

## Was a Roman Cohort Stationed at Ein Gedi?

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In 1964-65, excavations by B. Mazar and I. Dunayevsky brought to light the remains of a Roman bath house at the Ein Gedi oasis.<sup>1</sup> The bath house is located in the center of the alluvial fan between Nahal David and Nahal Arugot, about 200-250 m west of the shore of the Dead Sea.<sup>2</sup> The bath house is long and narrow in plan, with a series of successive rooms (*apodyterium*, passage room, *frigidarium* with pool, *tepidarium*, *caldarium*, store room) laid along a north-south axis. This axial layout, which is characteristic of Roman military bath houses, is known as a *reihentyp* plan (where bathers progress unidirectionally through a complex of rooms).<sup>3</sup>

In the first season of excavations in the bath house (1964), a group of six bronze coins was found in the hollow of a door frame, the latest of which has been dated to 117/118 (the first year of Hadrian's reign).<sup>4</sup> This discovery, together with the pottery, glass, and the incorporation of reused Herodian architectural pieces, suggested to the excavators that the bath house dated to between the First and Second Jewish Revolts, as was later reconfirmed by Y. Hirschfeld.<sup>5</sup>

Just two years before the bath house at Ein Gedi came to light, the Babatha archive was discovered in the Cave of Letters within the framework of Y. Yadin's expedition to Nahal Hever. Among the documents found in the archive is a Greek papyrus (P. Yadin 11) recording a loan upon hypothec.<sup>6</sup> According to this contract, which was signed on May 6, 124 C.E., Judas of Ein Gedi (Babatha's second husband) borrowed a sum of 60 *denarii* from Magonius Valens, a centurion of the *cohors I milliaria Thracum*:

In the consulship of Manius Acilius Glabrio and Torquatus Tebanianus, one day before the *Nones* of May, in En-gedi village of lord Caesar, Judah son of Elazar Khthousion, an En-gedian, to Magonius Valens, centurion of *Cohors I Miliaria [sic] Thracum*, greetings. I acknowledge that I have received and owe to you in loan sixty denarii of Tyrian silver,

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1 See Mazar and Dunayevsky (1964), 128-30; Mazar and Dunayevsky (1967), 142-43; Mazar (1993), 404-5. The bath house was re-exposed by Hirschfeld (2007), 105-12; Hirschfeld (2008), 1720.

2 Mazar and Dunayevsky (1964), 128, report a distance of ca. 200 m from the shore of the Dead Sea, whereas Hirschfeld (2007), 105, gives a distance of ca. 250 m, apparently reflecting the drop in the sea's level during the intervening years.

3 Hirschfeld (2007), 106.

4 Mazar and Dunayevsky (1964), 129.

5 Mazar and Dunayevsky (1964), 128-30; Mazar and Dunayevsky (1967), 142-43; Mazar (1993), 404-5; Hirschfeld (2007), 105.

6 In Roman law a hypothec is a mortgage or security held by a creditor on the property of a debtor without possession of it. For the preliminary publication of this document see Polotsky (1962), 259. For the final publication see Lewis (1989), 41-46.

which are fifteen staters, upon hypothec of the courtyard in En-Gedi belonging to my father Elazar Khthousion....<sup>7</sup>

The courtyard that Judah provided as security against the loan is described as abutted by *skenai* on the east and west, which H. Polotsky translated as '(presumably military) tents,' and Lewis rendered as 'camps.' On the north side, the courtyard is described as abutted by a street and a *praesidium* (*praesidion*) (according to Polotsky's reading), which N. Lewis translated as 'camp headquarters.'<sup>8</sup> Based on the reference to the centurion Magonius Valens and a *praesidium*, scholars have assumed that all or part of a milliary cohort was stationed in Ein Gedi in the period between the two revolts.<sup>9</sup>

The reference to a *praesidium* has influenced the manner in which the rest of this document has been interpreted. For example, the *skenai* are assumed to be military accommodations, either tents or more permanent structures, which housed all or part of the cohort.<sup>10</sup> From this, scholars have assumed that there was a Roman military post at Ein Gedi during the period between the revolts.<sup>11</sup> There are several problems with these assumptions. First, P. Yadin 11 does not necessarily indicate that Magonius Valens lived in Ein Gedi, only that he was present at the signing of the contract. Second, even if we assume that Magonius Valens lived in Ein Gedi, there is no indication that all or part of the cohort was stationed there as well. In fact, M. Speidel noted that a milliary cohort was unlikely to have been stationed in Ein Gedi, and suggested that the permanent base was in the vicinity of Hebron.<sup>12</sup> In light of Ein Gedi's status as an imperial estate, an

7 From Lewis (1989), 44.

8 Polotsky (1962), 259; Lewis (1989), 44.

9 The *Cohors I Thracum* was still stationed in Syria in 91 C.E.; see Speidel (1979), 170. Cotton (2001), 148-49, believes that the omission of *skenai* and a *praesidium* from P. Yadin 19 indicates that by April 128 the unit had been transferred elsewhere. Certainly by 186 C.E. this cohort was stationed in Hebron; see Speidel (1979), 171.

10 Polotsky (1962), 259: '(presumably military) tents'; Lewis (1989), 45, who argues that *skenai* 'cannot refer to transitory structures like Bedouin tents,' and identifies them as 'encampments of soldiers flanking the headquarters building' (i.e. the *praesidium*, although see n. 12 below for the possible range of meanings for this term); Cotton (2001), 148-49, who identifies the *skenai* as tents because there is no reference to *skenai* or a *praesidium* in P. Yadin 19.

11 Polotsky (1962), 259, who refers to 'the Roman military post'; Mazar (1993), 399, who says that 'a Roman garrison was stationed there'; Cotton (2001), 147, who says 'part (or the whole) of the *cohors I milliaria Thracum* is stationed there,' and 'The unit (or part of it) seems to have been stationed right in the middle of the village'; Isaac (1992), 174, characterizes the *praesidium* as a 'police station' that was 'manned by soldiers of the *cohors I milliaria Thracum* and commanded by a centurion.

12 See Speidel (1979), 170-71, who suggests that Ein Gedi was an 'outpost' (*praesidium*) under the command of a centurion, whereas the cohort was stationed at or near Hebron. Isaac (1992), 175, notes that in Talmudic sources, the word *praesidium* refers to 'guard posts along the roads to Jerusalem', which suggests that the 'Latin term was so widely used that it had become part of the daily language,' and need not always denote a fort or stronghold. It is also worth noting that according to the OLD the verb *praesideo* means 'to stand guard' as well as 'to exercise supervision over official functions' or 'to govern or control'. Accordingly, a *praesidium* could be interpreted as a location at which supervisory functions were performed.

individual centurion might have been posted on detached duty, particularly as it was common for military officers to assist in the local civil administration.<sup>13</sup> In this case, the *skenai* mentioned in P. Yadin 11 do not necessarily refer to military accommodations, whether tents or more permanent structures. Furthermore, there is no archaeological evidence of Roman military presence at Ein Gedi aside from the bath house. This absence of evidence is striking considering the extensive archaeological excavations that have been conducted at Ein Gedi, including Mazar and Dunayevsky's five seasons from 1961 to 1965, three seasons by D. Barag, E. Netzer, and Y. Porat from 1970 to 1972 (in the synagogue and its surroundings), and seven seasons by Hirschfeld from 1996 to 2002. None of these campaigns brought to light any identifiable Roman military artifacts or structures aside from the bath house.

Although the bath house is of a characteristic Roman military type, there is no reason to assume that it was built to serve a permanent detachment of troops stationed at Ein Gedi. The evidence from other parts of the Empire indicates that such structures need have no direct relationship with any military garrison. In this respect, three examples from North Wales are particularly instructive. At Prestatyn, a small, axially-arranged bath house built in the second century C.E. incorporated tile stamps of *Legio XX Valeria Victrix*.<sup>14</sup> Originally this was taken to mean that the legion maintained an outpost at Prestatyn, but extensive archaeological work has failed to locate the corresponding base and it is now assumed that the bath house was associated with a civilian *vicus* connected with the extraction and refining of lead.<sup>15</sup> At Pentre Farm, Flint, there is evidence of a small bath house with tile stamps of *Legio XX*, which was added to an impressive complex of timber buildings during a refurbishment in stone at the end of the second century C.E.<sup>16</sup> Again, there is no evidence of any army unit based in the vicinity, and the excavators believe that the complex formed the administrative center (and residence) of a Roman official tasked with the supervision of the local silver and lead mines.<sup>17</sup> A similar scenario has been suggested for the construction of a row-type bath house in the south-east quarter of the Roman fort at Segontium (Caernarfon).<sup>18</sup> This building apparently was not related directly to the needs of the garrison at Segontium, but instead was associated with an elaborate residential structure of Hadrianic-early Antonine date built on top of demolished barrack blocks. The excavators have speculated that this new bathing suite was intended to serve the needs of an imperial official, perhaps a *centurio regionarius* or a *procurator metallorum* based at the fort but tasked with local administrative oversight.<sup>19</sup>

This evidence may offer a parallel to the situation at Ein Gedi. Given that the village formed part of an important imperial estate that was the primary source of balsam in the

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13 For Ein Gedi's status as an imperial estate, see Cotton (2001), 139-46. For military officers assisting in local civil administration, see Alston (1995), 86-96; Isaac (1992), 137.

14 Blockley (1989), 34-41, 46-50, 136.

15 Silvester (2010), 308-09.

16 O'Leary (1989), 29-31, 33-35, 92.

17 Silvester (2010), 308.

18 See Casey and Davies (1993), 12-13, 47-50.

19 See Casey and Davies (1993), 13-15; Davies and Casey (2010), 222-23.

Roman world,<sup>20</sup> it would not be unusual to find an imperial official based here to supervise the production of the commodity. Such an official could easily have been a centurion seconded for the purpose, and the status ascribed to this individual may have demanded the provision of bathing facilities worthy of his rank. That the resulting bath house followed a typically “military” plan should occasion little surprise given the likelihood that Roman soldiers would have been responsible for its construction. As in the cases of Prestatyn and Pentre Farm, the fact that soldiers built the complex need not imply that a military garrison was served by the facility.

Capernaum on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee provides another possible parallel with the situation at Ein Gedi. An unpublished *reihentyp* bath house dating to the early second century reportedly was found in the village. As at Ein Gedi, the bath house has been interpreted as evidence that a Roman garrison was stationed in the village.<sup>21</sup>

It is also possible that the bath houses at Capernaum and Ein Gedi were constructed to service travelers and merchants who passed through the villages’ harbors. At Tremadog in North Wales, what appeared to be an isolated bath house of the second or third century C.E. was built near the site of another likely Roman harbor.<sup>22</sup> The recent discovery of a second century C.E. corn-drier close by suggests that the baths may have served a prosperous agricultural estate as well as travelers disembarking here.<sup>23</sup> Harbor baths are, of course, common throughout the Empire, although many of these examples (such as at Ephesus and Ostia) were on a much larger scale.

To conclude, the assumption that all or part of a Roman millitary cohort was stationed at Ein Gedi between the revolts is based on the word *praesidium* in P. Yadin 11, and its supposed connection with the centurion Magonius Valens. Even if a centurion or some other officer lived in Ein Gedi, there is no archaeological or documentary evidence indicating a more substantial Roman military presence. The bath house at Ein Gedi might have been constructed to serve the needs of such an officer, or could have been intended for the use of travelers passing through the harbor.

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<sup>20</sup> Cotton (2001), 145.

<sup>21</sup> See Reed (2000), 155. Interestingly, the Gospels refer to a centurion at Capernaum, who according to Luke built a synagogue for the villagers (Matt 8:5-9; Luke 7:2), although as Fergus Millar notes (personal communication), presumably he was a soldier in Herod Antipas’ army.

<sup>22</sup> See Breese and Anwyl (1909), 473-94.

<sup>23</sup> For the corn-drier, see Burnham (2006), 379-80.

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