the Qumran Temple Scroll in his shop. Dodgy characters and ancient relics are hardly strangers.

This brings us to the next question. Why would these books would have been produced in antiquity? Why would they would have been manufactured recently? The books are numerous (at least 50), probably mass-produced, apparently stored in a rural cave, not an urban warehouse, and manufactured with some care but designed with no meaningful text and an apparently random proliferation of letters and images. They are unlikely products, whether ancient or modern. If ancient, it seems to be likely that they had some kind of magical or ritual use. If modern, they were presumably designed to make money by selling to gullible customers who would not bother asking what they were supposed to be. So, if they are modern, the problem does not, in my view, stop there. There is more that needs finding out.

To add some spice to this enigma, there have been images circulating of sheets that look just like these lead books, but in much better condition. A few sceptics have pointed to these as further proof that the collection is not genuinely ancient. But they are so clearly modern copies (see figs 5 and 6). Fakes of fakes? Whatever shall we encounter next?

So we have some very firm conclusions on either side. Thomas Verenna, Steve Caruso, and a few established scholars have asserted these to be ‘fakes’. On the other hand Dr Ziad al-Sa‘ad, who was at the time of the original announcement the Director of Antiquities in Amman, said: ‘They will really match, and perhaps be more significant than, the Dead Sea Scrolls ... Maybe it will lead to further interpretation and authenticity checks of the material, but the initial information is very encouraging, and it seems that we are looking at a very important and significant discovery, maybe the most important discovery in the history of archaeology.’

One scholar, Larry Hurtado, has written as follows

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‘Finally, the incidence of the forgery of artefacts is so great that any responsible scholar must express profound hesitation about making any judgement on such items until they have been properly analysed. Especially in light of the “Jesus bone-box” drama, we might all take a few deep breaths and simply call for the items to be put into the public domain for competent study before more rash and pointless claims are proffered.’

Who can disagree with that—so long as ‘rash’ and ‘pointless’ claims of forgery are not made, too. It is no doubt wise to err on the side of caution and incline towards the likelihood that they are of modern origin. But this conclusion also raises some problems. The majority of scholars I have consulted, many of whom have seen one of these codices, have been impressed enough to regard their ancient origin as a possibility. If, as I believe, we shall at

some point be in a position to establish whether they are modern forgeries, or genuine antiquities, or ancient forgeries (if ancient enough, do they become genuine antiquities?), why commit oneself? It's fine to have an opinion, but a little room for doubt should be left by those committed to either view. At least those who think they are genuinely old are trying their best to establish whether they are right or wrong.

Let me end with a silence, The silence from Amman. The dog that has not yet barked. Although these items, if genuinely old, would be of value to the Jordanian Department of Antiquities and the Kingdom, ever since its erstwhile Director, Ziad al-Sa'ad made his opinion known there has been complete silence from Amman. Earlier this year, a group of biblical scholars from the UK's Society for the Study of the Old Testament wrote a letter to the Times asking the Jordanian authorities to make an announcement.

At the time of writing, we are still waiting. Without an initiative from Amman we may never know for sure what these are. Listen out!