

## Epigraphy of the Jordan Lead Books

The texts in the Jordan lead codices are written in revived forms of Paleo-Hebrew script attested in Second Temple times from the Hasmonaean era to the Bar Kokhba Revolt. One group of the Jordan lead codices, whose longest text consists of four lines of letters, contains Paleo-Hebrew script with contents in part relating to the Bar Kokhba revolt, but with apparent Nabataean Aramaic script influence in the epigraphy, although the text is in the Hebrew rather than the Aramaic language. A Nabataean script influence is in any case congruent with the codices' Jordanian origins. Also of relevance would be the Naḥal Ḥever Nabataean documents "deposited there by refugees from the province of Arabia during the Bar Kokhba revolt (132-6 CE)."<sup>1</sup>

A second group of the Jordan lead codices, whose longest text consists of eleven lines of letters, exhibits basically Hasmonean-period Paleo-Hebrew script, with some unique unattested modulations. The Second Temple forms of Paleo-Hebrew script were all nationalistic revivals of scripts from the earlier First Temple age. The revived script forms are basically artificial constructs at once recognizably divergent from those of the First Temple era. The revived forms are therefore at times not only artificial but also stylized, owing to the idiosyncrasies of individual scribes informed partly by what might be described as romanticized or even imagined reconstructions of First Temple period Paleo-Hebrew letter forms. This partly explains the rich variety of diverging epigraphical forms represented, for example, on Bar Kokhba coins, and the marked differences between some of the Paleo-Hebrew letters on Bar Kokhba lead weights compared with the already mixed epigraphical features found on the Bar Kokhba coins.

On one of the Jordan lead books, the place names of "Jerusalem" and "Zion" are in plain text, but the politically seditious slogans proclaiming "freedom" and "redemption" are encrypted. The unusual mixture of scripts (including multiple styles for a single letter, for example) may reflect the necessity for encryption of politically seditious content. This might be described as a double encryption method that made decipherment difficult even for ancient readers of Paleo-Hebrew script.

The mixture of epigraphic styles is an attested phenomenon. Roberts and Gardner describe Imperial and Hadrianic-era Greek epigraphy as featuring

a variety and inconsistency of writing which makes it often impossible to date them approximately by the forms of the letters, and sometimes causes confusion with inscriptions of an earlier date, owing to conscious imitation. The Hadrianic age is a time of revival and imitation, in epigraphy as in everything else. Consequently we find not only imitation, usually inconsistent and eclectic in character, of all sorts of earlier forms of letters, but even an attempt to revive, in a few instances, the obsolete alphabet of pre-Euclidean times. . . . On the other hand, we also find in this same period many new and fanciful forms. The apex strokes are sometimes revived, with the addition of . . . exaggerated forms . . . ; we

---

<sup>1</sup> Hannah M. Cotton, "Continuity of Nabataean law in the Petra papyri," in Hannah M. Cotton, Robert G. Hoyland, Jonathan J. Price, David J. Wasserstein, eds., *From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East* (Cambridge/NY: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 155.

find square or diamond shaped letters, . . . not to speak of other variations too numerous to mention, in which individual fancy ran riot. For the latest period of ancient Attic epigraphy there is little to chronicle, except a continual and chaotic use of all sorts of forms, earlier and later.<sup>2</sup>

Could it be that the Jordan lead books offer us a Hebraic counterpart of sorts to what Roberts and Gardner write concerning the mixture of styles and time periods found in Imperial and Hadrianic Greek epigraphy?

One might object, invoking the case of the disputed Jehoash temple inscription, whose text is written in what Christopher Rollston aptly describes as a “script *mélange*” of Aramaic, Paleo-Hebrew and Phoenician.<sup>3</sup> The genre of the Jehoash inscription, however, must not be overlooked. The Jehoash inscription is straightforward and concerns mundane building repairs, which is different from the Jordan lead books’ mysterious texts which make little straightforward sense. The suspicion of esoteric intent lies at hand, bringing to mind a closer though admittedly inexact parallel in phenomena such as the Qumran cryptic scripts, described by Frank Moore Cross as “a mixture of Paleo-Hebrew, Jewish and Greek scripts.”<sup>4</sup>

For the sake of completeness, one more possible explanation for the lead books’ unusual epigraphy may be helpful. One of the more recent metallurgical tests conducted on one of the artefacts indicates the lead dates to the earlier part of the High Medieval Period. The particular institution responsible for this test concluded, however, that the Paleo-Hebrew text and artistic designs were added later, based on their non-standard epigraphy and the text’s lack of straightforward meaning.

First, it is curious that this test diverges from the consistent conclusion reached by nearly all other tests done by different institutions, which have overwhelmingly found that the lead is consistent with ancient lead. Moreover, as anyone interested can confirm in a smithy, it is not possible to add raised text and designs to old lead at a later, especially modern, date and retain the lead’s old appearance. This is because whatever method might be used to add the text would result in the destruction and loss of the surface patina, making the surface appear smooth and shiny. Consequently, the text and designs were part of the original manufacture and not a later addition.

Second, non-standard epigraphy by itself is not proof of inauthenticity, based on what Roberts and Gardner tell us of Greek epigraphy. Neither is lack of straightforward sense in the text proof of forgery, since this could be explained as an unknown type of encryption or hieratic text that has yet to be fully deciphered.

---

<sup>2</sup> E. S. Roberts; E. A. Gardner, *An Introduction to Greek Epigraphy: Part II: The Inscriptions of Attica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905), pp. xvi-xvii.

<sup>3</sup> See Christopher A. Rollston, “Non-Provenanced Epigraphs I: Pillaged Antiquities, Northwest Semitic Forgeries, and Protocols for Laboratory Tests.” *Maarav* 10 (2003): pp. 135-193; idem, “Non-Provenanced Epigraphs II: The Status of Non-Provenanced Epigraphs within the Broader Corpus of Northwest Semitic.” *Maarav* 11 (2004): pp. 57-79.

<sup>4</sup> See Frank Moore Cross, “The Development of the Jewish Scripts,” in G. E. Wright, Editor, *The Bible and the Ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of William Foxwell Albright* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), pp. 133-202.

However, for the sake of argument, let us say that the artefacts date to the High Medieval Period. As we know from Nahmanides (1194-1270), this is the era when some Jews rediscovered ancient Jewish War coinage, whose Paleo-Hebrew inscriptions had to be translated for them by Samaritans. If the Jordan lead books had been created by Jews who had recently rediscovered Paleo-Hebrew, the lead books' non-standard epigraphy might conceivably be attributable to a lack of scribal mastery of the newly rediscovered script. The lack of straightforward sense could similarly be explained as either being reflective of a purely symbolic, imaginative portrayal of the script, or perhaps as some type of real or imagined ancient or medieval code.

There are many possible explanations for what we see on the Jordan lead books. Their interpretation should be guided by the entirety of the metallurgical tests compared with each other, and not by limiting ourselves to one single test only. It may very well be that the artefacts stem from different time periods, so that a single test result cannot be applied to the entire collection. Future metallurgical analysis may help us more precisely narrow down the geographical and temporal origins of these enigmatic artefacts than is currently possible.