

SCRIPTA CLASSICA ISRAELICA

YEARBOOK OF THE ISRAEL SOCIETY
FOR THE PROMOTION OF CLASSICAL STUDIES

VOLUME XLV

2026

ISSN 0334-4509 (PRINT)
2731-2933 (ONLINE)

The publication of this volume has been made possible by the support of

Bar-Ilan University
Ben-Gurion University of the Negev
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem
The Open University
Tel Aviv University
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PUBLISHED BY
THE ISRAEL SOCIETY FOR THE PROMOTION OF CLASSICAL STUDIES
<http://www.israel-classics.org>

Manuscripts in the form of e-mail attachments should be sent to the e-mail address scriptaclassica.editors@gmail.com. For reviews, contact fassberg@tauex.tau.ac.il.

Price \$50

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Camera-ready copy produced by the editorial staff of *Scripta Classica Israelica*
Printed in Israel by Magnes Press, Jerusalem

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FOR THE
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A Roman Military Bread Stamp from Ḥorbat Naḥal Yatir

Rivka Elitzur-Leiman

Abstract: This study reexamines a group of stone seals from Ḥorbat Naḥal Yatir and argues that earlier interpretations identifying some of them as Paleo-Hebrew administrative tools are unconvincing. It proposes instead that one key artifact, Seal No. 2, is best understood as a Roman military bread stamp. In addition, the study offers new interpretations for several other seals from the site, suggesting that they relate to local bread production within the rebel community. Together, these findings provide a revised and more nuanced understanding of the site's final occupation and the interactions between the Jewish rebels and the Roman army.

Keywords: Seals, Epigraphy, Bar-Kokhba Revolt, Roman army, Ḥorbat Naḥal Yatir

In a recent article published in this journal, D. Vainstub and P. Fabian presented a group of inscribed stone seals from a Second Revolt fortress at Ḥorbat Naḥal Yatir. They identified at least two of these seals as bearing Paleo-Hebrew inscriptions, concluding that the site functioned as a Bar Kokhba administrative center. Based on their reading of Seal no. 2, they proposed that certain functionaries at the site were involved in the production of specialized yarn and fabric.¹

This paper offers an alternative interpretation of some of these seals, in particular of Seal No. 2, and consequently, a revised historical reconstruction of the site.

Vainstub and Fabian suggested that Seal no. 2 was written in Paleo-Hebrew script. They interpreted the seal as comprising two inscribed vertical registers, with the wording running from top to bottom. In one of the registers, they suggest reading 'לעזל' which they translate as: 'for spinning,' connecting it specifically to yarn spinning. This reading led them to suggest that the seal was used in fabric production industry, attesting to such activity in the site.

Vainstub and Fabian's suggestion, in my opinion, is unconvincing in a number of ways. In general, the use of Paleo-Hebrew script by the administration of Bar Kokhba was unusual, restricted solely to the coinage minted by the rebels; other epigraphic attestations related to Bar Kokhba, including letters written by or for Bar Kokhba himself, were inscribed in 'Jewish' square or cursive script. Three noteworthy exceptions are lead weights containing the inscription: 'Shimon son of Kosba, prince of Israel,' in Paleo-Hebrew.² However, since all three of these weights surfaced in the antiquity market, with no provenance and no parallels in supervised excavations, I leave these examples out of the current discussion. Excluding the lead weights, we are left with no valid proof that Bar

* I am deeply grateful to Avner Ecker, Guy Stiebel, Tal Ilan, Yakir Paz, and Yinon Shviti, as well as to the two anonymous reviewers, whose valuable insights and generous advice greatly enriched this work.

¹ Vainstub and Fabian (2024).

² Deutch (2001, 2003); Zissu and Ganor (2006).

Kokhba's administration, or the Jewish society in general, used Paleo-Hebrew script outside of minting coins in the second century CE. Therefore, interpreting two seals from Ḥorbat Naḥal Yatir as 'the only Paleo-Hebrew inscriptions connected to the Bar Kokhba Revolt known to date' would need to be based on solid proof, at least.³ The suggested reading of Seal no. 2 as Paleo-Hebrew, nevertheless, is partial and doubtful. This is true, in my view, of the authors' reading of Seal no. 1, as well (see below).

The central argument in this paper is that Seal No. 2 (fig. 1) is not a Paleo-Hebrew seal used by Bar Kokhba's officials, but rather a Latin military bread stamp used by Roman soldiers stationed at the site, around the time of its destruction. Contrary to the vertical reading proposed by Vainstub and Fabian, I argue that the seal should be read horizontally. When viewed in this orientation, it aligns with the standard form of Roman military bread stamps: a rectangular stone engraved in mirror script to produce a legible impression on unbaked dough. The engraver divided the inscription into two registers separated by a vertical line, and decorated the margins with a frame. A comparable vertical dividing line between inscriptional registers can be observed on Roman military bread stamps from Wadi Murabba'at and Jerusalem.⁴



Fig. 1: Seal No. 2, illustrated flipped horizontally – to provide a clearer view of the inscription, which was engraved in mirror script. At the upper left is the typical Latin mark of the *centuria*.

The association of the seal with the Roman military is based on the first sign in the upper line, which I identify as the *centuria* symbol – commonly used by Roman soldiers

³ The citation is taken from Vainstub and Fabian (2024), 223. The authors did not refer to the three Paleo-Hebrew weights in their discussion.

⁴ de Vaux (1961), 35–36, Fig. 12.9, Pl. IX.26= CIIP IV no. 3743; Vincent (1910)= CIIP I no. 758.

to indicate their unit. Similar symbols appear on several Roman bread stamps recovered in Judea and other areas of the Roman Empire (see below). The dimensions of the seal (68–62 × 42–45 mm) are consistent with other military bread stamps from the region, which exhibit comparable measurements.⁵

Typically, military bread stamps featured two lines of Latin inscription: the upper line naming the *centuria* and the lower indicating the name of the baker-soldier, both usually in the genitive case. I suggest the following reading:

1. $\cap$ QMO

2. NONN

1. (centuria) Q(uinti) ...(ius)

2. <opus> Nonn(ii)

(Century) of Quintus ...ius, (work of) Nonnius

The name or names in the upper register likely belonged to the centurion in command of the unit for whom the bread was baked. The small line beneath the Q perhaps marks an abbreviated name. Based on this epigraphic observation, I suggest that the Q indicates an abbreviated *praenomen* – Quintus. Another military bread stamp containing *praenomen* was found in Jerusalem.⁶ The three vertical lines that follow might be a defective M, assuming that the broken area covers another stroke, and the last letter is an O. Together, they would form a *nomen gentile* – possibly a defected form of Modius.

It should be mentioned, however, that there are a few difficulties in the above-suggested reading. The use of *praenomen* was not common in the second century CE, and in fact, had almost disappeared. In addition, abbreviations were usually marked with a dot, not with an underline. Thus, alternatively, one may suggest that the upper register contains one name only, a *nomen gentile* starting with a Q, or with an O.

The second line contains another *nomen gentile*, Nonnius, presumably the soldier-baker.

The letters, the framing, and the back part of the stamp designed for gripping it, all attest to a deliberate and careful design, even if executed at a rather basic level and with somewhat careless workmanship. This is not surprising, given the peripheral nature of the site. The *centuria* symbol is represented here as an L shaped curved line, which may be further evidence of the stamp's crude character, since this sign usually appears as an inverted carinated C. However, a comparison of the various representations of this symbol on stamps discovered in Provincia Palaestina shows that it was generally characterized by instability in both form and orientation (see Table 1). More specifically, the *centuria* symbol on the present stamp resembles that of a stamp found at Legio – in both cases the lower edge is parallel to the frame, forming an L shape (no. 2 in Table 1).

⁵ e.g., Di Segni and Weksler-Bdolah (2012), no. 1 [= CIIP I no. 755]: 85 × 35 mm; no. 2 [= CIIP I no. 757]: 58–60 × 46–48 mm.

⁶ According to the authors' interpretation, see Di Segni and Weksler-Bdolah (2012), 26.

1		Ḥorbat Naḥal Yatir	
2		Legio	CIIP V no. 7546
3		Legio	CIIP V no. 7545
4		Wadi Murabba'at	CIIP IV no. 3743
5		Jerusalem	CIIP I no. 757
6		Jerusalem	CIIP I no. 755
7		Jerusalem?	CIIP I no. 756
8		Jerusalem?	CIIP I no. 758

Table no. 1: the *centuria* symbol on various Roman military stamps from Roman Palestine (the symbols are depicted in the same orientation as they appear on the seals)

ROMAN MILITARY BREAD STAMPS IN ROMAN PALESTINE

Several military bread stamps have been discovered in various parts of Roman Palestine, providing valuable evidence of the Roman army's presence and logistical operations at each site. The most prominent examples come from Jerusalem, where three stone stamps were found near the Western Wall Plaza, beneath the eastern Roman Cardo. These stamps, unearthed in a pit dated to the late first or early second century CE, are associated with the activities of the Tenth Legion (*Legio X Fretensis*), which was stationed in the city from 70 CE onward.⁷

⁷ Di Segni and Weksler-Bdolah (2012)=CIIP I nos. 755, 757, 761.

Another stamp, discovered in a bakery during the Temple Mount excavations, bears the inscription 'PRIM.' This has been interpreted either as the name of the baker – Primus – or as an indication of the quality of the wheat (*primus* = 'first-rate').⁸

Additional stamps, although lacking secure archaeological contexts, are also attributed to Jerusalem:

A soft limestone stamp naming Augurinius, a centurion of the Tenth Legion;⁹ a stone stamp of the *centuria* of Vitellius;¹⁰ and a clay stamp bearing the name Valerius.¹¹

Beyond Jerusalem, two bread stamps were recovered at Legio, the site of the military camp of the Sixth Legion (*Legio VI Ferrata*).¹²

A particularly notable find is a wooden military stamp from Wadi Murabba'at, discovered in close proximity to documents and other artifacts that belonged to Jewish rebels, echoing their tragic fate.¹³

The present discovery of another bread stamp at Ḥorbat Naḥal Yatir extends the documented distribution of Roman military bread stamps, now encompassing the Yatir region in the northern Negev. This new addition broadens our understanding of Roman military provisioning networks, and regional deployment in Judea during the period of the Second Revolt.

THE ROMAN MILITARY STAMP IN CONTEXT

The site of Ḥorbat Naḥal Yatir provides unique evidence related to the Bar Kokhba Revolt. Excavations conducted in 1982 by David Alon were first briefly reported in 1983, and later published in somewhat greater detail in 1987.¹⁴ The dig uncovered a fortress organized around a central courtyard, with shafts leading to an extensive subterranean hideout system. According to the excavator, the fortress was constructed after 70 CE. However, around the period of the Second Revolt it underwent renovations, and the hideout tunnels were quarried. The small finds discussed in this paper were all found on the floors of the burnt fortress.

The subterranean system contained human skeletal remains – men, women, and children. Based on osteological analysis, which showed no evidence of violent trauma or starvation, the excavator speculated that the individuals had been suffocated by smoke, probably caused by fires ignited by Roman soldiers in the tunnels' airshafts.

The fortress itself yielded ceramic finds, several basalt grinding vessels, and numerous coins, including three minted under the Bar Kokhba administration, dated to the second and third years of the revolt. The structure itself had been destroyed by a large fire – linked by the excavators to the outcome of the Bar Kokhba Revolt. Particularly noteworthy was a substantial pile of charred barley, discovered in one of the fortress's rooms. Botanical analysis indicated that the barley had been locally harvested and was likely intended for

⁸ Mazar (1971), 20; Stiebel (2011); see Werner Eck's critique, CIIP I no. 760.

⁹ Dalman (1903)= CIIP I no. 756.

¹⁰ CIIP I no. 758.

¹¹ Germer-Durand (1892), 387= CIIP I no. 759.

¹² Stiebel (2006), 29–30= CIIP V nos. 7545–7546.

¹³ CIIP IV no. 3743; see corrected reading in Stiebel (2010), 328–329.

¹⁴ Alon (1983, 1987).

bread production.¹⁵ Additional evidence which may be connected to the local production of bread, includes a group of five ovens arranged in a circle within one of the lower rooms in the wadi.

As noted by Vainstub and Fabian, the site exhibits an unusual abundance of various stone stamps – dated to the last phase of the fortress’ use, that is, the Bar Kokhba Revolt.¹⁶ In addition to the Latin military stamp discussed in this article, three other stone stamps were recovered in the fortress area:

Seal No. 1, a small cylindrical stone with engraved signs on one circular face, was interpreted by Vainstub and Fabian as bearing a Paleo-Hebrew inscription. However, in my opinion, this interpretation is unconvincing for several reasons. First, the poor preservation of the seal, as well as the worn and damaged state of the marks, do not allow a certain identification of the object – which might as plausibly bear a square Hebrew inscription, Greek letters, or a non-textual pattern. Second, some parallels brought by the authors to build their interpretation are doubtful. For example, while admitting that the suggested *alef* is ‘much defective,’¹⁷ the authors compare it to *alefs* found on the ‘Gamla coins’, following Ya’akov Meshorer’s traditional interpretation; however, more recent studies, by Farhi and Pfann, now widely accepted, identify the same letter as a square *mem*.¹⁸ Third, judging from the various photos provided by the authors, the *lamed* and the *gimel* do not seem to be two separated letters; the *gimel* is turned almost 90 degrees from the writing direction; the second *lamed* seems rounded and very doubtful, and so are the various types of *shins* the authors suggest in their reading of the second part of the inscription. Hence, although I cannot give a counter interpretation for Seal no. 1, I do not think that it was inscribed with Paleo-Hebrew Bar Kokhban script.

Seal No. 3 (fig. 2) was described by the authors as a practice tablet, engraved with three square Hebrew letters (*alef, bet, samekh*), two Paleo-Hebrew letters (*dalet, bet*), and one figurative sign – all in mirror script. Despite its simplicity, I argue that it could nonetheless have functioned as an actual seal, especially given the marginal nature of the site. In addition, I find it implausible that a single inscription would incorporate two Jewish script systems. I suggest instead two possible other interpretations:

The first is to read four letters in square script, adding to the authors’ reading אבס another recognizable letter in the lower line, a square Hebrew *tet*, hence suggesting the word: אבסט, as follows:

(two pictorial signs)	.1
אבס	.2
ט	.3

¹⁵ Kislev (1986).

¹⁶ Vainstub and Fabian (2024).

¹⁷ Vainstub and Fabian (2024), 216.

¹⁸ Meshorer’s traditional reading of this unique type of coins was (לגאולת ירושלם הקדושה), ‘for the redemption of Jerusalem the Holy,’ but Farhi and Pfann convincingly suggested reading on the obverse בגמלא or בגמלא, see Farhi (2006), Pfann (2006). For the acceptance of this approach instead of Meshorer’s, see Syon (2007); Farhi and Syon (2016). (It should be mentioned that Vainstub and Fabian refer to this new interpretation in their paper.)

אבסט could represent a shortened form of a personal name – perhaps Εὐστάθιος (Eustathios).¹⁹ The two additional marks on the upper part of the seal might represent schematic cornucopia.

Another option is to consider all the six signs as square Hebrew letters, reading: אבטלמס, as follow:

1. ט ל (facing up)
2. א ב מ
3. ט

In this suggestion I assume that the letters on the seal were positioned in a mixed order, and that two letters, *lamed* and *samekh*, are facing up instead of a right-left orientation. Various cases of mixed setting of letters are attested on some Bar Kokhba coins, containing metatheses of the name שמעון, such as שמ/נעו, שמ/ענו, and ממש/עש.²⁰



Fig. 2: Seal no. 3, flipped horizontally, inscribed in Jewish square script.

The last letter in line 2, according to the current interpretation, is a round *mem*, similar to the shape of this letter in cursive post-Herodian script.²¹

¹⁹ According to Ilan, Eustathios is documented twice in Jewish contexts: a synagogue dedicatory inscription in Asia, and a seal depicting a menorah from Greece. It should be mentioned that both attestations are dated to later periods, and that the name is not known in Hebrew transliteration so far. See further Ilan (2008), 275.

²⁰ Meshorer (2001), nos. 272a, 272c, 293a

²¹ See Yardeni (1997), 184–191.

אבטלמס could be a variant of the name אבטלמוס, derived from biblical אבשלום, a well-documented Jewish name in antiquity.²²

Seal No. 4, which includes, according to the authors, ‘disorganized scribbles,’ – some ‘look like Latin letters’,²³ might be another seal or a practice tablet. A few letters can be recognized on the upper register: L, H, O, T, L.

Another fragmentary stone object found in the fortress was engraved on both sides with geometric designs. While its function remains unclear due to its incomplete state, the authors proposed it was a two-sided seal.

Together, these artifacts suggest localized industrial activity, even if on a modest scale. Vainstub and Fabian, interpreting Seals No. 1 and 2 as evidence for organized textile production, proposed that the site served as ‘an official administrative center where functionaries were entrusted with the production of special yarn and fabric.’²⁴ However, given the alternative interpretation of Seal No. 2 offered here – rejecting both the Paleo-Hebrew reading and the assumption of centralized textile industry – there is little reason to suggest that the site was a formal fabric production hub, especially considering the lack of any other material attestation for this industry in the site.

As David Amit has shown, stamps in Jewish contexts throughout Judea were used for diverse purposes, most commonly to mark food products, such as bread.²⁵ The barley cache, grinding tools, and cluster of ovens found in the site might point to local bread production. In his study on bread in the rebel community at Masada, Guy Stiebel demonstrated the centrality of bread in the diet of the fighters during the First Revolt.²⁶ It is reasonable to assume that, almost sixty years later, the Jewish rebels of the Second Revolt at Ḥorbat Naḥal Yatir also depended on locally produced bread. Botanical evidence suggests that the bread was of modest quality, based on barley grown in the surrounding hills – a possible reflection of the rebels’ peripheral position in their desperate struggle against the Roman Empire. The various engraved seals, whether pseudo-textual, geometric, or alphabetic, likely reflect this localized and improvised production system.

Seal No. 2, the Roman military bread stamp, was most likely brought to Ḥorbat Naḥal Yatir by the Roman soldiers who captured the fortress – or perhaps produced locally as part of the Roman military presence at the site. If Seal No. 3 is indeed another Latin stamp, it may have arrived, or been made, under similar circumstances.

It is more difficult to explain why the Roman seal was found near the Hebrew stamp and the barley pile within the occupied fortress. Whether Nonnius – the presumed Roman soldier-baker – was searching the fortress for useful tools to support his bread-making and repurposed equipment or facilities left behind in the building, or whether he even had contact with the former Jewish inhabitants, including those who had used the fortress and its facilities, will remain unanswered. The same is true for the possibility that the seal was

²² Even if one does not accept the reading in the first line of the *lamed* and the *samekh*, I suggest that there is still an option to read אבטס or אבטם, which can equally represent a defected or shortened form of אבטלמוס. Ilan (2012), 59, 212.

²³ Vainstub and Fabian (2024), 227.

²⁴ Vainstub and Fabian (2024), 228.

²⁵ Amit (2013).

²⁶ Stiebel (2010).

used by the Roman unit during a short-term occupation of the site, established after the suppression of the fighters hiding in the caves.

Yet with this newly identified Roman military stamp, the fortress of Ḥorbat Naḥal Yatir now tells a more nuanced story – of rebels and their conquerors, of war and its devastating consequences.

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