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Coin Finds and the Question of the Conquest of Jerusalem by Bar Kokhba

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Abstract

Finds of Bar Kokhba coins in Jerusalem are often interpreted as negating the possibility of the conquest of the city by Bar Kokhba rebels. They are said to be too few in number to support the idea of such a conquest. However, when these finds are compared with the finds of other contemporaneous coins discovered in Jerusalem, especially those of Aelia Capitolina under Hadrian, a different picture emerges. The proportion of Bar Kokhba coins among these finds does not appear to be negligible and accordingly, Bar Kokhba's conquest of Jerusalem may be considered a possibility.

INTRODUCTION

In the year 130 CE, the emperor Hadrian visited Judea as part of his journey from Syria to Egypt. Evidence of the importance Hadrian placed on his visit to the region in 130 CE may be found coins issued in Rome with the legend ADVENTV IVDAEAE, with one example depicting the emperor standing before a woman and two children (*CRE* 3:493, No. 1655). The upsurge of local bronze minting in the region reflects Hadrian's presence (Ziegler 1996:126).¹

The emperor was a great admirer of the Hellenistic culture and at that time was contributing to the reestablishment of cities and temples in Europe, Asia and Africa. One example of an emperor's investment in a city would have been his raising it to the status of colony. This entailed a ceremony called *sulcus primigenius*, and included the delineation of the colony's borders. Such ceremonies or related ones were symbolized on coins by the depiction of the emperor plowing the perimeter of the city. In the southern Levant such depictions are found on coins of Hadrian in 'Akko-Ptolemais (Rosenberger 1972:26, No. 48), Caesarea (Rosenberger 1975:4, No. 24) and Aelia Capitolina (Meshorer 1989:24, No. 2). Although these depictions should not be understood to mean that a ceremony such as the *sulcus primigenius* actually took place in the presence of the emperor, or

1 E.g., Petra (Rosenberger 1978:61, No. 2); Tiberias (Meshorer 1985:34, No. 81), Caesarea (Kadman 1957:102–105, Nos. 26–32); Gaza (Rosenberger 1975:56–57, Nos. 65–66; note the double date according to a Hadrianic era). According to Stein (1990:178–179), after a decline and even cessation of local minting in the first half of his reign, coinage resumes precisely in the year of Hadrian's arrival (1990:184–201).

even that Hadrian visited all those places, they can still suggest that the cities had undertaken new urban development, and may reflect these municipalities' wish that Hadrian favor their cities. However, the case of Jerusalem might have been different. Cassius Dio states: "and in Jerusalem Hadrian erected a new city in place of the one destroyed" (*HR* 69:12.1–14.3; *BMC Pal.*:x; Kadman 1956:18). The abbreviated word COND (for *condita*) on coins with the foundation scene minted in Aelia Capitolina suggests that a ceremony similar to *sulcus primigenius* actually took place there, and that Jerusalem appears to be one of the cities Hadrian favored.² On the Temple Mount a temple to Jupiter was established (Cassius Dio *HR*, 69.12–13), an act which caused unrest amongst the Jews.³ Bar Kokhba, supported by the Jewish religious leadership led by Rabbi Akiva, instigated a rebellion (Isaac and Oppenheimer 1985:57), beginning in 132 CE (Mildenberg 1980:43).

The Jews' aspiration was to free Jerusalem and rebuild their Temple there. They expressed their desire with coins depicting the Temple in Jerusalem and the inscription "For the Freedom of Jerusalem" (*TJC*:143). Assuming that the testimony of the historian Cassius Dio is reliable, and the Jupiter temple was one of many erected by Hadrian during his travels, it could be that the appearance of the Temple (*TJC*:244–245, Nos. 218, 221) on the largest silver coin was intended as a call for opposition to Hadrian's plan to build a temple for Jupiter in the city.

In the first phase of the rebellion, the rebels succeeded in causing substantial damage and many casualties to the Romans. There are descriptions of this by Cassius Dio⁴ as well as by the Roman historian Fronto.⁵ Does the numismatic research support the claim, based on a few of the historical sources (App. [note 2], Euseb., *hist. eccl.* 6.8.10), that Aelia Capitolina-Jerusalem was conquered by the Bar Kokhba warriors?

2 Appian (*Syr.* 50.252) implies that Hadrian destroyed a city rebuilt after Titus had earlier destroyed it, so it may be that he had been the one who refounded it as Aelia Capitolina, and only subsequently ruin it during the rebellion (epitome by Xiphilinus).

3 "It was terrible in my eyes that the Jews had outlanders settling in their city, and Gentile temples erected in it" (Cassius Dio *HR*, 69.12.1–14.3 [epitome by Xiphilinus]).

4 In a letter to the Senate Hadrian fails to use the common opening phrase: "If you and your children are in good health, it is well, I and the legions are in good health" (Cassius Dio *HR*, 69.14.3). The presumed desperate situation in Judea may have brought about Hadrian's transfer there of Iulius Severus from Britain (Cassius Dio *HR*, 69.13.1–2).

5 Fronto, *Epist.*, *De bello Parthico*, (ed. van den Hout 1988:221): "*avo vestro obtinente quantum militium a Iudaeis, quantum ab Britannis caesum.*"

THE NUMISMATIC FINDS FROM THE PERIOD OF THE BAR KOKHBA REVOLT

The coins circulating in the area of Jerusalem from the period of the Bar Kokhba revolt include:

- A. Bronze coins of Aelia Capitolina (Meshorer 1989:70, Nos. 1–9; Kindler 1988). Nine different types were minted under Hadrian there while none of the other mints in the region operating under Hadrian struck more than five types.
- B. Other bronze Roman provincial coins, mainly from the Gaza, Ascalon and Caesarea mints. Those coins from Gaza and Ascalon are dated, according to their respective eras, while the Caesarea coins bear no dates.
- C. Silver Roman imperial coins in two denominations: *tetradrachms* from Antioch and Tyre, and *denars* from Rome, Cappadocia and Bostra.
- D. Bar Kokhba bronze coins, dated and undated, presumably all struck over coins of category B.
- E. Bar Kokhba silver coins, also dated and undated. It is presumed that all of the large silver coins were struck over *tetradrachms* from Antioch and Tyre, while most of the smaller silver coins were struck over the *denars* from Rome, Cappadocia and Bostra (both category C).

NUMISMATIC ARGUMENTS FOR AND AGAINST THE POSSIBILITY THAT BAR KOKHBA CONQUERED JERUSALEM

One numismatic argument has been made in favor of the possibility that Bar Kokhba conquered Jerusalem. Kindler explained that coins inscribed “Jerusalem” (*TJC*:244–246, Nos. 218, 221, 227) actually may be seen as taking the place of the rebel leader Bar Kokhba’s name. Thus on those coins the inscription “Jerusalem” indicated the name of the minting authority, and were struck there when the Jews controlled the capital (Kindler 1974:69). Additional researchers have claimed that the city was conquered by Bar Kokhba and that the Bar Kokhba coin-finds in Jerusalem indicated this (Alon 1970:16–47, 263; Oppenheimer 1982:60).

For those who believed that Aelia Capitolina continued to be a Roman city throughout the Bar Kokhba revolt, other numismatic arguments were employed.

- A. The small number of finds of Bar Kokhba coins in the city indicated that the city was not conquered by Bar Kokhba. If Bar Kokhba were to have conquered Jerusalem, a much larger quantity of his coins would have been found there (Applebaum 1976:27, 83 n. 211; Mildenberg 1980:250; Barag 1980:31, 33; *AJC* 2:133–134; Ariel 1982:293; Zissu and Eshel 2001:25).
- B. The inscription “For the Freedom of Jerusalem” (*TJC*:251, No. 267) indicated that the plan to redeem/conquer the city from the Romans remained only a slogan (Reifenberg 1947:25).

The ‘small number of finds of Bar Kokhba in Jerusalem’ argument is the key subject of this article. According to its proponents, the small amount of coins discovered in the city in controlled excavations in which some 13,629 other coins have been found, attests to the fact that Bar Kokhba did not occupy or hold Jerusalem. If Bar Kokhba did conquer Jerusalem, the argument goes, more coins of the rebel’s mint would have been uncovered. What these researchers did not take into account is the sparse number of provenanced coins from Jerusalem from that period in general.

The relationship between the quantities of Bar Kokhba coins found in Jerusalem to other coins found in the city in the same period may be viewed in the tables compiled by Ariel (1982:293). Only 21 coins were found in that city from the reign of Hadrian.⁶ A more focused comparison may be made between the two mints closest to Jerusalem at that time, the mint of Bar Kokhba, and that of Aelia Capitolina itself—under Hadrian only, of course. Drawing upon the published reports and the Israel Antiquities Authority (IAA) data base,⁷ it becomes clear that the quantities of finds in Jerusalem⁸ of these two issues are almost identical. The data for these two groups follow. The coins in the IAA were personally checked by the author.

The Finds of Bar Kokhba Coins in Jerusalem

At least four documented Bar Kokhba coins were found in the immediate vicinity of Jerusalem (Fig.1).



6 From the source data for Ariel 1982, provided by Donald T. Ariel. The four coins noted by Ariel from the Aelia Capitolina mint (1982:319) are included in this number.

7 My thanks to Donald T. Ariel for his help in accessing this material.

8 As the borders of the municipal control extended beyond the city walls, I have included the Bar Kokhba coin from Ramat Rahel (Fig. 1:4), 3.8 km south of the Old City of Jerusalem today.

No.	Findspot	Obv.	Rev.	Weight (g)	Condition	References
1	Southern wall of Temple Mount	Vine leaf.	Palm tree.	6.10	Poor; fragment of coin	Applebaum 1976:27 and 83 n. 211; Barag 1980:31; Ariel 1982:293 n. 60; Eshel and Zissu 2000–2002:160 (IAA 44738).
2	Southern wall of Temple Mount				Fine	Mazar 1971: Pl. XXVIII:10; Applebaum 1976:27 and 83 n. 211; Barag 1980:31; Ariel 1982:293 n. 60; Eshel and Zissu 2000–2002:160 (not in IAA).
3	Citadel	Vine leaf.	Palm tree with branches.	8.35	Worn; ancient perforation.	Ariel 1982:293 n. 60 (IAA 85461).
4	Near Ramat Rahel	Vine leaf.	Palm tree with seven branches.	10.33	Good	Ariel 1982:293 n. 60 (IAA 5566).
5? (not illustrated)	Third Wall	-	-	-	-	Sukenik and Mayer 1930:44; Applebaum 1976:27 and 83 n. 211. ⁹

Fig. 1. Bar Kokhba coins found in immediate vicinity of Jerusalem

If we restrict ourselves only to finds within any proposed boundaries of the city of Aelia Capitolina, the number of Bar Kokhba coins found would only be three.

The Finds of Aelia Capitolina Coins in Jerusalem

Five coins of Aelia Capitolina minted under Hadrian were found in Jerusalem (Fig. 2).

Similar to the calculation above — that not all of the Bar Kokhba coins in Fig. 1 were found within the likely boundaries of Aelia Capitolina — it should be noted that only four of the five Aelia Capitolina coins in Fig. 2 derive from within that ancient city. In the case of the Bar Kokhba coins, those from near Ramat Rahel and the Third Wall do not come from within Aelia Capitolina, and in the case of the Aelia Capitolina coins the coin from Shazar Blvd. falls outside the city limits. Nevertheless, in or out of the city, one must agree that the quantities are certainly very close.



⁹ There, a number of coins were noted from the period of Bar Kokhba. Unfortunately, no further details were given, and it is impossible to reach any conclusions regarding them.

No.	Findspot	Obv.	Rev.	Weight (g)	Condition	Reference
1 (not illustrated)	Southern wall of the Temple Mount	Bust r.	Capitoline triad within temple.	8.06	Poor	Unpublished. Part of counts in Ariel 1982:293 (IAA 39450).
2 (not illustrated)	Southern wall of the Temple Mount	Bust r.	Bust of Antoninus r.	7.64	Worn	Unpublished. Part of counts in Ariel 1982:293 (IAA 39189).
3 (not illustrated)	Southern wall of the Temple Mount	Bust r.	Capitoline triad within temple.	12.34	Extremely worn. Perhaps prepared for countermarking or restriking.	Unpublished. Part of counts in Ariel 1982:293 (IAA 39769).
4	Southern wall of the Temple Mount	Bust r.	Emperor plowing to r. with oxen.		Good	Mazar 1971: Pl. XXVIII:12. Part of counts in Ariel 1982:293 (not in IAA).
5	Shazar Blvd.	Bust r.	Emperor plowing to r. with oxen.	9.58	Good	Unpublished. Identified by Donald T. Ariel; noted here thanks to Rina Avner (in IAA).

Fig. 2. Aelia Capitolina coins found in Jerusalem

Roman provincial bronzes were generally in circulation locally.¹⁰ This is not to say that they always were dominant in quantities when compared to Roman provincial bronzes of other nearby cities found in the record of numismatic finds in a city. Not every city that minted Roman provincial coins produced them in quantities that enabled them to be greater in number than other coins, even in their own city. This is the case in Aelia Capitolina. Based upon the IAA coin database, coins of Caesarea were more plentiful in Jerusalem in Hadrian's time than the Aelia Capitolina coins themselves. Nevertheless, there is value looking at the numbers of one mint's coins in the context of the totals of coins found at a site in one time period.

In spite of the small numbers of Hadrianic Aelia Capitolina coins found in Jerusalem, it is clear that these coins were not rare. As stated above, five coins from the days of Hadrian were discovered in Jerusalem. These coins represent four out of the nine existing types under this emperor.

¹⁰ A number of Aelia Capitolina coins under Hadrian has also been discovered outside of Jerusalem, in: (1) Tsuba (IAA 88944; *rev.*: Bust of Sabina r.; Metcalf 2000:81, No. 6); (2) Al Jai cave (Eshel and Zissu 2000–2002:172, Nos. 11–12), (3) Caesarea (IAA 91715; *rev.*: wild boar r.); and (4) Tiberias (IAA 82865; *rev.*: wild boar r.).

Regarding the coin from the Al Jai cave, elsewhere in the same cave, four Bar Kokhba coins were uncovered. Kindler concluded from this that “the city was indeed founded prior to the outbreak of the war” (2000–2002:177). However, there was no archaeological stratigraphy to speak of in the cave, and no apparent relation can be made between the Aelia coin and the Bar Kokhba coins. The numismatic finds from the Al Jai cave cannot attest to the establishment of Aelia Capitolina before the rebellion.

Images of 26 coins of the Aelia Capitolina ‘foundation’ type were assembled by the author for the purpose of comparing their reverse dies. Most of these coins derive from various collections in Israel. Some are published (*BMC Pal.* 1914:82, No. 2; Meyshan 1968:146, Pl. V:10; Eshel and Zissu 2000–2002:172, No. 11; Mazar 1971: Pl. XXVIII:12) Yet others were found on the internet (e.g., http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/greece/judaea/aelia_capitolina/i.html) and in auctions (e.g., Archaeological Center Auction 29, No. 58). After careful examination it was found that *all* the reverse dies are different, suggesting that, even though only one coin of the type was found in Jerusalem, the series was plentiful.¹¹ This may also be seen by the existence of variant inscriptions (COL EL KAPIT\COND¹² and not COL AEL KAPIT\COND) as is common on the Aelia Capitolina ‘foundation’ coins. Also, on some of the coins there is a tassel at the bottom of the *vexillum*. Finally, some of the *vexilla* are rectangular while others are trapezoid.

Despite the seemingly large overall number of these earliest Aelia coins in general, it is striking that so few were found in Jerusalem. This being the case, should a small number of Bar Kokhba coin-finds in that city be necessarily interpreted as signifying that the rebel forces were never present there?

Intentional withdrawal of Bar Kokhba coins from circulation in Jerusalem

The small number of Bar Kokhba coins found in Jerusalem may also be related to the possibility that Bar Kokhba coins were intentionally withdrawn from circulation in Jerusalem after the revolt was suppressed. It is reasonable that the disqualification and withdrawal of the Bar Kokhba coins from circulation would have been warranted by the Roman authorities after the revolt ended. There may also have been intentional defacement of Bar Kokhba coins during the revolt in order to disrupt the rebel economy in the areas under their control.

11 One of the dies appears quite different (Meyshan 1968: 146, Pl. V:10) and, according to Meyshan, the letters LE V appears on the *vexillum*, denoting the *Legio V Macedonica*, which took part in the offensive attack on Bar Kokhba’s troops, after partaking in the siege of Beitar (Meyshan 1958; 1968), where a Latin inscription was found mentioning the legion’s name. Kadman noted (1956:21) that three numismatists had confirmed this reading. Meshorer, however, believed the reading to be incorrect (1989:21). The coin could not be relocated for another examination.

Nevertheless, the possibility exists that Hadrian issued a coin bearing a *vexillum* noting the Fifth Legion, as Meyshan (and Schalit) claimed. This may relate to the text in the Mishnah (Ta’anit 4:6), where the expression “the city was ploughed...” appears *after* “Beitar was taken...”. The order of the text may follow the chronological order of the events, i.e., a ceremony reminiscent of the *sulcus primigenius* was performed after Beitar was captured. The subject of the legion initials on the *vexillum* requires further examination.

12 Meshorer 1989:70, No. 2a.

After the rebellion and its suppression, the Romans may have done all they could to remove the Bar Kokhba coins from circulation and erase the bitter memory of the revolt. Hints of a possible withdrawal may be gleaned in the rabbinic literature: (1) the so-called “false Jerusalem coins” (BT Baba Qama 97b), which may refer to the Bar Kokhba coins bearing the inscription “Jerusalem” (e.g., *TJC*:244, No. 218; noted above); (2) “disqualified denar” (Mishna Kelim 12:7) and (3) “danger money” (Mishna Ma’aser Sheni 1:2).

The silver coins would have been melted and recycled. Those who kept such coins for decoration would have had to drill holes in them or chop them in order to ‘disqualify’ them so that they could not be used (Mishna, Kelim 12:7). Evidence for this phenomenon is plentiful (*TJC*:162). Out of the Bar Kokhba coins found in the Jerusalem excavations, it should be noted that the one discovered in the Citadel excavations was pierced (Fig. 1:3). There are also broken coins, and coins split in two. Some of these coins may also have been ‘disqualified’ (e.g., Archaeological Center Auction Catalogue 40, Nos. 224–225).

It may also be presumed that the possession of the Bar Kokhba coins meant *danger to the person who held them* (i.e., “danger money”—No. 3 above). It is unlikely that Gentiles would have kept such coins as souvenirs, and, as Jews may have been restricted from living in Jerusalem after the revolt,¹³ this may be another reason for the small amount of Bar Kokhba coins found in the city.

SUMMARY

The small number of finds of provenanced Aelia Capitolina coins in Jerusalem and the surroundings that were in the rebel control may contribute to a reexamination of the historical sources referring to Jerusalem during the revolt. One option is that Aelia existed and even minted coins before the rebellion started, whereupon the city was captured by Bar Kokhba and his forces. Roughly equal amounts of Aelia Capitolina and Bar Kokhba coins were lost, to be found in later excavations. Another option is that the Roman city was founded after the second rebellion, according to Eusebius’ version.

Judging from the number of dies of the Aelia Capitolina ‘foundation’ coins, these coins were not rare. This reinforces the importance of the comparison of provenanced finds of Aelia Capitolina and Bar Kokhba coins, suggesting that the paucity of Bar Kokhba coins in Jerusalem is not as meaningful as once thought. The numismatic and written evidence for the Bar Kokhba coins being ‘disqualified’ or withdrawn may further help to explain the low numbers of finds of Bar Kokhba coins in Jerusalem. Removing the coin argument from the discussion

13 Euseb., *hist. eccl.* 4:6: “in this way Jerusalem was totally desolate of the Jewish people and of its archaic settlers, and was occupied by outlanders.”

may, ultimately, point to new directions of research on the subject of the extent of Bar Kokhba conquests.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- AJC* Y. Meshorer. *Ancient Jewish Coinage*. Dix Hills, NY 1982
- AJN* *American Journal of Numismatics*
- BMC* e.g., *BMC Arab.*: G.F. Hill. *Catalogue of the Greek Coins of Arabia, Mesopotamia, and Persia*. London 1922
- BMCO* e.g., *BMCO* 1: S. Lane-Poole. *The Coins of the Eastern Khaleefehs in the British Museum. Catalogue of the Oriental Coins in the British Museum* 1. London 1875
- CH* *Coin Hoards*
- CIL* *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*
- CNP* e.g., L. Kadman. *The Coins of Akko Ptolemais* (Corpus Nummorum Palestinensium IV). Jerusalem 1961
- CRE* e.g., H. Mattingly. *The Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum I. Augustus to Vitellius*. London 1923
- DOC* e.g., P. Grierson. *Catalogue of the Byzantine Coins in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection and in the Whittemore Collection* 3. *Leo III to Nicephorus III 717–1081*. Washington, D.C. 1973
- IEJ* *Israel Exploration Journal*
- IG* *Inscriptiones Graecae*
- IGCH* M. Thompson, O. Mørkholm and C.M. Kraay. *An Inventory of Greek Coin Hoards*. New York 1973
- INJ* *Israel Numismatic Journal*
- INR* *Israel Numismatic Research*
- LA* *Studium Biblicum Franciscanum Liber Annuus*
- LRBC* e.g., P.V. Hill and J.P.C. Kent. Part 1: The Bronze Coinage of the House of Constantine, A.D. 324–46. In *Late Roman Bronze Coinage (A.D. 324–498)*. London 1965. Pp. 4–40
- MIB* e.g., W. Hahn. *Von Anastasius I. bis Justinianus I (491–565)* (Moneta Imperii Byzantini 1. Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften Philosophisch-Historische Klasse Denkschriften 109. Veröffentlichungen der Numismatischen Kommission 1). Vienna 1973
- MIBE* e.g., W. Hahn. *Money of the Incipient Byzantine Empire (Anastasius I–Justinian I, 491–565)* (Veröffentlichungen des Instituts für Numismatik und Geldgeschichte der Universität Wien 6). Vienna 2000
- MN* *American Numismatic Society Museum Notes*
- NC* *Numismatic Chronicle*
- NCirc* *Numismatic Circular*
- NNM* *Numismatic Notes and Monographs*
- NZ* *Numismatische Zeitschrift*
- RRC* M.H. Crawford. *Roman Republican Coinage*. Cambridge 1974
- RIC* e.g., C.H.V. Sutherland. *The Roman Imperial Coinage* I. *From 31 BC to AD 69*. London 1984
- RN* *Revue Numismatique*
- RPC* e.g., A. Burnett, M. Amandry and I. Carradice. *From Vespasian to Domitian (AD 69–96). Roman Provincial Coinage* 2. London 1999
- SC* e.g., A. Houghton and C. Lorber. *Seleucid Coins. A Comprehensive Catalogue. Part I. Seleucus I through Antiochus III*. New York, Lancaster, PA and London 2002
- SICA* e.g., S. Albm and T. Goodwin. *Sylloge of Islamic Coins In the Ashmolean, Volume 1: The Pre-Reform Coinage of the Early Islamic Period*. Oxford 2002
- SNAT* e.g., L. Ilisch. *Sylloge Numorum Arabicorum Tübingen–Palästina IVa Bilād aš-Šām I*. Tübingen 1993
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- SNR* *Schweizerische Numismatische Rundschau*
- TINC* *Transactions of the International Numismatic Congress*
- TJC* Y. Meshorer. *A Treasury of Jewish Coins from the Persian Period to Bar Kochba*. Jerusalem and Nyack 2001
- ZfN* *Zeitschrift für Numismatik*