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ABSTRACT
During excavations in the areas of the Judaean Desert where the Bar Kokhba revolt took place from 132 to 135 CE, fifteen letters were discovered together with several legal documents and two personal archives in the “Cave of Letters”, as the site was named after the findings. All sets of documents show evidence of multilingualism, consisting of items in Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek. Especially one of the only two letters written in Greek has sparked particular interest among the scholars due to a sentence of justification for the use of Greek, although severe damages affect the papyrus and only partial conclusions can be reached.

KEYWORDS
Judaean Desert, Jewish uprising, Multilingualism, Bar Kokhba.

The aim of this paper is to present some observations on the extent of attested multilingualism in 2nd-century Judaea. In the early 1960s the Israel Exploration Society promoted four expeditions to the south-eastern part of Judaea, which systematically explored the area close to the Dead Sea. Here, a few kilometers from the oasis of En Gedi, archaeologists found the caves where the Jewish rebels had taken refuge during the second revolt against the Roman Empire (132-135 CE). Several objects, coins and pieces of clothing were discovered together with documents, including two relatively well-preserved personal archives, a sheaf of fifteen letters and various other fragments. The main archive belonged to a Jewish woman called Babatha, who lived in Maoza, a village in the neighboring province of Arabia, certainly up to 130 CE. Subsequently she moved to En Gedi, where she had some family connections. Whether she set out for the caves with all her documents to support the rebels or out of fear of some threat of reprisal against Jews, it is impossible to know. On the other hand, we are sure that the letters consist of exchanges of messages between the rebels distributed among probably up to three camps, during the years of the revolt. Both sets of documents show evidence of multilingualism: of the thirty-six items in Babatha's archive, twenty-six are written in Greek and the few others in Nabatean and in Aramaic, while the correspondence between associates in the revolt, the so-called “Bar Kokhba letters” after the name of the rebel leader, are written mainly in Aramaic, but also in Hebrew and Greek. I shall return later to this last category.
The coexistence of Greek, Aramaic, Nabatean and Hebrew is not surprising. Greek was the language of administration both in Judaea and in the recently-created province of Arabia, and was commonly used for official transactions, contracts and deeds. It is also probable that a basic familiarity with Greek was widespread and it may even have been a fundamental component of the paideia for more highly-educated élites. Aramaic was the first language of Jewish residents of the region, once it had become an essential means of communication under Persian rule, and Nabatean was a separate dialect of Aramaic used by Arab residents. The case of Hebrew is somewhat different, since scholars acknowledge that it was hardly ever spoken any more. However, the presence of Hebrew in the Bar Kokhba letters suggests that it may possibly have been deliberately used for explicitly ideological reasons during the revolt. As already indicated, the letters represented direct communications between the rebels, in other words primarily Jews fighting against the Roman Empire and his policies. The question then arises as to why Greek was chosen within such a nationalistic context.

Although the matter is undoubtedly complex, some conclusions may be reached. In particular one of only two letters in Greek, P.Yadin 52, has been the subject of considerable attention ever since its discovery. Apparently it is merely a message asking for palm fronds and citrons needed to arrange celebrations for the feast of the Tabernacles, but it contains a phrase justifying the use of Greek (ll. 11-14), thus indicating that the addressees would have found it unexpected.

The text is reproduced below with an English translation.

Some interesting points about the letter P Yadin 52:

1. It is written in Greek, which is unusual for the Bar Kokhba era.
2. It is a message asking for palm fronds and citrons needed for celebrations for the feast of the Tabernacles.
3. The message contains a phrase justifying the use of Greek, which might suggest an ideological context.
4. The letter is one of only two letters in Greek from the Bar Kokhba era.

The text is reproduced below with an English translation.

**Greek Text**

Ϲουμμαίος ἰοναθῆ 
... νου καὶ Μα-
[...]αβάλα[ι] χαίρειν. 
ἐπὶ δὲ ἐπεμμα πρὸς
5 μὴς Λ[γ]ρίππαν επυ-
δι[ας]τε πέμις μοι 
[...]ρο[ν][ς] καὶ κίτρια 
δὲν δυνασθήσεται 
[i] [π]αριμβολην ιου-
10 [δ][α]λον καὶ µὴ ἄλλως 
πο[ν]ησται. ἐγράφη 
δὲ Ἐλληνετι διὰ 
τὸ ἡ[μ]ῆς ἡ ἐφη-
[κ][ε]ναι Ἐβραετι.
15 [π] διὰςται ἀτὸν 
ἀπ[ο]λος τάχιον 
[δ][α]ς τὴν εορτὴν 
καὶ η[ν] ἄλλως ποιη-
10 [ε]ται.

**English Translation**

... and to Ma-
obaballa and rejoice. 
and to them:
5 to L[γ]rippus be still 
and my citrons and 
will not be possible 
it [π]arimbole Iou-
10 and [δ][α]los and not others 
pay attention. It was written 
and to the Greek 
and her wedding 
[κ][ε]nto the Greek.
15 that he 
the prodigy 
and the festival 
and the others did.

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Transl.: Soumaios to Yehonathan / son of Ba'yan, and Ma-/sabala, greetings. As I sent Agrippa to /you, hurry / to send me / palm fronds and citrons, / as much as you can, / to the camp of the Jews / and don’t do / otherwise. This was written / in Greek because / there is no way of writing / in Hebrew (Aramaic?).\textsuperscript{11} / Make sure you / release him as soon as possible / on account of the feast / and don’t do otherwise. / Soumaios. / Be well!

Thanks to the contributions of H.M. Cotton, in recent years the text has reached an overall convincing sense even though some controversial issues are still to be restored, such as the question of the identity of the sender, Soumaios. In fact, his name occurs nowhere else in the letters and it has been postulated that he could have been a Jew called Šimon, whose name appears here in a Greek rendition, but no other cases of such transliteration are known. On the other hand, the name Soumaios appears among the signatories of another document from the Judaean Desert, this time in a Nabatean context.\textsuperscript{12}

I shall now attempt to define and analyze the two main possibilities.

The first one points to a non-Jewish background, an opinion shared by several scholars for different reasons. In the first place, Yadin (1971: 130) believes that this person was a Gentile, given the choice of Greek over Semitic languages, either Aramaic or Hebrew, which might have been foreign to him. Moreover, in his view the expression camp of the Jews (II. 9-10) would imply a sort of cultural distancing. Cotton (2002: 361) suggests instead that Soumaios was Nabatean, thus linking him to his namesake among the Nabatean signatories of the document referred to above. Soumaios would probably have been able to speak Aramaic but for letter-writing he would perhaps be competent only in Greek, if he had been trained for administrative employment, and also perhaps in his own language, which however used a different alphabet from the Jewish script. In this interpretation the sender, who is making his contribution for the cause, apologizes for the use of the language of the Romans, being unable to do otherwise due to his background. Furthermore, if one then attributes non-Jewish identities to Soumaios as well as to the bearer Agrippa (I. 5) and to Ailianos, sender of the other Greek letter (P.Yadin 59), this would mean implying evidence of a relevant non-Jewish participation in the uprising aimed at ending Roman rule, each of the groups having different reasons for joining.\textsuperscript{13}

A second possibility has most recently been revisited by M.O. Wise (2015: 206ff), who tends to regard Soumaios as a Jew, who is asking for materials in preparation of a Jewish feast during a Jewish rebellion, instead of postulating a Nabatean involved in these preparations and having some degree of responsibility. From this perspective, no ideological implications would be attached to Greek, which would be merely a means of communication for practical purposes: Soumaios may have felt it necessary to justify his choice as against Bar Kokhba’s decree on
Hebrew, because he may have employed a scribe with professional knowledge of Greek letter-writing. The Judaean scribes were not necessarily trained in Aramaic before they studied Greek writing, so they may even have been nearly illiterate in Semitic languages. Without considering it as a definite sign of hellenization in the area, some knowledge of Greek at different levels among Jewish population should be also assumed, since the need to use the language for professional and/or administrative purposes and in the case of inevitable contacts with neighboring regions. This seems to be confirmed by the letters themselves, the recipients or bearers of which must have had a perfect understanding of the message.

In conclusion, there is little that can be asserted with absolute certainty. The lack of supporting literary sources makes historical reconstruction extremely difficult, as does the fragmentary state of preservation of the documentary evidence. Over many decades perhaps excessive focus has been placed on tiny clues, expanding them to become a springboard for discussion on wider topics. Nonetheless, the great interest this eighteen centuries-old treasure trove still arises remains undeniable.

Essential bibliography


Notes

1. The communication presented in occasion of the 2nd International Forum for Young Researchers at the University of Cyprus originates from my BA thesis in Papyrology. To my supervisor, late professor John W.R. Lundon, who guided me with both rigor and politeness, I owe a never-ending debt of gratitude for his invaluable teaching. However, I take full responsibility for the contents expressed here.

2. Better known are the so-called “Cave of Letters” and “Cave of Horrors”, named after the major findings in them, respectively papyrus letters and human skeletons. An informative and engaging report on the expeditions written by Yigael Yadin was later published (1971).

3. The question concerning the use of Hebrew as a spoken language at that time is vexed. During the post-exilic phase of Jewish history, Aramaic language was believed to have gradually replaced Hebrew as vernacular, even though Hebrew undoubtedly continued to be the language of worship and religious literature. The discovery in the 1960s of documentary letters written in Hebrew eventually reopened the discussion, suggesting either that it never completely ceased to be spoken or that a revival of the language took place for some specific reason.

4. As Yadin early pointed out (1971: 124), it is possible that Bar Kokhba issued a decree to revive Hebrew during the years of the revolt, with a view to restoring the language of the Jews before the Persian domination.

5. Unlike the first Jewish war against Rome (66-70 CE), of which Flavius Josephus gives full report, this second uprising lacks of extensive literary sources. However, partials accounts are offered by Cassius Dio (Hist. Rom. 69, 12.1-14.3) and Eusebius (Hist. Eccl. 4, 6) in addition to some Jewish sources (jTa’an 4.68d-69b; Lam r. 2, 4).
6. The other letter, P.Yadin 59, is consistently damaged and it barely allows understanding that, like P.Yadin 52, it contained requests of certain materials to the recipients. Again the sender’s name, Αἰλιανός, is not Jewish but appears to be a Latin loanword transliterated into Greek. This has sometimes lead to consider him a non-Jew, but guessing origins on the basis of a personal name remains a risky operation. Certainly noteworthy is anyhow the sole occurrence this text offers of the Greek vocalized form of patronymic of Bar Kokhba, Κωγίβα.

7. This revised text differs slightly from the most recent publication by H.M. Cotton (Yadin et al. 2002: 354).

8. Unfortunately ll. 12-14 are affected by a major three-line lacuna in the papyrus, which has given rise to various speculations and interpretations. Nevertheless, since Cotton’s integration of the verb εὑρηκ[έ]ναι is generally acknowledged to be persuasive, I see no need to list the others here.

9. This possibility was suggested to me by professor Lundon.

10. The letter substantially adheres to the conventions of Graeco-Roman epistolography, except for the presence of the sender’s name repeated at the bottom, a usage which is barely attested elsewhere in the tradition, although recurrent in the Semitic letters from the same set. On the other hand, it has been illustrated (cf. Wise 2015: 210) that these latter differed in terms of formal patterns (i.e. opening formulas) from earlier Semitic practice, thus suggesting a Greek influence upon them.

11. The adverb Ἑβραετί is well-known in Jewish literature meaning both Hebrew and Jewish Aramaic, as the latter remained the only language still widely spoken (a hypothetic «aramaïsti» does not exist). It is difficult to decide how to translate it without first solving other textual issues.
12. P.Yadin 19, a legal act created in Petra (l. 34). This Soumaios is the only Nabatean witness to sign in Greek.

13. It is not clear what specific reasons lead non-Jewish groups to join the revolt. There could be either members of the lower-classes seeking an improvement of their condition by overthrowing local aristocracy, or Nabateans participating to express their discontent with Roman rule, or even rebels looking for profit, as a difficult passage by Cassius Dio may suggest (Hist. Aug. LXIX 12, 2).

14. It should be recalled that P.Yadin 52 presents two distinct hands, the first one being the author of the main text and the second one being the signatory, who repeats the sender’s name followed by the farewell. The reasons why a writer may have used Greek even if he was Nabatean or Jew have been briefly discussed above. Whether the sender then signed in Greek due to illiteracy in Aramaic (either because he was Nabatean or Jew) or simply knowledge of the language of the main text still cannot be determined.