

# COMMENTS ON MARGARET BARKER'S PRESENTATION

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I thank Margaret Barker for her challenging and stimulating presentation. My comments will be divided in two sections: the question of authenticity and the question of methodology.

## Part A

### The Question of Authenticity

The Jordanian lead artifacts first surfaced around 2010 in Israel. They are controversial because they are nonprovenanced, that is, they did not originate in an academically controlled excavation. This justifiably raises the suspicion of forgery. This understandable suspicion unfortunately generated various false claims in the press, which were even spread by many scholars; for example, that the Jordanian lead artifacts had no precedent. An example of a precedent is a lead “magical book,” dated approximately fourth or fifth century CE, in the National Roman Museum here in Italy. The text seems basically nonsensical.

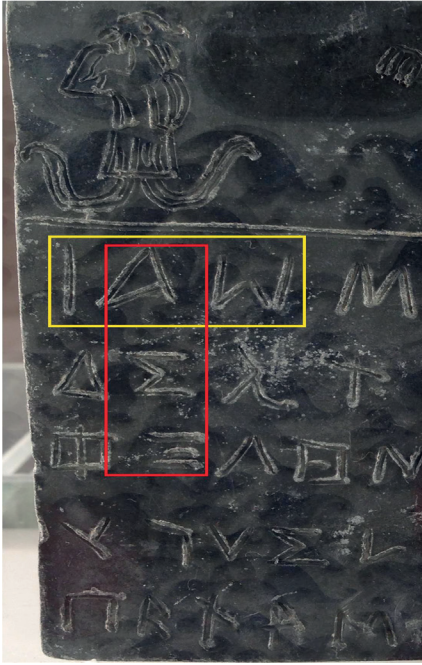
This Gnostic lead book's mostly nonsensical text contains, however, some brief sensible encryptions—again, like the Jordanian lead artifacts. In the Gnostic lead book beneath a serpentine image of Abrasax (more commonly known in the corrupted spelling Abraxas), we see (fig. 2) his title IAŌ, a Greek version of the tetragrammaton placed horizontally (long ago identified in the literature<sup>1</sup>), with an overlapping vertical abbreviation of the name Abrasax, namely, *alpha-sigma-xi* (identified by Zinner).



*Fig. 1. "Magical book formed of seven pages enclosed by a cover with a veiled woman's head and a bearded man." Ca. 4<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> cent. CE. The text seems basically nonsensical. Baths of Diocletian, Epigraphic Museum. Courtesy Ryan Baumann. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages\\_of\\_the\\_Roman\\_Empire#/media/File:Magical\\_book\\_Kircherian\\_Terne.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages_of_the_Roman_Empire#/media/File:Magical_book_Kircherian_Terne.jpg).*

The Jordanian metal artifacts were often ridiculed as “obvious fakes.” For example, scholars of influence at SBL and other learned societies mocked figure 3’s crocodile on a copper tablet as obviously produced by a modern plastic child’s toy. Looking through my library, it took me five minutes to discover that this crocodile image, regardless of when it may have been created on the copper tablet, had been produced by an object that closely resembles an ancient type of Roman bronze crocodile brooch.

Anyone can scratch or engrave writing into the surface of ancient corroded lead. This would remove the corrosion of the affected areas, which would then be covered by artificial patina to conceal the hoax of the added text. The artificial nature of the patina and the recent date of the incisions would be immediately revealed by any professional scientific lab analysis.

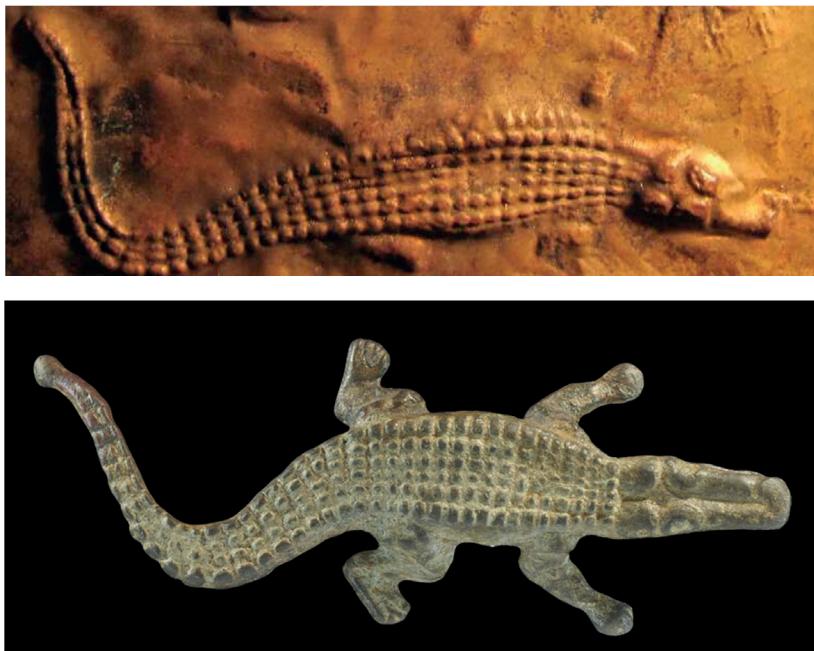


*Fig. 2. Detail from "Magical book formed of seven pages enclosed by a cover with a veiled woman's head and a bearded man." Ca. 4<sup>th</sup>–5<sup>th</sup> cent. CE. The text seems basically nonsensical. Horizontal rectangle: IAŌ, a Greek version of the tetragrammaton. Vertical rectangle: abbreviation of the name Abrasax, namely, alpha-sigma-xi. Baths of Diocletian, Epigraphic Museum. Courtesy Ryan Baumann.*

Adding raised content (which is what we have on the Jordanian lead books) to ancient corroded lead is an entirely different affair. Any attempt to add raised text or images to ancient lead would result in the immediate loss of the surface patina and corrosion, and the images would transfer only very unclearly and would look blurry on the surface of the now relatively clean metal. This is because the oxides of the corrosion would prevent a clear transfer of the imagery. There are thus two insuperable challenges to adding modern raised images to ancient corroded lead. First is how to retain the corrosion and patina in the image transfer attempt. Second is how to make the transferred images look as crisp and clear as the images on the Jordanian lead books. There is no known method to achieve either of

these objectives, not in the textbooks and not in the knowledge of metalworkers.

Close to a dozen lab tests have determined that at least some of the lead books' metal lacked alpha particle emissions at 5.3 MeV (megaelectron volts), a state that requires the passage of at least two hundred years after the production of lead, which would coincide with the time the texts and images were created.



*Fig. 3. Above: Jordanian Copper Artifact. Image courtesy of the Centre for the Study of the Jordanian Lead Books. Below: Roman Bronze Crocodile Brooch, ca. 2<sup>nd</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> cent. CE, 64.5 mm. Image from [timelineauctions.com/lot/bronze-crocodile-brooch/8317](https://www.timelineauctions.com/lot/bronze-crocodile-brooch/8317).*

## Part B

### Methodology: Control Source for Identifying Geometric Letter Encryptions

Although I date the Jordanian lead artifacts to the immediate post-Second Temple period and beyond (possibly even into the High Middle Ages?), I find Margaret Barker’s interpretation of a First Temple setting congruent at least with the possibility that some Second Temple traditions may hark back to First Temple times. As an Islamic tradition says, “The diversity of opinions of scholars is a blessing (a mercy).”

Margaret Barker mentioned my discovery of triangular encryptions in the Jordanian artifacts. I should explain this as follows. André Lemaire (of the Sorbonne University in Paris) and I

both independently identified the Jordanian lead “books” as being based on the coinage of the First Jewish War (66–73 CE) and the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132–35 CE), whose inscriptions were in Paleo-Hebrew, like those of the Jordanian lead books. The lead books echo coinage slogans like “For the redemption/freedom of Israel,” the name “Shimon” (bar Kokhba), etc.

Also included are slogans from Hasmonean coinage. Imagery from Greco-Roman coinage also appears throughout the lead books, such as that of a female nymph, which was widely and in a sensationalistic way misidentified in the popular press as the face of Jesus. The inclusion of coin imagery is congruent with the Jordanian artifacts functioning as Jewish amulets, perhaps as burial objects for soldiers who fell in the Bar Kokhba Revolt, like the more well-known Orphic gold tablets.

My findings were in general accepted by Philip R. Davies (Sheffield), Bernhard Lang (Paderborn/Aarhus), Charles Häberl (Rutgers), John Sawyer (Durham), Robert Gordon (Cambridge), and Alan Millard (Rankin Professor Emeritus of Hebrew and Ancient Semitic Languages, and Honorary Senior Fellow [Ancient Near East] at the School of Archaeology, Classics and Egyptology in the University of Liverpool).

David Hendin argued independently of me that Bar Kokhba coins abbreviate the name Shimon in order to create a link with the Shema ‘Yisrael’s first word, *shema* ‘ (“Hear!” from Deuteronomy 4:6, “Hear Oh Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one”), and that some of the bizarre spellings on Bar Kokhba coins are not sloppy accidents but intentional esoteric configurations.<sup>2</sup> The Bar Kokhba coins contain triangular arrangements of text, as in figure 4’s



Fig. 4. Above: Théodore Reinach, *Jewish Coins*, Plate VIII Bar Kokhba Coin.

Below: E. Rogers, *A Handy Guide to Jewish Coins*, Plate VI.

abbreviation (fig. 4 left) of the name Shimon, simultaneously intentionally evoking, because coinciding with, the word *shemá*, “hear!” figure 4’s right two images show two examples of bizarre spelling on Bar Kokhba coinage, congruent with what we find throughout the Jordanian metal artifacts.

Hendin overlooked that strange arrangements of letters on Bar Kokhba coins could bring to mind traditions that link the origins of Jewish letter mysticism involving letter permutations to Rabbis Akiva and Shimon bar Yochai. The Bar Kokhba coins and the Jordanian lead artifacts may conceivably offer evidence for a kernel of historical truth behind these traditional Jewish claims.

Now in figure 5 we get to the Jordanian lead artifacts. Here we see three consecutive triangular patterns identified with triangles that form the words “Shimon,” “Israel,” and “redemption” (*geulat*, spelled defectively, lacking *’alef*), echoing the Bar Kokhba coin slogan “For the redemption of Israel,” *Le-geulat Yisrael*. Another defective spelling of *redemption* is in the box on the right, while the box on the left contains a full spelling of *geulat*, and both in reverse reading direction.

The two artifacts Margaret Barker discussed are from designs discovered in the two Jordanian cities Karak and Shobak. This is noteworthy: the two cities are linked historically. The Shobak

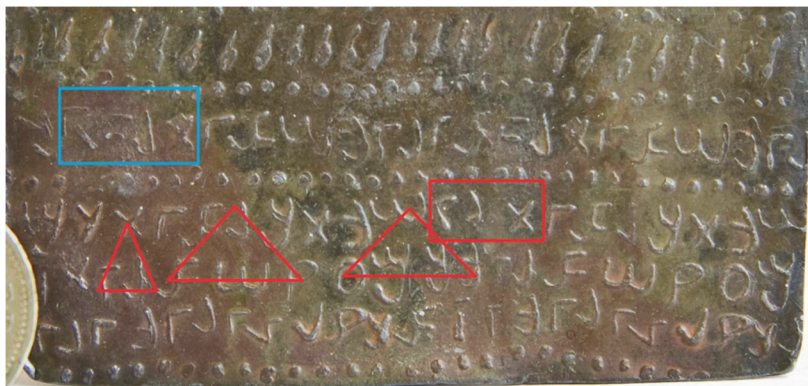


Fig. 5. Jordanian Lead Book. Triangles: three consecutive triangular patterns that form the words “Shimon,” “Israel,” and “redemption.” Right box: another defective spelling of redemption. Left box: a full spelling of *geulat*. Courtesy John Stuart Reid.



Fig. 6. *Jordanian Lead Book*. Right oval: the letters שבתן, a defective spelling of שבתון. Left oval: מבוא, “entrance,” “onset,” producing “entrance/beginning of the Sabbath.” Lower rectangle: “my people.” Image courtesy the Centre for the Study of the Jordanian Lead Books.

crusader castle, built by Baldwin I of Jerusalem in 1115 CE, was the site of royal power until 1142, when the leadership relocated to Karak’s strategically superior castle. From Karak, one enjoys a view of the Dead Sea.

The Jordanian lead book’s Bee image (inspired by the famous Ephesus bee coinage) contains a relatively straightforward text. At the top of the design are two words that flank a bee along the wings. Each of these two words read from the bottom up; in the right oval are the letters שבתן, a defective spelling of שבתון, from the Torah phrase שבתון שבת (roughly, “Sabbath of Sabbaths”), and in the left oval

is מבוא, “entrance,” “onset,” producing “entrance/beginning of the Sabbath.” At the bottom is “my people.” In the Torah, the phrase שבתון שבת is found only in Exodus and Leviticus, the only two books of the Torah in which God addresses Israel as “my people.”

As figure 7 shows, the Jordanian Menorah lead artifact, here shown in a gold exemplar, echoes a coin text from the First Jewish Revolt, specifically the phrase “Year 3/Gimmel” over a chalice, and “holy” from the phrase “Jerusalem the Holy.”

Surely, these two Jordanian tablets’ straightforward texts conceal more meanings of an encrypted sort, of the general type Margaret discussed. In my published study on these artifacts, I tried to identify only those encryptions that I found congruent with the controls offered by the Bar Kokhba and other coinages in order to avoid possible random patterns. It would be helpful if more scholars engaged with these difficult texts to advance our state of

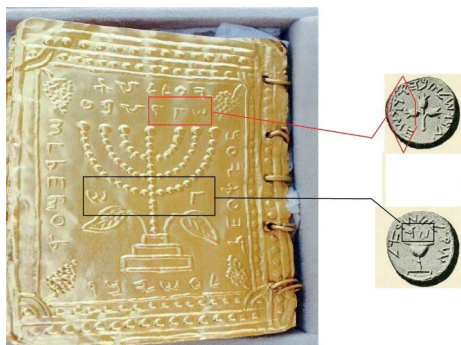


Fig. 7. Jordanian Gold Book and First Jewish Revolt Coin, Year 3. Image courtesy the Centre for the Study of the Jordanian Lead Books.



Fig. 8. Jordanian Lead Design, composite. Image courtesy the Centre for the Study of the Jordanian Lead Books.

knowledge. Unfortunately, scholars are reluctant to do this, for understandable reasons (above all, their nonprovenanced status).

Figure 7's chalice with the letters *shin-gimmel* (= year three) above it is paralleled in the Jordanian artifact in figure 8, where, however, the *shin* alone is retained in order to form a triangle of the letters *shin-mem-ayin*, an abbreviation of "Shimon" that again evokes the Shema Yisrael. However, directly in the middle of the text beneath are the final two letters of the name Shimon, *waw-nun*. In my study, I presented evidence that the Jordanian artifacts reinterpret the coinage's *shin-gimmel*, "year three," in the more profound sense "Shimon, *Geulat*," "Shimon, Redemption." This hints at Shimon bar Kokhba as a messianic redemptive figure. The chalice in figure 8, like the one on the Bar Kokhba coin, is that of the measure of the *omer*, which harks back to the First Temple era.

### Conclusion

Perhaps after a generation has passed more scholars will take a second look at the case of the Jordanian lead artifacts in a more dispassionate light. Nonprovenanced items initially dismissed as "obvious" forgeries sometimes turn out to be authentic. This may prove to be the case with these enigmatic metal artifacts from Jordan. In the end, they may turn out to supply a missing link in the history



of Jewish mysticism, some of whose ultimate roots in much earlier forms may reach back to the First Temple era.

I commend Margaret Barker for her tireless efforts to promote interest in and to cultivate scholarship on the Jordanian metal artifacts, and I thank her again for her engaging presentation.

### Notes

1. Ryan Baumann, "A Curious Metal Codex in the Baths of Diocletian," Ryan Baumann (blog), 10 February 2015, accessed 20 January 2017.
2. David Hendin, "On the Identity of Eleazar the Priest," *Israel Numismatic Journal* 18 (2014): 155–67.