

## The Demise of the Aramaic Document in the Dead Sea Region

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In the course of his review of the Cotton-Yardeni edition of *P. Hever*, Roger Bagnall observes, 'The use of languages here (and in the still unpublished part of the Babatha archive) certainly shows that Aramaic remained usable in legal documents under Roman rule and that competent scribes in both languages were available in at least the more important villages; we still do not know accurately why one language was chosen for one document, the other for another. There is no evidence that the Romans discouraged the use of Aramaic. That may, incidentally, make one doubtful that the decline of Demotic in Egypt was the product of official policy'.<sup>1</sup>

The last sentence may be construed, I think, as a gentle invitation for me to revisit my paper in *JEA* 79 (1993), 276-81,<sup>2</sup> where I suggested that documents written in Demotic, so numerous in the finds from the Ptolemaic period, fell into desuetude under Roman rule because there was no place for them in the Greek monolingualism of the Roman provincial administration. Far from undermining this finding, the evidence from Roman Judaea and Roman Arabia, scanty as it is, parallels that from Egypt, suggesting that Aramaic documents in the Roman East disappeared under the same circumstances, and in more or less the same time span, as did the Demotic documents of Egypt.

The latest extant dated documents written in, or containing, Aramaic are *P. Mur.* 25 and *P. Hever* 7, 8, 8a and 13, which date from 133, 134 and 135 CE. The Aramaic language continued in use, of course, right down to

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<sup>1</sup> *BASP* 36, 1999, 139.

<sup>2</sup> Now reprinted in *On Government and Law in Roman Egypt. Collected Papers of Naphtali Lewis* (American Studies in Papyrology 33, 1995), 351-56.

modern times; but from Antiquity no Aramaic commercial document has yet turned up bearing any date later than 135 CE.<sup>3</sup>

Essentially the same pattern is found in the documents from Roman Egypt. The latest known documents drawn up in Demotic are *P. Tebt. Botti 2* and 3, of 130 and 175/6 CE. We have also a handful of Greek documents with Demotic subscriptions; these range in date from 50 to 210/1 CE. The contrast with over 600 published Demotic documents of Ptolemaic date *saute aux yeux*, and the contrast becomes even more striking when we recall that the total number of all documents from the Ptolemaic period is but a fraction of those of Roman date. To be sure, the Egyptian population continued to use its native tongue all through Roman times, and there was even a renaissance of native literature, first in Demotic and later in its Coptic transformation. But business documents drawn up in Demotic became toward the middle of the second century pretty much a thing of the past.

In my *JEA* paper I suggested that the disuse of the Demotic document was a consequence of the advent of Roman rule in Egypt. The Ptolemaic administration had maintained a bipartite system of courts, one operating in Greek, the language of the government and the *lingua franca* of the Hellenistic world, the other — the courts of the *laokritai* ('people's judges') — conducting its business in the language of the indigenous population. What is more, Demotic documents enjoyed evidentiary status not only in those 'native' courts, but even, when presented in Greek translation, in the Greek-language courts as well. There is extant a series of such documents headed ἀντίγραφον συγγραφῆς (*vel sim.*) Αἰγυπτίας μεθρημηνευμένης κατὰ τὸ δύνατον, 'copy of an Egyptian contract (*vel sim.*) translated to the

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<sup>3</sup> I thank Ada Yardeni for confirming that these are indeed the latest known. The recently published sixth-century *ketuba* (C. Sirat, P. Cauderlier, M. Dukan, and M.A. Friedman, *La Ketouba de Cologne: Un contrat de mariage juif à Antinoopolis*, *Papyrologica Coloniensia* 12, 1986) is not a commercial document of the kind under discussion here, but merely another of the many evidences of the continuity of Aramaic as an intra-community language. Such a document could never *per se* have become a cause of action, or even supporting evidence, in a Roman or Byzantine court of law.

It is perhaps otiose to repeat here the caveat inherent in any *argumentum ex silentio*: tomorrow's find may totally upset today's state of affairs. From Jewish communities in Rome's eastern provinces we also have no Greek documents later than those from Hever and Murabba'at; but we do know that in those areas business and government affairs continued to be conducted in Greek. See H.M. Cotton, W. Cockle and F. Millar, 'The Papyrology of the Roman Near East: A Survey', *Journal of Roman Studies* 85, 1995, 214–35, nos. 332ff.

best of the translator's ability'. The latest such document is dated in the year 11 CE.<sup>4</sup>

There is no trace in Roman Egypt of the *laokritai*, nor of the pre-existing bipartite judiciary. So, too, in the Babatha papyri we find Jewish inhabitants of Roman Arabia taking their disputes to the Roman provincial court system; there is no mention of any other, neither 'native' nor rabbinic. Official business within those provinces being conducted only in Greek (note, for example, how in *P.Yadin* 16 even Babatha's Aramaic attestation had to be translated into Greek for submission), there was less and less call for the services of Demotic scribes in Egypt, Aramaic scribes in the regions farther to the east, and correspondingly more demand for scribes competent in Greek.

All this is not to say, however, that the Roman provincial administration 'discouraged' the use of the vernacular tongues. Most readers would, I think, understand that term as carrying a connotation of active deterrence. The demise of the Aramaic and the Demotic *document* — not literature, or oral use — was a consequence, rather, of governmental insouciance and indifference: the 'natives' were generally free to continue their customs and practices so long as these did not conflict with governmental requirements. In the eastern provinces that meant conducting official business in Greek, which in turn diminished the socio-economic viability of the vernaculars.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See the list in *CPR* XV 1.1n.

<sup>5</sup> Fergus Millar's recent surveys of the linguistic mosaic in the eastern provinces in the late Roman and early Byzantine periods afford an apposite sidelight. Regarding the fourth and early fifth centuries he writes, in summary, '... the Near Eastern provinces of the Roman Empire can still ... be seen as a zone of Greek culture, but a culture in which Christianity was ever more dominant. Within that overall framework, however, there also persisted an unbroken tradition of continual self-expression in Semitic languages by the two related "peoples of the Book", the Jews and the Samaritans' (*Mediterranean Archaeology* 11, 1998, 176); and for the fifth and sixth centuries, '... [il] cosiddetto 'Aramaico Giudaico Palestinese' ... deve considerarsi come la lingua, o almeno una lingua, normale delle comunità ebraiche. Dobbiamo esitare, per non escludere la possibilità che in effetti la loro lingua più comune non fosse l'aramaico, ma il greco. Questa possibilità rimane aperta per tutte le diverse comunità della Palestina' (*Mediterraneo Antico* 1, 1998, 91).