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The Paleo-Hebrew Script in Achaemenid, Hellenistic and Early Roman Jewish Coinage

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Abstract

Despite the dominance of the square Aramaic script in most contexts, Jewish minting authorities almost exclusively used the Paleo-Hebrew script for Hebrew and Aramaic coin legends from the Achaemenid period until the Bar Kokhba Revolt. This paper reconsiders the dominant interpretation of the script as a 'nationalistic' reflection of an assertive Judean identity and an archaizing gesture designed to evoke the First Temple period, arguing instead that a more complex combination of factors contributed to its use. The paper begins by analysing the iconography of Jewish issues during this period, which drew heavily on Hellenistic, Phoenician, Roman procuratorial, and other local artistic traditions, and arguing that a purely 'nationalistic' understanding of the coins' Paleo-Hebrew legends consequently presents interpretative problems. I then suggest that a nationalistic interpretation is also complicated by the Paleo-Hebrew script's close similarity to the Phoenician script, which was widely used in Phoenician municipal coinage (particularly during the Achaemenid and Hellenistic periods). The paper then proposes new explanations for the script's adoption. Firstly, I suggest that, during the Achaemenid, Ptolemaic, and Hasmonian periods the Paleo-Hebrew script was partly selected precisely for its similarity to Phoenician. As such, during these periods, it not only reflected a local identity, but also engagement with regional commercial and cultural networks. Secondly, I propose that the script's adoption by rebel authorities during the Jewish Revolt did not only communicate pride in Jewish history, but also the need for the rebel administrations to project authority and legitimacy by using conventional designs.

Keywords: Paleo-Hebrew; Numismatics; Palaeography; Yehud Coinage; Phoenician Coinage

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1. Introduction

The Paleo-Hebrew script¹, which evolved from the Phoenician script in the early first millennium BCE, was the dominant writing system for Hebrew texts produced between the mid-9th and early 6th centuries BCE.² Following the destruction of the First Jewish Temple in 587 BCE and the subsequent widespread use of Aramaic in the Achaemenid imperial administration, the script was gradually replaced by a version of the square Aramaic script which became the preferred script for the majority of Hebrew texts and inscriptions.³

Despite this, from the Achaemenid period until the Bar Kokhba Revolt Jewish minting authorities almost exclusively used the Paleo-Hebrew script for Hebrew and Aramaic coin legends. Scholars have proposed numerous reasons for this, with most arguing that the script embodied a nationalistic approach which associated the minting authorities with the Davidic monarchy and/or the priestly class. This paper re-examines this phenomenon by situating Jewish coinage within a broader regional context. Ultimately, by re-examining the coins' relationship to Phoenician municipal coinage and reconsidering the development of Judean coin designs, it concludes that the Paleo-Hebrew script was also used to signal Judea's participation in broader cultural networks and communicate the legitimacy of the coins (and their minting authorities) by consciously adopting similar designs to major regional mints.

2. The Coins

From the late 5th and early 4th centuries BCE, coinage was minted by the Province (מדינתא) of Judea (Aramaic: *Yehud*⁴), a small section of the Achaemenid Empire's vast Trans-Euphrates

¹ Some scholars have suggested alternative terms for the script: Birnbaum, for instance, used 'Neo-Palaeo-Hebrew'—see Birnbaum 1971. The later square script also has a variety of names, including the 'Jewish script', the 'square script' or, in Rabbinic literature, the כתב אשורית (see, for instance, B. Sanhedrin 21b). Again, for the sake of consistency, this will be called the 'square Aramaic script' or simply the 'Aramaic script' in this study.

² Naveh 1982, 65–78

³ For more on this transition, see Naveh 1982, 111–24; Mizrahi 2017. For the subsequent dominance of the Aramaic script, see Cross 1967; Naveh 1982, 112–25; Zissu and Abadi 2014.

⁴ Here, I am using common Anglophone transliterations of the Aramaic and Hebrew names for the province (these may alternatively be rendered YHWD and YHDH respectively).

Satrapy.⁵ The coinage emerged during a period of prolonged instability on the Empire's southern flank precipitated by rebellion in Egypt and dynastic upheaval, during which Judea became an important and heavily fortified strategic node.⁶ These coins continued to be minted following Alexander the Great's conquest of the Achaemenid Empire in the 330s BCE, first under the Macedonian Empire itself and subsequently under the Ptolemaic dynasty. Minting ceased in the mid-3rd century, though precisely when (and why) this happened is unclear.

While the iconography of these coins is varied and represents a curious *mélange* of influences from Phoenician, Achaemenid, Greek, and local art, their legends are relatively stable, with the vast majority featuring only the name of the province in Aramaic (*Yehud*) or Hebrew (*Yehudah*).⁷ These legends are almost always transcribed exclusively in the Paleo-Hebrew script.⁸

After the *Yehud* coins were discontinued, no new Judean coins were minted until the reign of the Hasmonean High Priest John Hyrcanus I (134–104 BCE) over a century later. These coins continued under his successors Judah Aristobulus I (104–103 BCE) and Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 BCE). Neither Alexander Jannaeus' successor Salome Alexandra (76–67 BCE) nor her sons Hyrcanus II (67–66 BCE) and Aristobulus II (66–63 BCE) minted new coin types, though new Hasmonean coins did appear again during the brief reign of Antigonus II Mattathias (40–37 BCE).⁹

⁵ Scholars are divided as to whether Judea was an independent administrative unit from the beginning of the Achaemenid period, or only from the arrival of Nehemiah in the mid-5th century (before which it would have been part of Samaria). The balance of probability now favours an earlier date, not least because of the presence of early Achaemenid seal impressions with the name 'Yehud': see Williamson 1988; Hoglund 1992 69–86; Grabbe 2004 140–42; Hensel 2016 221–26.

⁶ Fantalkin and Tal 2006; Gitler et al. 2023, 7–14. See also Fantalkin and Tal 2012a; Fantalkin and Tal 2012b.

⁷ A small number of types are marked with the names of local officials, including 'Hezekiah' (Hendin 6063–6065, 6069) who evidently served as governor of the region, and 'Yohanan the Priest' (Hendin 6071).

⁸ A notable exception is an Achaemenid-era coin type (Hendin 4048) which bore the legend "AΘ" ("Ath"; in imitation of Athenian tetradrachms) alongside a Paleo-Hebrew yod. For the iconography of the coins, see Wyssmann 2014; Gitler et al. 2023, 125–87.

⁹ Rappaport 1976; Meshorer 2001, 50; Rappaport 2014, 155; Hendin 2021, 139–43.

Paleo-Hebrew was used in almost all known Hasmonean coin types.¹⁰ Alexander Jannaeus and Antigonus II Mattathias also produced coins with joint Paleo-Hebrew and Greek legends.¹¹ In all cases, the Paleo-Hebrew legends mention the name and priestly title of the ruler, with some issues also referring to the ‘Community of the Jews’ (*Hever Ha-Yehudim*).¹²

After the Hasmonean dynasty was deposed by the Romans, coins continued to be minted by the Herodian dynasts and Roman procurators, who exclusively used Greek legends. The Paleo-Hebrew script appeared again, however, on all known coin types minted by the rebel authorities during the First Jewish Revolt (66–70 CE) and, later, the Bar Kokhba Revolt (132–136 CE).¹³ In these coins, the script was used for simple legends emphasising themes of liberty, sanctity, and (in the case of the Bar Kokhba Revolt) the authority of Simon bar Kokhba.

3. Explanations

3.1 Nationalism

In his landmark study of West Semitic epigraphy, Joseph Naveh argued that the Paleo-Hebrew script was used on Jewish coins as part of a “nationalistic” cultural programme which evoked an idealised, ‘authentic’ Jewish past.¹⁴ This interpretation has underpinned much subsequent scholarship on Second Temple Jewish coinage. Studies of Paleo-Hebrew in Achaemenid and Ptolemaic provincial issues, for instance, have described the script as “a graphic show of nationalistic pride and religious tradition”.¹⁵ Similarly, analyses of Hasmonean coinage have treated the script as one element of a broader, state-sponsored nationalistic movement that emphasised an authentically Jewish, pre-Hellenistic past, as exemplified by contemporary

¹⁰ Two strange, but evidently widely produced, types were produced with legends in the Aramaic Script in 80/79 BCE (Hendin 6191 and 6192). Hendin has speculated that these coins were produced as part of a gift-giving campaign designed to improve Alexander Jannaeus’ reputation with the Pharisees: Hendin 2021, 173–74; 183. See also Naveh 1968.

¹¹ Hendin types 6184 and 6189 (for Alexander Jannaeus) and types 6197, 6198, and 6203 (for Antigonus Mattathias). In both cases, the name and title of the ruler was recorded in Paleo-Hebrew on the obverse and Greek on the reverse. See also Meshorer 2001, 37–40, 52–53.

¹² For more on the *Hever Ha-Yehudim* and its possible function, see Sperber 1965; Rappaport 1993; Rajak 2000, 54; Meshorer 2001, 31–32; Hendin 2021, 157. See also further discussion below.

¹³ For a recent, detailed description and discussion of these coins see Hendin 2021, 293–364.

¹⁴ Naveh 1982, 119

¹⁵ Hendin 2021, 77. See also: Vanderhooft 2021.

literature such as *1 Maccabees* and *Judith*.¹⁶ The script's reappearance on the coins of the First Jewish Revolt and the Bar Kokhba Revolt has likewise been read by most scholars as “nationalistic” and nostalgic.¹⁷

There are, however, reasons to believe that a more complex combination of factors is at play. Firstly, if the Paleo-Hebrew script was intended simply to convey a nationalistic message, it is striking that the accompanying iconography during the Achaemenid and Hellenistic periods was not distinctively Jewish but drawn from a shared repertoire of symbols used across the Levant and wider Eastern Mediterranean. This is especially clear in the Yehud issues, which feature Athenian-inspired owls, portraits of the Persian king, and winged lions alongside more local motifs such as lilies—which were a symbol of Jerusalem—and shofars. Hasmonean coins likewise display wreaths, cornucopias, anchors, helmets, and diadems, all borrowed from the standard Hellenistic iconographic vocabulary, alongside a scattering of more local images (including lilies and, in the brief reign of Antigonus Mattathias, menorahs). Moreover, the coins of Alexander Jannaeus and Antigonus Mattathias also include Greek legends that proclaim their royal status in Hellenistic terms, adding to the cosmopolitan, conventional appearance of the designs. To suggest that Paleo-Hebrew was used in these coins purely as a “nationalistic” assertion of cultural separatism, then, is to impose a reading inconsistent with their broader iconographic programme: instead, the blend of local and regional designs suggests that the minting authorities were precisely communicating that Judea was integrated within a larger cultural framework.

The iconography of the coins minted during the First Jewish Revolt against Rome was more distinctively local, but not clearly ‘nationalistic’. The silver sheqels minted throughout the Revolt bear a pomegranate branch—a common motif in Judean art—and a Temple vessel. The bronze *prutot* minted in the second and third years of the Revolt reproduce iconography previously used by the procurator Gratus (a vine leaf and an amphora), while the half-, quarter-, and eighth-sheqels minted in the fourth year feature images related to the harvest festival of Sukkot. None of these designs clearly signal a nationalistic or archaising aesthetic, and seem instead to be a mix of influences from preceding Roman coinage, symbols of the Temple cult,

¹⁶ Meshorer 1982, 51; Mendels 1997, 63; Carr 2011, 155; Regev 2013, 185; Schniedewind 2013, 168–69; Wise 2015, 243; Hendin 2021, 141–43; Machiela and Jones 2021, 259.

¹⁷ Goodman 2005, 165; Wise 2015, 243; Deutsch 2012, 120; Hendin 2012, 131

and motifs associated with fertility and harvests.¹⁸ While the Paleo-Hebrew script may have carried a traditional resonance, then, it is not clear that these coins sought to “hark back to a mythical distant past”.¹⁹ Indeed, if the Paleo-Hebrew script were to be read purely this way, it would (again) be incongruous with their iconography (particularly of the second and third year prutot which, as discussed above, are directly modelled on Roman issues).

Only with the Bar Kokhba Revolt does Jewish coinage prominently adopt imagery—such as depictions of the Temple—that can plausibly be read as assertively historicising and potentially ‘nationalistic’, though it is likely (as I will argue below) that the Paleo-Hebrew script communicated multiple meanings even in this context.

Furthermore, while the Paleo-Hebrew script had a local set of meanings, it was not an *exclusively* Judean writing tradition but an extremely close derivative of the Phoenician script, with which it surely remained mutually intelligible despite relatively minor variations in letter forms. In Phoenicia, the Phoenician script continued to be used in certain contexts, including on coin issues throughout the Achaemenid period and during much of the Hellenistic period despite the emerging dominance of Greek.²⁰ The script was likewise employed for longer inscriptions in various formats during these periods, both in Phoenicia proper and across the Phoenician diaspora.²¹ Paleo-Hebrew is also attested in Hellenistic inscriptions from the Samaritan sanctuary on Mount Gerizim—a cultic centre destroyed during the campaigns of John Hyrcanus in the late second century BCE—although this case is more complex, given the Samaritan claim to be the true descendants of ancient Israelites.²² In any case, the Paleo-Hebrew script would have had both local *and* broader regional associations during this period, which minting authorities would have been well aware of.

Finally, it is mistaken to suggest that the script would have necessarily evoked the First Temple period: in fact, Paleo-Hebrew was still a living script in certain contexts during this period.

¹⁸ For more on the place of this imagery in contemporary Jewish art, see Economou 2019.

¹⁹ Goodman 2005, 165.

²⁰ Bonnet 2019, 104; Seyrig 1962.

²¹ Naveh 1982, 53–64; Bonnet 2019, 105–7; Chatonnet and Hawley 2020, 380–81.

²² Magen et al. 2004. Inscriptions No. 382–388 are in the Paleo-Hebrew script, while No. 389 uses a mix of Paleo-Hebrew and Aramaic scripts. Other inscriptions (such as No. 153) also show Paleo-Hebrew influence on letter formations.

Several Qumran manuscripts, including biblical texts, were written entirely in Paleo-Hebrew, while others used it for the tetragrammaton.²³ The Paleo-Hebrew script also (rarely) appears in funerary contexts, including the well-known Abba Inscription (where it is, bizarrely, used for the Aramaic language) and various shorter epitaphs.²⁴ Perrot and Richelle have even suggested that the Paleo-Hebrew script was not used in documents for a special ideological or ritual purpose, but instead simply reflects a late phase of the historic Paleo-Hebrew scribal tradition.²⁵

3.2 Other Explanations

While the ‘nationalism’ explanation has long predominated in scholarship, several alternative interpretations have been proposed for the use of Paleo-Hebrew on Jewish coinage during this period. Some scholars have argued that the script was used in Hasmonean coinage to reflect the predominance of the Sadducees.²⁶ Similarly, Mansfield, Overcash, and Llewelyn have recently argued that the script’s appearance on the coinage of the First Jewish Revolt signalled priestly or Sadducean authority in the new revolutionary state.²⁷ This argument, which draws on broader studies that associate Paleo-Hebrew with the Sadducees, largely rests on two observations. Firstly, scholars have noted the script’s transmission was likely maintained within priestly circles, and may have been regarded as part of a specifically “priestly” or “Sadducean” aesthetic. This could perhaps explain its use in certain Qumran texts and in other contexts such as the Abba inscription.²⁸ Secondly, Mansfield *et al.* observe that the coinage of the First Jewish Revolt features some images which may be associated with Temple activity, including the Temple vessel on the obverse of the Revolt’s silver shekels and (less certainly) the pomegranate branch which some have argued is in fact a priestly staff.²⁹

There are some problems with this approach. Firstly, as Vanderhooft pointed out, associations of the script with the Sadducees are undermined by its appearance on various Samaritan inscriptions from Hellenistic Mount Gerizim.³⁰ Secondly, it is extremely difficult to justify the

²³ For a list of Paleo-Hebrew documents from Qumran, see Tov 2004, 231–32. For a list of texts using Paleo-Hebrew for the tetragrammaton, see Tov 2004, 227–29.

²⁴ Naveh 1973; Rosenthaler 1975; Barkay 1989

²⁵ Perrot and Richelle 2022.

²⁶ Tov 2004, 122–23; Hendin 2021, 143.

²⁷ Mansfield *et al.* 2017

²⁸ Diringier 1950; Naveh 1973; Tov 2004, 233–34.

²⁹ This was first argued by Robert Deutsch in a 2011 article, though the case remains uncertain; see Deutsch 2011, 362–63.

³⁰ Vanderhooft 2021, 114. For more on the Gerizim inscriptions using the script, see above note 21.

connection between the script and the Sadducees (or, indeed, the priestly elite more generally) when we consider the bronze coins produced in the fourth year of the First Jewish Revolt, which were likely minted under the peasant rebel leader Simon bar Giora.³¹

In a 2014 article, Zissu and Abadi offered a different explanation. They proposed that the use of Paleo-Hebrew in this period reflects the perception that it was less sacred and prestigious than the square Aramaic script.³² Their argument rests on certain later passages of rabbinic literature (e.g. B. Sanhedrin 21b) which indicate a preference for the Aramaic script, and on archaeological evidence that ritual objects such as phylacteries and mezuzot from Qumran are overwhelmingly inscribed with the Aramaic script. On this basis, they suggest that Paleo-Hebrew was chosen for coins precisely because coins circulated widely and could be brought into ritually impure contexts where the ‘sacred’ Aramaic script might be profaned. They support this claim by pointing to the use of Tyrian sheqels, which were decorated with pagan imagery, in the payment of Temple tithes, as “another example of the overall attitude towards coins in the Second Temple period”.³³

Zissu and Abadi’s idea is bold and thought-provoking but, ultimately, a rather strained reading of the evidence. Firstly, there are numerous examples of the square Aramaic script being used in profane contexts, including funerals, ossuaries and, indeed, bronze and lead coinage.³⁴ As such, it is difficult to sustain the argument that there was a widespread taboo against using the square Aramaic in ‘unclean’ contexts.

Secondly, we must again consider the images which the Paleo-Hebrew script was paired with on coins. Many of the coin types from the First Jewish Revolt and Bar Kokhba Revolt feature explicitly sacred motifs, including depictions of the Temple itself. If the minting authorities had deliberately chosen Paleo-Hebrew to avoid employing the sacred Aramaic script, it is difficult to explain the use of unambiguously cultic iconography.³⁵

³¹ Kanael 1953; Roth 1962; Ariel 2011.

³² Zissu and Abadi 2014

³³ Zissu and Abadi 2014, 657. For the apparent preference for Tyrian sheqels in Temple donations, see M. Bekhorot 8.7 and Tosefta Ketubot 12.13.3.

³⁴ See note 9 above.

³⁵ The image of the Temple features on coinage from the Bar Kokhba Revolt (Hendin 6402, 6414–6417). Other religious themes include the nevel in the Bar Kokhba coins (Hendin 6406, 6412, 6418, 6422, 6426, 6434, 6435), and images representing the festival of Sukkot in the First Jewish Revolt coins (Hendin 6396–6398).

Thirdly, their treatment of the Tyrian sheqels is problematic. While it is true that Tyrian silver was accepted for Temple donations despite its pagan imagery, this is more plausibly explained by practical necessity than by indifference to aniconism. The Herodians produced no silver coinage and their bronzes were sometimes iconic, while the Roman procurators' coins, though aniconic, were only bronze. Late Second Temple Jews therefore had little alternative but to employ the high-quality, locally available Tyrian sheqels. The use of these coins, *contra* Zissu and Abadi, reflects not attitudes toward imagery or sanctity but rather the constraints of metal supply and circulation.

4. Alternative Explanations

4.1 Achaemenid, Ptolemaic, and Hasmonean Coinage

I propose two additional explanations for the use of the Paleo-Hebrew script on Jewish coinage: one for the earlier issues (Achaemenid, Ptolemaic, and Hasmonean periods) and another for the later issues (the revolts against Rome).

I will begin with the earlier coinage. As discussed above, the iconography of these issues is not obviously nationalistic but belongs to a wider repertoire of motifs common to the coinage of the Levant and Eastern Mediterranean. I suggest that the use of Paleo-Hebrew can partly be understood as part of this broader pattern of cultural borrowing—and, specifically, that it reflects the influence of Phoenician local coinage.

The Phoenician script had been used on Phoenician civic issues from the late fifth century BCE onwards. In Sidon and Byblos, it recorded the abbreviated names of local kings—a practice perhaps mirrored by the mid-fourth-century BCE Judean coins inscribed with the name of the governor Hezekiah.³⁶ Similarly, Tyrian coinage employed Phoenician legends throughout the Achaemenid period, first to indicate denominations in full and later for single-letter abbreviations.³⁷ The decision to employ the Paleo-Hebrew script—which, as noted, was extremely similar to and mutually intelligible with Phoenician—likely reflects, at least in part,

³⁶ Betlyon 1980, 3–22; 111–22. The Hezekiah coins are Hendin types 6063–6065 and 6069.

³⁷ Betlyon 1980, 39–59. The script has a similar usage in the coinage of Aradus.

the influence of these designs, which (along with Philistian coinage) would have been the most immediately familiar regional examples available to the provincial authorities of Yehud. This mirrors the municipal coinage of the Philistian cities Ashkelon and Gaza, which both used the Phoenician script.³⁸ It may also demonstrate influence from (or, alternatively the existence of similar design approaches in) the coinage of the neighbouring province of Samaria, which used the Paleo-Hebrew script on various issues.³⁹

If this interpretation is correct, the adoption of Paleo-Hebrew was one of several features shared with Phoenician and Philistian coinage during this period. Some of the most prevalent imagery in Achaemenid and Hellenistic coinage from Judea, in particular owls, Persian kings, and mythical animals appear frequently in the coinage of Sidon and Tyre.⁴⁰

This influence likely arose from the prominence of Phoenician coinage in regional trade and, more broadly, the close commercial relationship between Judea and the cities of the Levantine coast, which is reflected in both the archaeological data and the Persian/early Hellenistic text *Ezra-Nehemiah*.⁴¹ Excavations in the City of David and Ophel, for instance, have revealed substantial Mediterranean fish remains alongside Phoenician goods such as carved ivory, bullae, and seals.⁴² This evidence, when read alongside the claim at *Nehemiah* 13:16 that the “people from Tyre who lived there [Jerusalem] were bringing in fish and other kinds of merchandise and selling them in Jerusalem”, indicates that Phoenician merchants were involved in trading fish to Jerusalem (indeed, Brendan Noonan has suggested that there may even have been a Tyrian merchant colony in the city during the Achaemenid period).⁴³ Phoenician coinage itself (especially from Tyre and Sidon) was also disseminated throughout Palestine, including in Judea and Samaria where it has been found at Abu Shusha (near ancient Gezer), Samaria, and Nablus.⁴⁴

³⁸ Tal 2012 253.

³⁹ Meshorer and Qedar 1991, 17–31; Wyssmann 2014 226.

⁴⁰ Multiple series of Tyrian coins feature owls and images of mythical animals such as hippocampi, while images of Persian kings are common in Sidonian coinage: see Betlyon 1980, 3–22; 39–59. Similarly, during the Ptolemaic period, the imagery on Judean and Phoenician coinage is further harmonised, depicting the heads of members of the royal dynasty on the obverse and eagles on the reverse, though this is presumably by royal diktat (for Judea see Hendin types 6078–6088; for similar imagery on Phoenician coinage, see Hoover 2004, 485–86; Lorber 2008).

⁴¹ See *Ezra* 3:7 and *Neh.* 13:16: in the latter passage, it is even suggested that a permanent community of Tyrian merchants resided in Jerusalem. For further discussion see Edelman 2006; Noonan 2011.

⁴² Lerna and Lerna 1989; Lerna and Lerna 1992; Reich, Shukron, and Lerna 2007. See also discussion in Noonan 2011 294–8.

⁴³ Noonan 2011.

⁴⁴ Elayi and Elayi 2004, 697; Elayi and Elayi 2009, 399.

Rather than serving purely as a medium for a self-confident, 'nationalistic' local identity, I suggest that Achaemenid and early Hellenistic Judean coinage instead largely drew on prevalent regional types. This does not mean that the adoption of the script was simply a nod to convention: indeed, in a context where multiple scripts were in use, the use of Paleo-Hebrew was likely a conscious decision to convey legitimacy and, perhaps, signal participation (to both travelers and local citizens) in Phoenician commercial and cultural networks, which extended into Jerusalem itself and perhaps even manifested in a merchant colony (see above). Such an interpretation also does not preclude the possibility that the script might also have been selected to reflect local identity—indeed, it is conceivable that Paleo-Hebrew was chosen precisely because it contained numerous useful ideological associations at once.

I believe that a similar phenomenon occurred during the Hasmonean period, and that the design of Hasmonean coinage is best understood in light of the re-emergence of Phoenician municipal coinage in the Seleucid Empire. In 169/8 BCE, a group of 19 cities in the western Seleucid Empire began minting their own bronze coinage, conventionally described as 'quasi-municipal' in modern scholarship, including the Phoenician cities of Tyre, Sidon, Ptolemais, Tripolis, Byblos, and Berytus (Laodicea).⁴⁵ These issues bore the portrait of the Seleucid monarch on the obverse and a civic emblem—typically a local deity, palm tree, or ship—on the reverse. With the exception of Tripolis and Ptolemais, the Phoenician cities also included Phoenician legends naming the issuing community, often accompanied by epithets advertising their antiquity or prestige.⁴⁶ These quasi-municipal coins offered the closest regional analogue for an “independent”, non-royal civic coinage and thus provided an obvious model for the Hasmoneans as they gradually secured autonomy from Seleucid rule. It is therefore unsurprising that Hasmonean coins adopted both the basic structure of these issues—featuring, in place of a royal bust, a wreathed inscription naming the High Priest on the obverse and a maritime, botanical, or religious motif on the reverse—and a script closely resembling Phoenician. As has been argued elsewhere, this reflects a broader Hasmonean tendency to assimilate the cultural idioms of their regional neighbours.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Lorber 2008, 68.

⁴⁶ Hoover 2004, 489; Lorber 2015, 68–69.

⁴⁷ This can be seen in a range of contexts, including the design of *miqva'ot* (Adler 2018) and the spread of aniconic art (Kloner 2011 570–571; Levin 2020 13). For a broader discussion, see Economou 2026, chap. 4.

The influence of these quasi-municipal coins may also be reflected in legends mentioning the ‘*Ḥever Ha-Yehudim*’ on a number of coins issued by John Hyrcanus, Alexander Jannaeus, Judah Aristobulus, and Antigonus Mattathias. This term is somewhat ambiguous: while some have suggested that it should be translated as ‘the Council of the Judeans’⁴⁸, others have pointed out that no such body appears in our literary sources, and have instead argued that it is an ethnic identifier which is best translated ‘the community of the Judeans’.⁴⁹ If we accept this interpretation, the Phoenician coins, which typically feature similar ethnic identifiers (“of the Sidonians”, “of the Tyrians”, etc.), are again the obvious inspiration.

4.2 The Revolts Against Rome

Turning to the Jewish revolts against Rome, it is evident that the Paleo-Hebrew script was not employed in imitation of Phoenician cities, which by this period had largely abandoned the Phoenician script and language in favour of Greek (including on their coinage). Nevertheless, for the reasons discussed above, the Paleo-Hebrew script should not be understood only as a ‘nationalistic’ gesture by the minting authorities. Rather, by the time of the First Jewish Revolt, the script had also become conventional within Jewish coinage through a process analogous to the sociolinguistic phenomenon of ‘borrowing’, whereby the adoption of an alien element is so thoroughly assimilated into a linguistic system that it ceases to be perceived as unusual.⁵⁰ A comparable dynamic likely applied during the Bar Kokhba Revolt, by which time the status of Paleo-Hebrew as the standard script for Hebrew coin legends had been further reinforced by its use in the First Revolt. Given this long-established convention, it would in fact have been more surprising had the rebel authorities chosen to employ the Aramaic script, which was virtually unprecedented in earlier Jewish coinage.

5. Conclusions and Implications

In this paper, I have argued that the use of the Paleo-Hebrew script on Jewish coinage should not only be interpreted as ‘nationalistic’ or part of an archaising aesthetic intended to evoke the First

⁴⁸ Sperber 1965; Applebaum 1989, 26; Hendin 2021, 157.

⁴⁹ Rappaport 1993; Rajak 2000, 54.

⁵⁰ For further discussion of this term and its applicability to cultural history, see Mullen 2013, 79–81.

Temple period. Rather, I have suggested that its adoption during the Achaemenid and Hellenistic periods also reflected its close similarity with the Phoenician script, which was widely employed on Phoenician municipal coinage—the most immediate and influential model (along with Athenian coins) for early Judean issues. In this context, the script did not simply constitute a patriotic assertion of cultural distinctiveness, but signalled Judea's sustained engagement with regional cultural networks. Because the Paleo-Hebrew script was used so extensively on these earlier coins, by the time of the Jewish revolts against Rome it had become the conventional medium for Hebrew coin legends. Its use in this later period, therefore, should likewise not be understood as the product of a radical or ideologically charged programme.

This is not to suggest, however, that the script was semantically neutral. Across all periods, its presence endowed coins with a familiar and authoritative appearance that reinforced their legitimacy—whether through their resemblance to Phoenician municipal coinage or to earlier Judean types. In this way, the Paleo-Hebrew script functioned not only as an emblem of resistance or nostalgia, but as a guarantor of value and authenticity, affirming both the credibility of the currency and the legitimacy of the issuing authority.

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