

A Unique Prutah from the First Year of the Jewish War Against Rome

by Robert Deutsch

In 1538, Guillaume Postel illustrated for the first time -- in a book on ancient scripts -- a Jewish shekel as an example of the Samaritan script.¹ Since then, shekels and other coins of the Jewish War against Rome (A.D. 66-70) have been published time and again and became a well-known phenomenon.



The unique coin published here is a Jewish bronze coin (prutah) similar to the common bronze coins of the 2nd and 3rd years of the Jewish War (67-68 AD) depicting an amphora on the obverse and a vine-leaf on the reverse. Our coin, however, differs from these coins in its legends. The description of the coin is as follows:²

- AE; 17 mm.; axis \ (Pl. 16:1-2).
- *Obv.*: Amphora with fluted body and two small handles on the shoulders. Around from top 1., downwards, Palaeo-Hebrew legend: "Jerusalem (the) Holy"
- *Rev.*: A cut vine-branch with one leaf and one tendril. Around from top 1., downwards, Palaeo-Hebrew legend: ("Is)rael"

The legend on the obverse is clear and complete; instead of the expected legend for this type of coin -- "year two" (or "year three" on the coins depicting an amphora with lid) -- the legend reads "Jerusalem (the) Holy". It is the very same legend as on the silver shekels and half-shekels of the first year of the Jewish War. The reverse legend of the silver issues of the first year omits the letter (y) in the name "Jerusalem" and the article (h) and the (w) in the word "the Holy" as on our coin.

The legend on the reverse is incomplete and only three letters are visible as the result of an off-centre die punch. The three letters RAL stand, obviously, for Israel. It is rather difficult to complete the legend on the reverse. The name Israel appears on the coins of the Jewish War only in the legend "shekel of Israel", on the silver shekels of years 1-5, as a definition of the denomination and is thus irrelevant in our case.

The reverse legend on the bronze coins of the second and third year of that war reads "[of the] Freedom of Zion" and on the bronze series of the fourth year ([of the] Redemption of Zion).³ It seems to me possible that the reverse legend on our coin reads "[for the] Freedom of Israel". If this is the case, this formula was introduced during the first year of the Jewish War, then abandoned and re-introduced in the second year of the Bar Kokhba War.

Previously, it was common knowledge that in the first and fifth year of the Jewish War only silver coins were struck, while in the second, third and fourth years silver as well as bronze coins were issued. The coin published here establishes that a limited issue of bronze coins was already struck during the first year of the war, perhaps toward the end of that year. It remains to be seen whether bronze coins of the fifth year will, eventually, turn up in the future. As Dr. Leo Miltenberg remarked in an article in a previous issue of this journal: "Numismatic evidence is irrefutable, but not final".⁴

Notes

¹ *Linguarum Duodecim Characteribus Differentium Alphabetum Introductio ac Legendi Modus Longe Facilimus...*, G. Postel. Paris, 1538. Shekel on p106.

² I am grateful to Mr. S. Moussaleff, London, who kindly permitted me to publish this coin from his collection.

³ For the change of the reverse legend, see the historical background of the Coins "Year Four... of the Redemption of Zion", *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*. Vol 129, 1953. Pp 18-20.

⁴ "A Bar Kokhba Didrachm", L. Miltenberg. *Israel Numismatic Journal*. Vol 8, 1986/7, p33.