

New Ossuary Inscriptions from Jerusalem*

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In the summer of 1990 three burial caves, dated to the last hundred years of the Second Temple period, were discovered and investigated in the Qidron Valley in Jerusalem. The excavation was carried out on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority and supervised by the archaeologists G. Avni and Z. Greenhut. The caves, distinguished by their extravagant layout and decoration, were used for burial over a long period of time, down to the Byzantine period. However, the excavators were able to identify the Jewish burials of the Second Temple period with relative ease, since burial in ossuaries is typical of that period only.

The Second Temple ossuaries in the three caves were numerous, and many of them bore inscriptions in both Greek and Aramaic. From these inscriptions it emerges that the interred were most likely two Jewish families who migrated to Jerusalem from Syria. Thus they join a gallery of celebrated Jews who immigrated to Jerusalem from the Diaspora during the Herodian period. In this category one may mention high priests such as Simon son of Boethus the Egyptian (Jos., *AJ* 15.320-322) or Hananel the Babylonian (*AJ* 15.22), eminent scholars, such as Hillel the elder (*e.g.*, *Sifre Deut.* 357), and even warriors such as Zamaris of Babylon (Jos., *AJ* 17.29). Other burial caves of the Second Temple period in Jerusalem also

* I wish to thank G. Avni and Z. Greenhut for offering me the pleasant task of deciphering and publishing the inscriptions. I also wish to thank the Israel Antiquities Authority for allowing me to use part of the material in this initial publication.

create the impression that they had served as final resting places for Jewish immigrants.¹

A full report of the entire excavation and the inscriptions will be published under the auspices of the Israel Antiquities Authority. The following is an initial presentation of four inscriptions which are of special interest and consequently should be published without delay.

1. Cave 3 - Ossuary 007

ΑΡΙΣΤΩΝ
אריסטון אפמי
יהודה הנגיד

Ariston
Ariston of Apamea
Judah the Proselyte

A. Ariston

The first person buried in this ossuary is a certain Ariston (Ἀρίστων). He has a Greek name which is recorded both in Greek and in the Jewish script of the Second Temple period. The Hebrew version of his name adds the detail that he originated from the city of Apamea.

It is interesting to note that another Ariston of Apamea is mentioned in the Mishnah in the context of the validity of gifts brought to the Jewish Temple from abroad:

אריסטון הביא חלות מאפמיא וקיבלו נכניו מפני שאמר: הקונה בסוריא
כקונה בפרור שבירושלים

(*M.Hallah* 4.11. “Ariston brought his first-fruits from Apamea and they accepted them from him, for they said: He that owns [land] in Syria is as one that owns [land] in the outskirts of Jerusalem”, trans. H. Danby)

Can Ariston of the ossuary be identified with Ariston of the Mishnah?² That is, was a man by the name of Ariston who came from

¹ H. Vincent, “Nouveaux ossuaires juifs”, *Revue Biblique* 11 (1902), 103-107; *idem*, “Tombeaux et ossuaires juifs récemment découverts”, *Revue Biblique* 22 (1913), 262-277.

² Such identifications should not be made too facily, see my “Julia Crispina Daughter of Berenicianus, a Herodian Princess in the Babatha Archive — A Case Study in Historical Identification”, *JQR*, in press.

Apamea to Jerusalem during the Herodian period an unusual phenomenon and therefore the identification of the two is likely, or was it very common, thus making the similarity between the two a mere coincidence or even making the mishnaic Ariston a literary fiction? Chronologically they can be matched. The mishnaic Ariston is dated to a time when the Temple still stood, but more specific dating is impossible, for the mishnaic tradition is not transmitted in the name of an authority and none of the persons mentioned can be more precisely dated.³ It may be fair to say, however, that most traditions in the Mishnah from the days of the Second Temple do not go much further back than the beginning of the Christian era.

The two can also be matched geographically. The Mishnah specifically mentions Ariston's town of origin as Apamea in Syria, leaving no doubt as to which Apamea is meant. That Ariston of the ossuary originated from Syrian Apamea is suggested by the presence of what seem to be two other Syrian place names (Seleucia and Beirut) mentioned on two other ossuaries from the same burial complex.⁴ The Mishnah, however, does not suggest that Ariston migrated to Jerusalem. On the contrary, it states that he owned land in Syria. Ariston of the ossuary, on the other hand, certainly did migrate, as he was eventually buried in Jerusalem together with other members of his family (see below). The possibility that his bones were transferred to Jerusalem after his death is anachronistic; this custom developed only later.⁵ That he may have died while on pilgrimage is made highly unlikely by the fact that his two daughters were buried with him.

³ Joseph the priest mentioned in the same Mishnah is perhaps an exception: he is mentioned elsewhere in Rabbinic literature as an example of an overly pious person (e.g., *T. Shabbat* 13.13; *bZebahim* 100a) but dating his activity more precisely is impossible because he is never mentioned with anybody whose date is exactly known.

⁴ As will appear in the final publication, one of the ossuaries bears the inscription ΣΕΛΥΚ. This word can be understood as the patronymic Seleucus, or as reference to the Syrian city Seleucia. On another ossuary the form ΒΕΡΟΥΤΟΣ appears in the name of the artist who produced it. This may be a reference to the city of Beirut.

⁵ See I. Gafni, "Reinterment in the Land of Israel: Notes on the Origin and Development of a Custom", *The Jerusalem Cathedra* I, ed. I.L. Levine (1981), 96-104.

There is no doubt that Ariston was a popular name.⁶ Its complete absence for both Jews and non-Jews from Syria is not in itself significant, because the *corpora* of names from that region are far from complete. The name is certainly not unknown in the Jewish-Palestinian *onomastica* of the Second Temple period. This was the name of one of King Agrippa I's friends and advisors (Jos., *AJ* 19.353). One may assume that he was Jewish, but this cannot be verified. In Hebrew characters the name appears as אַרִיסְטוֹן, the father of Joseph mentioned in one of the better-known Bar Kokhba letters.⁷ This Ariston was certainly Jewish. Also, the form Ἀριστίων is found in the recently published Babatha archive, as a landowner in Ein-Gedi whose property borders that of Babatha's family.⁸ Although Ein-Gedi was a predominantly Jewish town, this person could have been a non-Jewish landowner. Thus we may conclude that only one other person known by this name — except the mishnaic Ariston — was a Palestinian Jew and the name was therefore not popular among Palestinian Jews. Whether this information enhances the possibility that a Jewish Ariston of Apamea was a unique phenomenon is difficult to assess.

The historicity of characters such as Ariston of Apamea of the Mishnah is an open question. Queen Helene and her son King Monbazus mentioned in the Mishnah (e.g., *M.Yoma* 3.10) are certainly historical persons because they are mentioned also in Josephus (*AJ* 20.17,93). On the other hand, Judah, the Ammonite proselyte mentioned in *M.Yadaim* 4.4, is probably a literary fiction, as his very common name indicates (see below), suggesting the possibility of other fictitious figures in the Mishnah. Yet only rarely are persons invented in the Mishnah for literary purposes. Most persons mentioned in it (like Ariston, who is mentioned together with

⁶ The only volume of Greek names from the Hellenistic and Roman periods that has been published to date is from the Aegean Islands, Cyprus and Cyrene (P.M. Fraser and E. Matthews, *A Lexicon of Greek Personal Names* I, [Oxford 1987]) and it shows that Ariston was a very popular name (253 entries, 23 of them from Cyrene alone — pp. 77-79).

⁷ R. de Vaux, P. Benoit and J.T. Milik, *Discoveries in the Judaean Desert* II, *Les grottes de Muraba'at* (Oxford 1961), 156.

⁸ N. Lewis, *The Documents from the Bar Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters: Greek Papyri* (Jerusalem 1989), *P.Yadin* 20. 11, 34.

Nithai of Tekoa, ben Antinus and Joseph the Priest) are connected to historical events which serve as precedents in legal and halakhic rulings. This purpose would not be served if the precedents were not real. The mishnaic Ariston is, therefore, most likely a historical figure.

The likelihood that persons mentioned on ossuaries are historical persons known from other sources is a matter of statistics. Naturally many thousands lived and died in Jerusalem without ever being mentioned in literature. The sample of burial caves discovered in Jerusalem is random, and the chances of finding the ossuary of an historical personality who is also mentioned in the written sources are *prima facie* not very great. These chances are somewhat enhanced, however, by the fact that persons mentioned in literary works were usually influential and therefore at least moderately wealthy, and that persons buried in ossuaries had to be able to afford the burial chamber, case and inscription.

To date, only two persons mentioned on ossuaries have been identified with certainty: Nicanor of Alexandria, the benefactor who contributed gates to the Temple,⁹ and Theophilus the High Priest, whose granddaughter's ossuary was recently published.¹⁰ These identifications were made on the strength of chronological and geographical correspondences, and a unique title.¹¹ Yet these two cases

⁹ See M.Ch. Clermont-Ganneau, "Archaeological and Epigraphical Notes on Palestine", *PEF Quarterly Statement* 35 (1903), 125-131.

¹⁰ D. Barag and D. Flusser, "The Ossuary of Yehohanah Granddaughter of the High Priest Theophilus", *IEJ* 36 (1986), 39-46.

¹¹ Other identifications were also suggested: (1) of Sadan Malkta with Queen Helene of Adiabene, see M. Lidzbarski, *Handbuch der nordsemitischen Epigraphik* I (Weimar 1898), 117; (2) of Judah son of Mattathias from the Abba Cave (E.S. Rosenthal, "The Givat Hamivtar Inscription", *IEJ* 23 [1973], 72-81) with Mattathias Antigonus, the last Hasmonean king, see Y.M. Grinz, "The Giv'at Hamivtar Inscription: A Historical Interpretation", *Sinai* 75 (1974), 20-23 (Hebrew); (3) of Alexander son of Simon קרניית (N. Avigad, "A Depository of Inscribed Ossuaries from the Qidron Valley", *IEJ* 12 [1962], 9) with Alexander son of Simon of Cyrene mentioned in the New Testament, see J.T. Milik, *Gli scavi del Dominus Flevit* II (Jerusalem 1958), 81. Other even less likely suggestions have also been made, see S. Klein, *Jüdisch-palästinisches Corpus Inscriptionum* (Vienna-Berlin 1920), 14-15, and other examples there. Klein seems to

differ from that of Ariston: the number of high priests was limited and well-documented, and only one Nicanor made gates for the Temple, but there was an entire Jewish community within the large city of Apamea (Jos., *BJ* 2.479). We must therefore conclude that the similarity between the two Aristons is interesting but not specific enough for any definite identification.

b. Judah the Proselyte

The second person named on Ariston's ossuary is יהודה הגיור, Judah the proselyte. Persons identified as proselytes are mentioned on several ossuaries discovered in the past.¹² Three of these ossuaries are in Greek, and the only Hebrew ones are those of women proselytes: Maria and Salome, whose appellation is spelled גירת. The literary word for proselyte is גר in Hebrew, גיורא in Aramaic. It is usually assumed that the name of the rebel leader in the Great Revolt against Rome, Simon Bar Giora (*e.g.*, Jos., *BJ* 2.521) should be understood to mean "son of the proselyte". The form גיור found on this ossuary is unusual in that it is Aramaic but lacks the conventional Aramaic ending.

That Judah was the most common Hebrew name adopted by proselytes during the Second Temple period emerges from several examples, both epigraphic and literary; the name indicated that its bearer had just joined the Jewish people. Of the three male proselytes mentioned on ossuaries, two are named Judah.¹³

Rabbinic literature mentions a certain Judah son of Gerim (גרים = proselytes, *e.g.*, *bMo'ed Qatan* 9a) and in Babylonia mention is made of Judah Hindua, who was a proselyte with no legal heirs (*bQiddushin* 22b). The Mishnah records (*M.Yadaim* 4.4), as mentioned above, a certain Judah, an Ammonite proselyte. Although this person is probably fictitious, the fact that the author called him Judah indicates that the name was typical of proselytes. We do in-

have totally disregarded the statistical problem of the dead discovered in excavations who are not mentioned in literary compositions.

¹² J-B. Frey, *CIJ* II, 1385, 1390; Milik (n. 11), 84, no. 13; 89, no. 21; 95, n. 31.

¹³ Frey, *CIJ* 1385; Milik, 84, no. 13.

deed know other proselytes of this period with different names, such as Aquila the proselyte (*e.g.*, *Genesis Rabbah* 70.5), or Diogenes the proselyte on the third proselyte ossuary (see n. 13), but they retained their non-Jewish names. To my knowledge, no Hebrew name other than Judah is recorded for proselytes, except for the Egyptian proselyte Benjamin (or Minyamin: *T. Qiddushin* 5.4 — perhaps a fictitious figure), and another Benjamin son of Ashtor (*yBikkurim* 1.4, 46a), indicating perhaps that Benjamin was also a name for proselytes). This ossuary under discussion, therefore, further supports the premise that Judah is the name adopted by proselytes.

Ossuaries were, as a rule, used by more than one individual, but in the Qidron burial complex most of the ossuaries were inscribed with the name of only one person and usually contained only one set of bones. The bones of Ariston's ossuary were not found *in situ* (the ossuary was found broken and has since been mended), but if only one person was buried in the ossuary, then Judah the proselyte may be the Hebrew name of Ariston of Apamea, who was, as it turns out, a convert.

2. Cave 3 — Ossuary 002

A beautiful ossuary painted in pink.

ΣΕΛΑΜΨΙΝ ΑΡΙΣΤΩΝΟΣ
שלמציך בת אריסטון

Selampsin (daughter) of Ariston
Salamzion daughter of Ariston

This ossuary, discovered in the same chamber as the previous one, obviously belonged to a daughter, Salamzion, of the above-mentioned Ariston (Σελαμψιν Ἀρίστωνος). The daughter's name was one of the most common Jewish female names in Palestine in the Second Temple period.¹⁴ It is interesting to note that the person who inscribed Salamzion's name on this ossuary used the sophisticated Greek transliteration of MΨ for צמ (mēm-ṣādê). Josephus transliterated this name in the same manner (*AJ* 18.130), as did the

¹⁴ T. Ilan "Notes on the Distribution of Women's Names in Palestine in the Second Temple and Mishnaic Periods", *JJS* 40 (1989), 191-192.

scribe of a marriage contract from the Judaeen Desert,¹⁵ but on ossuaries the name was usually transliterated ΣΕΛΑΜΣΙΟΣ or ΣΑΛΑΜΣΕΙΩΝ.¹⁶ On the other hand, the inscriber has written the end of the name with IN, indicating perhaps the vulgar pronunciation of the name (Salamzin)¹⁷ rather than the more correct Salamzion. The Hebrew inscription has the longer, more formal version.

3. Cave 3 — Ossuary 2001

Another beautiful ossuary painted in pink with a bilingual Greek-Hebrew inscription.

שלום בת אריסטון	ΣΑΛΩΜ(Η) ΑΡΙΣΤΩΝ(ΟΣ)
Salome daughter of Ariston	Salom(e daughter of) Ariston.

This ossuary, discovered in the same chamber as the other two, belonged to another daughter of Ariston — Salome (Σαλώμη Ἀρίστωνος), as the bilingual inscription indicates. This proves once and for all that Salome and Salamzion are not the same name.¹⁸ Already Josephus distinguishes the two, claiming that Herod had one daughter by Mariamme the Hasmonean — Salampsio (= Salamzion *AJ* 18.30) and another by Elpis — Salome (*AJ* 17.21). Although Herod did not hesitate to name two or more of his sons (by different wives) by the same name (namely Herod, see: *AJ* 17.20-21), Josephus himself makes the distinction in the case of Salome and Salampsio.

The Greek transliteration of the name שלום uses the vowel ω in the second syllable while the transliteration of שלמציין uses α there.¹⁹

¹⁵ Lewis (n. 8), *P.Yadin* 18, l.11.

¹⁶ See Ilan (n. 14), 198-199.

¹⁷ This could be inferred from many inscriptions where the name is written שלמציין, see Ilan (n. 14), 198-199; see also the distorted form of the name in Rabbinic literature: T. Ilan, "The Greek Names of the Hasmonians", *JQR* 78 (1987), 7, n. 28.

¹⁸ As I once believed; see above, n. 14.

¹⁹ See my list (n. 14), 198-199.

This means that the common element in the names was not pronounced in the same way. To this it should be added that nowhere is the name שלמציון written in Hebrew with the letter ו (waw), *i.e.*, *שלומציון; thus the Hebrew spelling supports the Greek transliteration. The name Salome in Hebrew, on the other hand, is frequently written with a waw (שלום).²⁰ This may also imply that the names do not have the same meaning. While שלום means Peace, שלמציון does not mean Peace of Zion but the redemption of Zion, or the wholeness of Zion.

The discovery of the ossuaries of the two daughters of Ariston, who had similar but different names,²¹ confirms that the Jews of the Second Temple period did not give their children the same names.²²

4. Cave 2 — Ossuary 1006

A Greek inscription divided unevenly by a rosette on the ossuary.

ΜΕΓΙΣΤΗΣ ΙΕΡΙΣΗΣ Belonging to Megiste the priestess

Megiste is a woman as her name and title indicate (Μεγίστης ἱερίσης).²³ Moreover, the bones found in the ossuary were identified as those of a woman.²⁴

The title priestess should probably be translated into Hebrew as נהנת, the wife or daughter of a priest: אשת כהן, בת כהן. Women bore other titles — such as ἀρχισυναγωγίσσα, πρεσβυτέρα or μήτηρ

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *John* 19.25, if punctuated correctly, does not yield, as some think, Mary sister of Mary.

²² For a suggestion that Salome was a Hebrew name whereas Salamzion was Aramaic, and that they are therefore distinct from each other, see G. Meyer, *Die jüdische Frau in der hellenistisch-römischen Antike* (Stuttgart-Berlin-Köln-Mainz 1987), 107, 110.

²³ Megiste is a Greek feminine name (*e.g.*, Athenaeus 13.583e). For the form ἱερίσα see two other priestesses mentioned in this article: Frey *CIJ* I, 315; II, 1514.

²⁴ G. Avni, personal communication, based on the unpublished anthropological report of J. Zias.

συναγωγῆς — which are mentioned in their burial inscriptions. Bernadette Brooten, in her study of such titles, argued persuasively that women who bore them could have served in official positions.²⁵ She was wrong, however, to include in this general conclusion the title of priestess, which is fundamentally different. For whereas all the other titles were acquired by their bearers, both men and women, by virtue of their public activity and recognition, a Jew could be a priest only if he was born one. No one could become a priest, no matter how good a Jew he was,²⁶ just as no priest could cease to be one, no matter how badly he behaved.²⁷ Since a man could not become a priest or lose his priesthood, neither could a woman. The title priestess from the halakhic point of view entailed specific privileges and duties. The position of a priest's daughter with relation to her father is already discussed in the Bible (*Lev.* 22:12-13). As long as she lived under his roof, she was considered part of his household and was thus allowed to partake of some of the holy gifts her father received. When she married she lost this unique position unless she married another priest. She regained her privileges if she was widowed or divorced without progeny. The Rabbis further interpreted Scripture to mean that any woman who married a priest became a member of his household (*M.Terumot* 6.2). Elsewhere in Rabbinic literature such a woman is designated כהנת (priestess, e.g., *M.Sotah* 4.8).

After the destruction of the Temple the title priest, for men as well as for women, became no more than an honorary designation. But there is no clear evidence that even when the Temple was still func-

²⁵ Bernadette Brooten, *Women Leaders in the Ancient Synagogues* (Chico, CA 1982), 73-99.

²⁶ See, for example, the gentile who wished to be proselytized for the purpose of becoming high priest — *bShabbat* 31a and Hillel and Shamai's essentially similar answers to him.

²⁷ See, for example, the family of Bilga, who became Hellenized during the Hasmonean revolt (e.g., *T.Sukkah* 4.28), but remained priests, e.g., *Jos.*, *BJ* 6.280. See also the discussion in *M.Sotah* 4.8. On the subject of the stress on descent as opposed to its rejection see D.R. Schwartz, "On Two Aspects of a Priestly View of Descent at Qumran", in: *Archaeology and History in the Dead Sea Scrolls. New York University Conference in Memory of Yigael Yadin*, ed. L.H. Schiffman (Sheffield 1990), 157-197, and see particularly 157-158, 165-168.

tioning, men called כֹּהֵן or “priest” in their burial inscription actually served in any official function as priest. The same would thus also be true *a fortiori* for women.

Brooten discussed three specific women who bore the title priestess. The women are Marin of Leontopolis (Μαρίν ἱέρισα), Maria of Palmyra buried in Beth She‘arim (ἱηρείας κατὰ Μα(ε)ίης) and Gaudentia of Monteverde in Rome (Γαυδεντία ἱέρισα). She claimed that these women, as Diaspora Jews living in peripheral Jewish communities, did function in some form or another as priestesses. But this view is not supported even by what seems at first sight to be a unique case, that of Marin, who was buried in Tel el-Yehoudieh in Egypt,²⁸ the cemetery of the Jewish community centered around the Egyptian Jewish temple of Onias in Leontopolis. For there is no basis for Brooten’s assumption that the temple of Onias was sectarian and did not conform to the Jewish cult in Jerusalem, and that, therefore, it also allowed women to officiate in it. On the contrary, the temple was founded by a member of the official high-priestly dynasty in Jerusalem and is mentioned in the Mishnah as similar in some aspects to the Temple in Jerusalem (*M. Menahot* 13.10). As for the two other women mentioned as priestesses in inscriptions from Beth Shearim and Rome, there is no reason to accept that their post-destruction date implies that these women performed honorary functions in the synagogue. Their title expresses only an exalted descent, like the title priest for most men.

The discovery of Megiste of Jerusalem of the Second Temple period undermines Brooten’s theory equating the title priestess with a religious function. This theory was based solely on the evidence of priestess inscriptions which are either post-70 or from the Diaspora, or both, and assumed that such priestesses were not to be found in Jerusalem before 70 C.E. Yet Megiste lived in Jerusalem while the Temple stood. She confirms the conservative yet correct view that this title was borne either by a priest’s daughter or by a priest’s wife.

Jerusalem

²⁸ Frey, *CIJ* 1514.