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CONTENTS

Bar-Kokhban Seals from Ḥorbat Yatir

Daniel Vainstub and Peter Fabian

Abstract: Excavations carried out in a fortress in the northern Negev dated to the period of the Bar-Kokhba Revolt against the Romans (132–135 C.E.) uncovered locally made stone seals and related objects used by the rebel authorities of the place, which possibly functioned as an administrative center for the preparation of special fabrics.
A round seal bears a Paleo-Hebrew inscription forming a date, while a rectangular seal bears a Paleo-Hebrew inscription related to the spinning of yarn. A stone with a flattened surface was used to practice the engraving of mirrored Paleo-Hebrew and Jewish letters on seals. Another seal bears indecipherable scribbles, and a fifth object bears geometric designs.
The Paleo-Hebrew inscriptions on the seals are hitherto the only known exemplars, apart from the Bar-Kokhban coins and two unprovenanced lead weights, of inscriptions in this script related to the Bar-Kokhban administration.

Keywords: Yatir, Bar-Kokhba, Paleo-Hebrew, seal, inscription

Introduction

The site of Ḥorvat Naḥal Yatir (fig. 1) is located on a hilltop (451 m above sea level) above the east bank of Naḥal Yatir (0779/1468 Israel Grid). The site was discovered by the late ʻEid al-Tori and David Alon during a survey of the area in 1982. The survey was carried out following a report by Peter Fabian and Yuval Goren that silver coins from the Bar-Kokhba Revolt, said to come from the Yatir area, were circulating in the Bedouin market in Beer-Sheva. The site of Ḥorvat Naḥal Yatir is not mentioned in any known written records or maps, nor included in any of the surveys conducted in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. The late David Alon, with the assistance of Peter Fabian, conducted excavations in the entire site on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority between 1982 and 1984 (Alon 1983; Alon 1987).

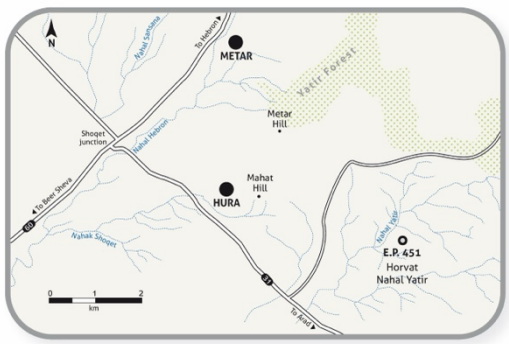


Fig. 1. *Location of the site.*

The site overlooks a vast area: the Beer-Sheva Valley spreads to the south, the ridge of the ʻIra Mountains can be seen to the east, to the north is the ridge of the Yatir Mountains, and the Lehavim Hills can be seen to the west. The site comprises two complexes (fig. 2). The poorly preserved polygonal building on the summit was identified as a stronghold of the Persian period (Vainstub and Fabian 2015). The other complex consists of a well-preserved large fortified building surrounding a central courtyard (fig. 3), a complex of underground hiding tunnels carved into the limestone rock, and rural structures scattered over the hillside down to the creek. This second complex dates from the late Herodian period to the Bar-Kokhba Revolt. A cemetery dating from the beginning of the second century C.E. was discovered south of the fortified building.

The fortress was violently destroyed and burned by the Romans in the fall of the year 135 CE (Alon 1987, 159; Pagelson et al., 1), a conclusion drawn from the following findings: The general destruction of the building with traces of fire in all the rooms and the openings to the passages, remains of metal weapons, burned cereals including a heap of barley (see below), charred wooden beams, 35 skeletons of men, women and children who died from smoke inhalation in the hiding tunnels, and 31 coins relating to the time of Bar-Kokhba's revolt, including one '2nd year' and two '3rd year' Bar-Kokhban coins (Alon 1983; Alon 1987; Goren and Fabian 1983; Pagelson et al.). In our current state of knowledge it seems that the fortress was the southernmost among the fifty forts mentioned by Cassius Dio (69.14.1) as having been destroyed by Julius Severus when he crushed the revolt (Alon 1983, 81; Alon 1987, 159; Pagelson et al. 1).

Within the fortress, five engraved objects made from local limestone were found. They all appear to be of poor-quality local production. Two of them (seals 1 and 2) are seals bearing Paleo-Hebrew inscriptions in mirror script. Another (seal 3) is in fact a stone with a flattened surface used to practice the engraving of mirrored Paleo-Hebrew and Jewish letters on seals. Seal 4 bears indecipherable scribbles, and the fifth object bears geometric designs.

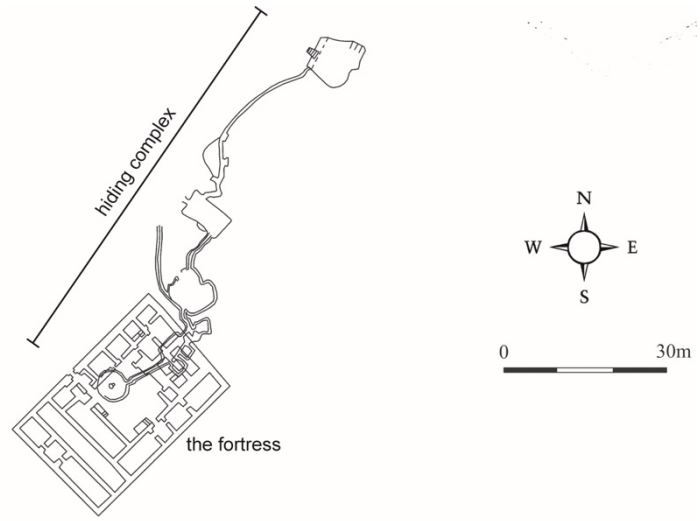


Fig. 2. *Map of the fortress and the hiding complex.*

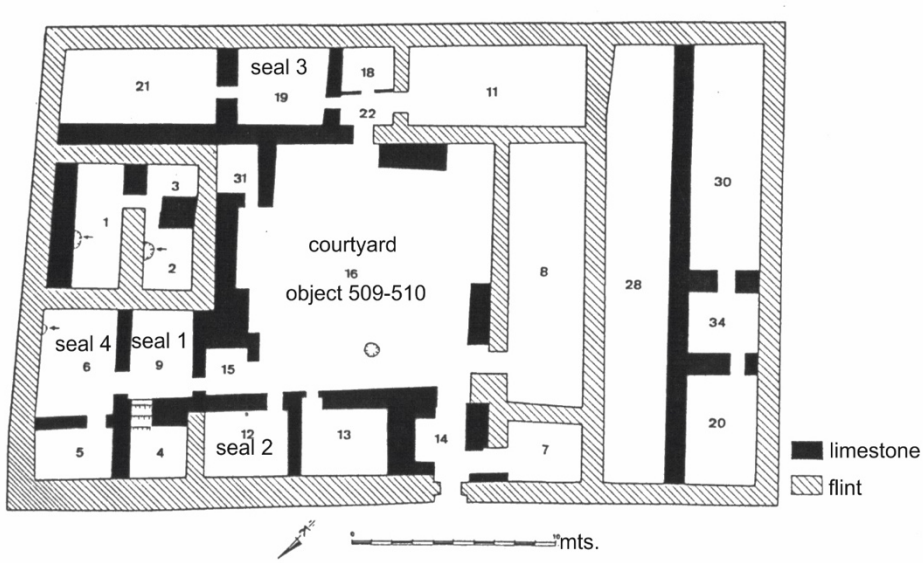


Fig. 3. *Plan of the fortress.*

TWO PALEO-HEBREW SEALS

Seal 1 (fig. 4)

Fig. 4. *Seal 1*

שׁ שלשׁ לגאלתם

'Y(ear) three of their redemption'

A round seal (35 mm in diameter) with a conical body found in room 20. The seal itself and the sealing surface were poorly carved by an inexpert hand. The sealing surface was

not properly smoothed before the engraving of the inscription. A hole was drilled in the middle of the sealing surface.

Initially a Paleo-Hebrew inscription with the heads of the letters facing the outside was engraved all around the sealing surface, and later most of the inscription was deliberately erased using a sharp tool (fig. 5). Apparently, part of the inscription was erased in a single action by dragging a chisel, while other smaller segments were erased by targeted blows from a pointed tool. The eraser left a single word: לגאלתם 'of their redemption.'

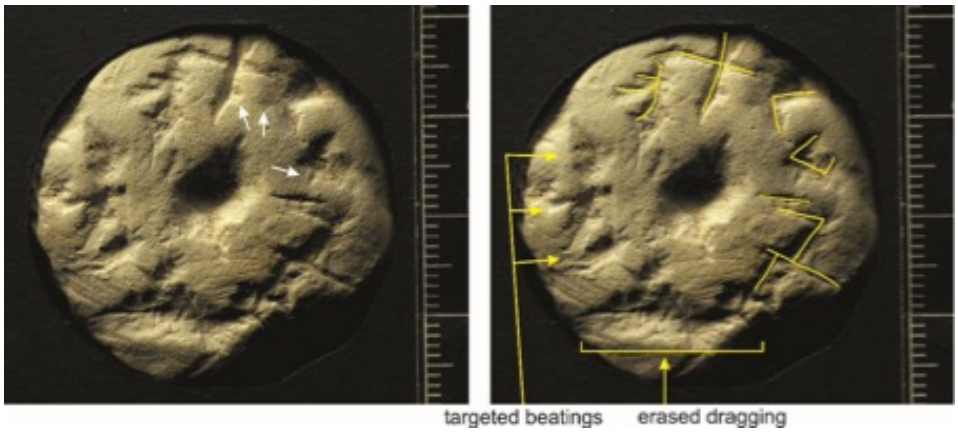


Fig. 5. Seal 1: *general RTI photograph (demirrored). The white arrows point to examples of shallow indentations in the surface of the seal, not to be confused with the engraved strokes, from which they differ in depth, width, and color.*

Aligned and demirrored: 

Paleography (the letters will be described in demirrored orientation)

Although the letters of the remaining word are very abraded and worn, thanks to photographs taken by Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI) technology all of its letters can be discerned with different degrees of certainty.[1] Notwithstanding, the poor state of preservation of the seal forces us to offer our interpretation with caution in view of the difficult reading of some of the letters. In several shots taken from different angles and with varying lighting, different parts of the letters can be discerned, so that sometimes one part of a letter can be seen in one shot and another part in another shot. There is an extra stroke to the left of the *gimel*. This stroke is different from the letters' strokes, as it is finer and narrower. Most probably it was not executed by the engraver of the seal, but if it was it could be a failed first attempt at engraving the left stroke of the *gimel*. The

[1] We are most grateful to Mr. Michael Magen of the laboratories of the Israel Museum for his excellent high-quality RTI photographs, which allowed us to discern strokes and traces invisible to the naked eye.

letters were executed in a very simple style by an inexpert hand. However, it seems that the engraver did not merely copy the letters from a source without understanding the script, but rather was familiar with them and executed them unhesitatingly. Below we will comment on some of the letters (figs. 6–7):

Fig. 6. Seal 1: *closer view (demirrored) of the gimel (attached to the lamed), the extra stroke, and the aleph.*

Fig. 7. Seal 1: *closer view (demirrored) of the tav and the mem.*

Aleph. The *aleph* is much defective. It is reminiscent of exemplars in which the lower horizontal stroke emerges from the bottom of the vertical axis, as in coins from the Great Revolt (Meshorer 2001, 241, coin 192 [pl. 61:192]; 243, coin 211 [pl. 63:211]) and the Bar-Kokhba Revolt (Meshorer 2001, 244, coin 219 [pl. 64:219]). However, the letter in the seal is rotated through 180°, and the second horizontal stroke as well emerges from the axis. Very similar *aleph*s appear on the coins of the Great Revolt from Gamla (Meshorer 2001, 244, coin 217 [pl. 63:217]; Syon 2014, 120–122). This letter in the Gamla coins has alternatively been read as *mem* in the Jewish script by Farhi (2003–2006) and Pfann (2006).[2]

Mem. The left stroke of the head of the *mem* is somewhat rounded. A very similar *mem* appears on a coin from the Bar-Kokhba Revolt (Meshorer 2001, 253, coin 277a [pl. 70:277a]).

The Erased Zone (figs. 8–9)

Fig. 8. Seal 1: *the erased zone (demirrored).*

שׁ שׁלֹשׁ

‘Y(ear) three’

Despite the intentional erasure in two areas of the sealing surface, remains of the letters can be discerned due to their deep engraving, allowing us to recover the deleted word with a reasonable degree of certainty. Thanks to close-up RTI shots a complete *lamed* can be clearly distinguished; in fact, the two edges of the letter protrude from the erased zone and consequently were not deleted. Similarly, close-up RTI shots using different lightings and taken from different angles reveal remains of all the strokes of the other letters (figs. 8–9). The abbreviated *shin* is smaller than expected and very defective. The second *shin* of שלש was executed by engraving two ‘V’ shapes that are interposed rather than joined.

2 For a summary of the debate, see Syon (2014), 121–22.

Above the first *shin* of שלש there is another *shin*, executed obliquely; it is otiose and hence is most likely a first and unsuccessful attempt at engraving the letter (fig. 8).

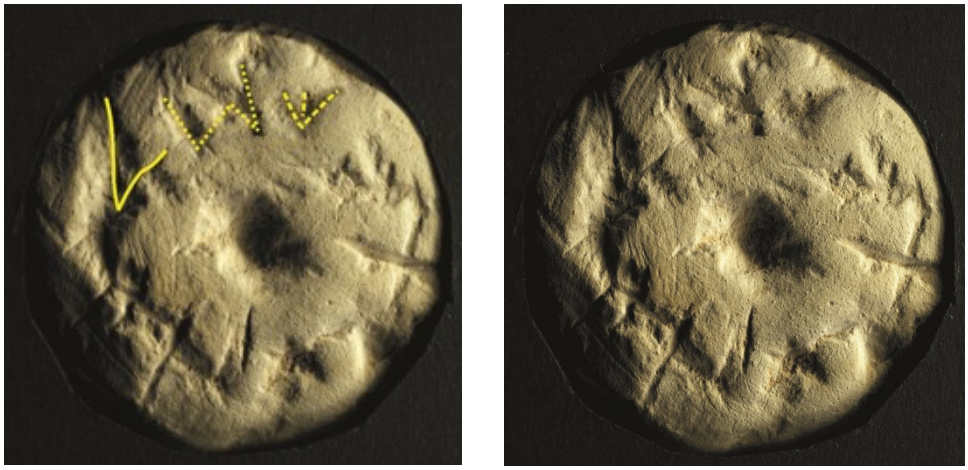


Fig. 9. Seal 1: *the erased zone (demirrored), shot from a different angle.*

Shin as an abbreviation of (נת)ש 'year' is very common in the coins of the Great Revolt against the Romans and those of the second year of the Bar-Kokhba Revolt. The defective spelling שלש 'three' contrasts with the *plene* spelling שלוש used in the dating formula in the Bar-Kokhban documents found in the Naḥal Ḥever caves: שנת שלוש 'year three.' The alternation between the original defective spelling of the word and the *plene* one can be compared to the similar alternation of קדושה/קדשה in the coins of the Great Revolt.

The reconstruction of the process of engraving and partial erasing of the seal, combined with the other findings in the fortress, allows us to trace the possible chain of events reflected in the seal. Possibly the seal was made in the third year of the Bar-Kokhba Revolt, and when the end of the third year approached, the words 'Y(ear) three' were deleted so that the seal could still be used. Some months later, during the fourth year of the rebellion, the fortress was completely destroyed and burned by the Romans, and the seal remained buried in the remains until the archaeological excavations in the 1980s. There is still no consensus on the counting of the years of the rebellion: According to Kanael (1971) and Wacholder (1973, 178–179) the rebels considered the '1st Year' to run from Nissan 1, 132 to Adar 29, 133. According to Eshel (2003) it started in Tishri or the beginning of the summer of 132.

Newman (2004, 243–244) agrees with Eshel although he still views the alternative proposal as possible. The excavations uncovered a heap of barley grains in a corner of room 3 of the fortress. A study of these grains by M. E. Kislev (Kislev 1986; 1987) led to the conclusion that the fortress was destroyed between July and September of the year 135 C.E. (Kislev 1987, 388).[3] Considering that according to Jerome (*In Zachariam* II, 8:18–19) the town of Betar, the stronghold of the Bar-Kokhba Revolt, was finally conquered

[3] In his words, 'after most of the summer (March–September) had passed.'

and destroyed by the Romans in August 135 C.E., in accordance with the Jewish tradition of its destruction in the Hebrew month of Ab (Mishna Ta'anit 4:6), we can conclude that the fortress of Yatir was destroyed at approximately the same time as Betar. If our assumption is correct, the seal was in use for only a few months after its partial erasure.

DISCUSSION

The inscription of the seal is obviously related to the formula engraved, also in the Paleo-Hebrew script, on the coins issued in the first year of the Bar-Kokhba Revolt: שנת אחת לגאלת ישראל 'Year one of the redemption of Israel,' and to the dating formula used in the official documents of the Bar-Kokhban administration found in the Naḥal Ḥever caves and other sites in the Judean Desert. Unlike the coins, however, in which the formula was changed in the second year of the revolt from 'redemption' to חרות 'freedom,' in the official documents the formula 'of the redemption' continued in use until the end of the rebellion. In those documents, the shortened formula of the coins is usually rendered in full: 'Year X of the redemption of Israel by Shim'on the son of Kosiba, the *Nasi'* of Israel.' In both the coins and the documents, the word 'redemption' comes only in the construct state: גאלת ישראל. The expression לגאלתם 'of their [the People of Israel's] redemption' on our seal is hitherto unique. However, although the fact that the continuation of the inscription is deleted forces us to be cautious, this reading seems the only possible one.

It cannot be ruled out that the hole in the middle of the seal was made to erase letters, though it is most probably merely decorative.

Seal 2 (figs. 10–11)

***Fig. 10. Seal 2** from above.*

The seal, found in room 12, is carved in an irregular rectangular shape (68–62 × 42–45 mm). It does not show signs of wear, and it seems that it was used very little. A rectangular framework and a vertical divider in its center contain two vertical columns of script. All of the five strokes are very irregular. The seal was found broken into three parts. The small upper left segment was reattached without leaving any damage to the written surface, although a triangular splinter broke off in the upper side of the break. The horizontal break

of the lower third of the seal did cause some damage; although the pieces were successfully reattached, a horizontal strip of material, about 2 mm in width, was lost.

Four Paleo-Hebrew letters were engraved in the right column, while in the left column characters of some other kind were engraved.

Fig. 11. Seal 2: *photograph and drawing of the sealing surface (demirrored).*

Paleography (the letters will be described demirrored)

Left column.

לעזֹל ‘for spinning’

The two *lamed*s and the *‘ayin* are fully preserved. The *‘ayin* is somewhat square in aspect, similarly to some *‘ayin*s in El‘azar coins (Meshorer 2001, 244, coin 219 [pl. 64:219], 246, coin 224 [pl. 65:224], 247, coins 234–235 [pl. 66:234–235]).

The third letter is composed of a horizontal upper stroke and two parallel oblique strokes descending from right to left. However, a closer look at the break line reveals on both walls of the gap (above and below) marks of another horizontal stroke, very similar to the upper horizontal stroke (figs. 11–12). The seal was obviously broken along the stroke. The four strokes form a *zayin* similar to that of El‘azar coins, except for the lack of the tick in the lower left corner of the seal. This letter is one of the least frequently attested in the Paleo-Hebrew script of the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Its development was as follows (tables 1–2).

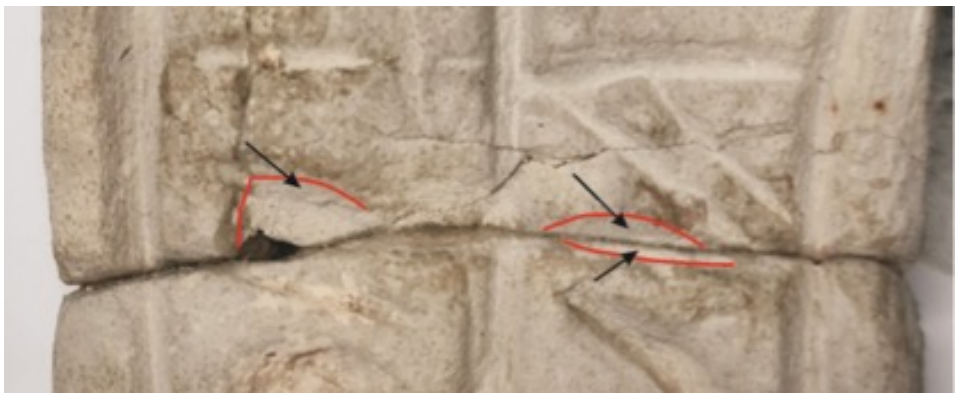


Fig. 12. Seal 3: *marks of another horizontal stroke in the walls of the gap.*

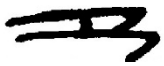
7th century B.C.E.	7th–6th century B.C.E.	6th century B.C.E.
Arad 31	Qadesh Barnea	Arad 6[4]
		

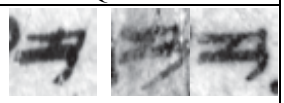
Table 1: Prototypes of *zayin* in the Hebrew script of the First Temple period.

In the First Temple period the basic shape of the letter was composed of two horizontal parallel strokes with a short vertical stroke joining them in the middle. In a cursive subtype very common in the last generations of the period, the right edges of the horizontal strokes curved down and to the left. This subtype is preponderant in the Paleo-Hebrew script of Qumran, in most cases with the upper tick descending to the lower horizontal stroke and thus forming in fact a sort of second vertical stroke. This shape, however, was not the only one in use, as on three column drums from Masada dated to the time of Herod the Great the ancient shape without ticks is still used (Foerster 1995, 85). The only occurrence of the letter in the sacred Samaritan complex on Mount Gerizim (destroyed in 162 B.C.E.) was possibly executed with these two ticks.[5] In the Abba inscription from Jerusalem, also dated to the Herodian period, only the lower horizontal stroke has a tick. The letter does not occur in the coins of the Great Jewish Revolt against the Romans. Its next occurrence was in the אלעזר הכוהן/הכהן coins minted in the first and second years of the Bar-Kokhba Revolt in 132–134 C.E. The *zayin* in these coins continues the developed type and takes it one step further: the upper tick is already perceived as an independent stroke rather than as a continuation of the upper horizontal. It moves to the left in parallel to the vertical stroke, both executed diagonally, making the right edge of the upper stroke end in a

4 See also Arad 56–57, 59, 67.

5 The lower one is preserved; most probably there was also an upper one that was cut by the breaking line.

protruding tip. The tick continuing the lower stroke is conceived as an independent element added in most of the coins on the incorrect side. The *zayin* in our inscription is formed in accordance with this model, the only difference being that it lacks the lower tick.

2nd century B.C.E.	1st century B.C.E.–C.E.	1st century B.C.E.–C.E.	1st century B.C.E.–C.E.
Gerizim temple	Masada columns	Abba	Qumran
			

132–133 C.E.	132–133 C.E.	133–134 C.E.	133–134 C.E.	132–134 C.E.
El'azar M219	El'azar M224	El'azar M234	El'azar M235	Yatir seal
				

Table 2: Paleo-Hebrew *zayin*.[6]

Right column. The characters in the right column do not make up a text in any known script, nor are they numerals known from other contemporaneous sources (Ifrah 1990, 346–351). This is despite the fact that in principle some of the characters are generally reminiscent of Cursive Jewish letters: the upper sign is reminiscent of a *lamed*, the rounded one in the second row is reminiscent of some *mem*s or *samekh*s (Yardeni 2000, 45, 49), and the sign in the lower row is reminiscent of a Paleo-Hebrew *'ayin*.

While they could be the first letter of the name of an official or supervisor, these signs most probably represent origin, quality, type, or measures of volume or weight in the context of wool intended for spinning. The use of symbols or abbreviations for such properties or other administrative functions was very common in the Roman period. Initial letters expressing a value were commonly used by all the peoples of the area, and even the combined use of letters and symbols of different scripts together was not rare. Good examples are the tags with specific names from Masada dated to the Great Revolt against the Romans (Yadin and Naveh 1989, 17–19, pls. 14–20), which include a personal name in Jewish script, a letter in Paleo-Hebrew script, and another letter in Greek script. A similar combination can be seen in inscriptions on storage jars (Yadin and Naveh 1989, 41–42, pl. 34). Initial letters and symbols, sometimes combined with a text in another

6 The Qumran examples are taken from Perrot and Richelle 2022 and the examples from El'azar coins from Meshorer (2001). The numbers 'M219' and the like are the numbers of the coins in Meshorer (2001). The Gerizim example is taken from Magen et al. (2004), 257, inscription 387, and the Masada example from Foerster (1995), 85.

script, can often be seen on weights or in administrative lists (e.g., CII numbers 620, 693, 2604, 2620).

All of this considered, we can cautiously point to the two following details.

1. The second row can be interpreted as a *samekh* in Cursive Jewish script expressing the volume measure סאה (about 8 l) or the weight measure סלע (19.2 g), followed by the numeral 1. A general overview of the volumes of wool normally spun daily in the period can be learned from a rabbinic source (Mishna Ketubbot 5:9; b. Talmud Ketubbot 64b). According to that source, a wife living in separation from her husband in Judea should prepare for him the weight of five *sel'aim* of warp or the weight of ten *sel'aim* of woof during the week, that is to say about one *sela'* of warp or two *sela'* of woof daily.
2. If the lower sign of the column is a Paleo-Hebrew *'ayin*, it is most probably an abbreviation of the name of an officer or the town of provenance of the wool and not a unit for which the current Cursive Jewish script would be expected, rather than the Paleo-Hebrew script reserved for special uses.

DISCUSSION

As the root עז"ל is not known in Hebrew but is very widespread in Aramaic, including the Aramaic dialects spoken by the Jews of the Land of Israel in the Roman and Byzantine periods,[7] it seems that עזל is an Aramaic term embedded in the Hebrew used by the Bar-Kokhban administration, even though Hebrew continued to use the Biblical Hebrew root טו"י rather than the root עז"ל. The term is introduced here by a *lamed* 'for,' 'to.' The root עז"ל in Aramaic expresses the action of spinning yarn, especially from wool, and so translates the Hebrew root טו"י in the Targums (Onkelos, Neofiti, and Pseudo-Jonathan) for its three occurrences in the Bible in Exod 35:25–26, two as a verb 'to spin yarn' and one as a noun מַטְוֶה, referring to the yarn spun by the women from goats' hair for dyeing before use in the Tabernacle. If our assertion is correct, this is in line with the known adoption of Aramaic terms in the Hebrew of the Bar-Kokhban letters.[8]

All of this points to the seal's being connected to administrative activity related to wool selected for the spinning of yarn from it, obviously for a special use. Possibly the right column specified features like quality, origin, and weight, and the left column defined the objective: the spinning of yarn for a particular very special purpose. Very probably the use of the Paleo-Hebrew script for rendering it implies that this special purpose had a national-religious value.[9]

CONCLUSIONS

The two seals engraved in Paleo-Hebrew letters found in the fortress position the site in a singular place among the Bar-Kokhban fortresses hitherto known to us, since, apart from

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7 Sokoloff (2017), 452; see also Tal (2000), 630 on its use by the Samaritans.

8 On the influence of Aramaic on the Hebrew of the writings related to the Bar-Kokhba rebels found in the Judean Desert, including the adoption of words, see Mor 2015: 383–94, especially 387–89.

9 See Naeh (2008), especially pages 126 and 133, note 40. For an opposite opinion, see Zissu and Abadi (2014).

those of the coins, they are the only Paleo-Hebrew inscriptions connected to the Bar-Kokhba Revolt known to date. The differentiation made by the Bar-Kokhba administration between the two scripts used by the Jews of the period—the overwhelmingly used Jewish script and the rarely used Paleo-Hebrew script—is very sharp: the Paleo-Hebrew script has a declarative and emotional significance and was used only on the coins issued by the rebel leadership, it was the only script used for the coins, and its presence on them is considered the last epigraphically[10] known use of the script by Jews.

The Paleo-Hebrew seals found in Yatir, which in all likelihood were made at the site, testify to the presence there of functionaries who were not only very skilled in the Paleo-Hebrew script but also had the authority and the ability to devise official formulae and render them in Paleo-Hebrew script. Their skill and knowledge contrast with the simplicity and poor artistic quality of the seals themselves. The text on the round seal was not merely copied from Bar-Kokhban coins but expressed the same concept of the foundation of a new era of redemption as the coins and the official documents, but in a different way. Even the erasing of part of the inscription clearly attests to the knowledge of writing possessed by both the engravers and the recipients of the stamped objects.

The use in the seal of the Paleo-Hebrew script instead of the Jewish script is worthy of scrutiny. The Paleo-Hebrew script was hitherto known in Bar-Kokhba-related inscriptions only on the coins minted by the leaders of the revolt, and it was the only script used on them, as well as on unprovenanced two lead weights (Deutsch 2001; Zissu and Ganor 2006). Conversely, all other known documents originating in the Bar-Kokhban administration, such as the 'Bar-Kokhba letters' and property-leasing documents issued by Bar-Kokhba functionaries in Ein-Gedi, are written in Jewish script, whether in Hebrew or Aramaic (Naveh 1992, 83–117).[11] Moreover, even the inscriptions on seven of the nine known lead weights of Bar-Kokhba's administration were engraved in Jewish script, despite the fact that, like the coins, they were designed to serve as a means of propaganda for the general public (Kloner 1990).

All of this leads to the conclusion that the officials stationed at the fortress in Yatir were most probably in charge of spinning wool into yarn and weaving it into fabric for a certain purpose.[12] The fact that they used the Paleo-Hebrew script leads to the conclusion that this was no ordinary yarn and fabric, as it was under governmental administration and the authorities had to issue special stamps for this purpose. Why would a special type of yarn be subject to the monitoring and supervision of the Bar-Kokhban authorities, and why did they do this using the Paleo-Hebrew script reserved for the symbolic and declarative formulae on the coins?

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10 But not literarily, as rabbinic sources attest to its existence later: Mishna Yadayim 4:5; Giṭṭin 9:8; b. Talmud Megillah 8b; Shabbat 115a (see Naeh (2008) and Naeh (2010) with references). Even at least one Christian source, Epiphanius (De gemmis, PG 43:357–58), attests to the use of the Paleo-Hebrew script by Jews after the Bar-Kokhba Revolt (see Di Segni 1995, especially pages 53–54).

11 On the languages of these materials, see Naveh (1992), 98, 102, 117.

12 On the importance of wool at the time and its preponderance in the remains of fabrics found among the remains left by the refugees of the Bar-Kokhba revolt in the Judean Desert, see Sukenik (2023), especially 390–91, 400.

Considering the great importance that the leaders of the revolt attached to the observance of religious precepts, the hypothesis that the purpose of a special type of yarn is the production of *tzitzits*[13] for Bar-Kokhba's men, cannot be ruled out.

The commanders of the Yatir fortress had the authority to produce their own seals using the Paleo-Hebrew script and manage the production of special yarn in the name of the Bar-Kokhban government. This is an activity in line with the management of other matters by the Bar-Kokhban authorities, such as the supply of the Sukkot 'four species' in the areas controlled by the rebels, as is clear from two of the 'Bar-Kokhba letters' (Yadin et al. 2002, 322–28; Cotton 2002, 351–62).

Very possibly the finds related to spinning and weaving at the site were all connected with this function. Excavations in the fortress yielded one large iron needle in room 3 and eight stone loom weights scattered throughout the structure: four in room 1, one in the courtyard, and one in each of rooms 6, 21, and 22.

Seal 3 (fig. 13)

Fig. 13. Seal 3: *the top, the sealing surface, and the sealing surface demirrored.*

13 Not to be confused with tallit which in this period was an everyday garment.

This object, found in room 19, is not an actual seal but a stone with a flattened surface designed for practicing the engraving of mirrored letters on seals, part of the equipment of a local seal engraver. It has no handle, its contour is very irregular, and it shows no signs of having been worn by use. This extraordinary object is unique for two reasons: it is the first known practice board of a seal engraver, and this seal engraver was one who had mastered two scripts.

Paleography

Six characters of different scripts were engraved in very varied sizes in a disorganized fashion.[14] Though characters 3, 4, and 5 could in principle be read as a word built on the root אבס 'to feed an animal,' it seems that their arrangement is merely a coincidence, as characters 1 and 6 are each positioned in a different stance, both of which differ from that of characters 3, 4, and 5.

Two characters, 1 and 6, are Paleo-Hebrew. Character 1 is a Paleo-Hebrew *dalet* whose upper right protuberance was damaged by the edge of character 2. Character 6 is a fully preserved Paleo-Hebrew *bet* with a semi-rounded head, very similar to some *bet*s at Qumran (Perrot and Richelle 2022, 60, 4Q45; 61, 11Q1) and on Bar-Kokhba coins (Purvis 1968, Table V, coin 14).

The engraver who engraved the Paleo-Hebrew *dalet* must have had an independent knowledge of the Paleo-Hebrew alphabet, since this letter does not appears in the Bar-Kokhba coins.

The three characters 3, 4, and 5 are in formal post-Herodian Jewish script (Cross 1998, 388–392, pl. 10); however, character 4 is reminiscent of the Paleo-Hebrew *aleph* of seal 1, and character 5 could in principle be a Paleo-Hebrew *'ayin*. They are aligned but are executed in different sizes.

Character 2 is not a letter; it is a sign resembling a hook for hanging.

DISCUSSION

Despite the simplicity of this training stone for seal engraving, its contribution is remarkable, as it shows not only that the Yatir fortress housed officials authorized and able to produce their own special seals, but also that these officials had full control of both scripts, the Paleo-Hebrew and the Jewish, and were trained in engraving both of them in mirror script.

14 However, a seal with scattered letters dated to the Hellenistic period was found in Mount Grizim (Magen et al. 2004, 260); in this case the same script and letter type were used, and the inscription makes sense. Moreover, the letters in the seal are not disorganized but arranged in the corners of the square seal.

Seal 4 (figs. 14–16)

Fig. 14. Seal 4.

Fig. 15. Seal 4: *RTI photograph.*

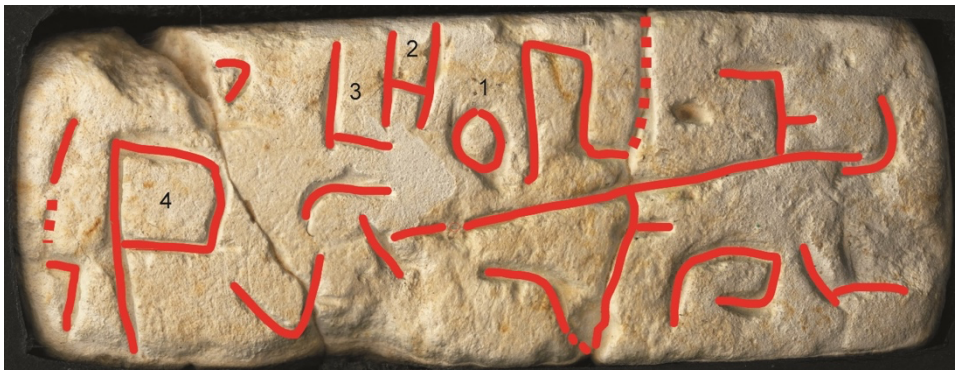

Fig. 16. Seal 4 (demirrored): *with the engravings marked.*

A rectangular seal (75 × 27 mm) with a handle found in room 6. The sealing surface was thoroughly smoothed before its engraving, and even though it was found broken into several pieces, the engraved signs can be discerned almost completely.

On the surface of the seal are engravings that are not text or known symbols, but disproportional and disorganized scribbles. Although three of them (2, 3, and 4) look like Latin letters and three of them (1, 2, and 3) are somewhat reminiscent of the Paleo-Hebrew עזל in seal 2 with the central letter wrongly rotated, these similarities are most likely coincidental. The most prominent element in the seal is a long oblique stroke crossing most of the sealing surface. The seal's engraving is most likely an exercise, possibly after the object had been disqualified as a seal because of an error. As the scribbles generally resemble hooks, rods, harnesses, and shuttles, the engraver was possibly inspired by such devices that were present at the site.

Object 509–510 (fig. 17)

Fig. 17. *Object 509–510.*

A broken fragment of a stone object (32 × 60 mm) found in room 16. The fragment is a corner of the original object, a slab 19–22 mm thick engraved on both sides. In the corner

two small strokes are engraved in one flank and one stroke in the other, probably to indicate the correct positioning of the object. The surviving engravings on both sides of the fragment are geometric designs, and it is impossible to determine if the object served as a two-sided seal or had some other function.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The finding of the epigraphic material presented here sheds light on hitherto unknown aspects of the leadership and administration of the Bar-Kokhban government and identifies the fortress of Ḥorbat Yatir as an official administrative center where functionaries were entrusted with the production of special yarn and fabric. Considering the emphasis placed by the Bar-Kokhban authorities on the strict fulfillment of religious precepts, the hypothesis cannot be ruled out that the purpose of a special type of yarn is the production of *tzitzit*s for Bar-Kokhba's men, and Ḥorbat Yatir was probably an official administrative center of their production and distribution.

The commanders of the fortress had the authority and the ability to produce their own seals for administrative issues, and it seems that they themselves even redacted the formulae of the seals, showing proficiency in both scripts—the Paleo-Hebrew and the Jewish—as can be seen in seal 3, on which the same person practiced the engraving of both scripts.

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