

# WIENER ZEITSCHRIFT

FÜR DIE

# KUNDE DES MORGENLANDES

HERAUSGEGEBEN VON

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REDAKTION:

CARMEN BERLINCHES RAMOS

107. BAND

WIEN 2017

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IM SELBSTVERLAG DES INSTITUTS FÜR ORIENTALISTIK

WIENER ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR DIE KUNDE DES MORGENLANDES

**107**

**2017**

## Inhalt des 107. Bandes

### Aufsätze

Nicla De Zorzi .....	11
Another Teratomantic Tablet from Tigunānum	
Issam K. H. Halayqa.....	19
Silver Tetrachms from Kherbit Beit Nasib West of Hebron	
Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila .....	27
Rustam in Arabic Literature and the Middle Persian <i>Khwadāynāmag</i>	
Michael Reinhard Heß.....	59
Martyrdom in ‘Imādeddīn Nesīmī’s Turkic Divan: A Literary Analysis – Part II	
Michael Jursa and Céline Debourse .....	77
A Babylonian Priestly Martyr, a King-like Priest, and the Nature of Late Babylonian Priestly Literature	
Jan Keetman .....	99
Die Markierung des Passivs im Sumerischen	
Abdelkrim Lardi .....	127
Der Faqīh als Dichter: Am Beispiel von ‘Abdallāh Gannūns Werk <i>Adab al-Fuqahā’</i>	
Rüdiger Lohlker.....	143
Eine Bibliothek arabischer Atheisten	
Alex Mallet.....	153
Two Writings of al-Ṭurṭūshī as Evidence for Early Muslim Reactions to the Frankish Crusader Presence in the Levant	
Haggai Mazuz.....	179
‘Abd al-Ḥaqq al-Islāmī—An Independent-Minded Polemicist or a Mimic of His Predecessors?	
Giuliano Mion .....	191
On the Arabic Varieties Described in the <i>Ġumāna fī ʔizālat ar-raqāna</i>	
Khalid Mourigh and Maarten Kossmann .....	221
Moroccan Berber Songs about the Refugee Trail	
René Neumann .....	235
Postwertzeichen als historische Zeugnisse: Ein Einblick in türkische Briefmarken	
Nefeli Papoutsakis.....	251
Al-Aḥnaf al-‘Ukbarī: A Sui-Generis Tenth-Century Arab Poet. His Life and His <i>Sāsānī</i> Poems (includes a CD-ROM)	
Judith Pfitzner.....	261
Von Bergeseln und Göttersilber: Diri-Komposita und Ähnliches	

Erich Prokosch.....	277
Der zweigehörnte Alexander: Eine falsche Übersetzung, die die Zeiten überdauert hat	
Maxim Yosefi.....	289
Muhammad's Attitude towards Poets and Poetry as Described in the Islamic Tradition: A Conflict Hidden Behind the Discourse	

### Rezensionsartikel

Alexander Borg .....	317
Yemeni Herbal Medicine and Beyond	

### Besprechungen

#### Ägyptologie

Fischer-Elfert, H.-W. ; Parkinson, R. (eds.): Studies on the Middle Kingdom: In memory of Detlef Franke. (M. A. Stadler) .....	337
Jansen-Winkel, K.: Inschriften der Spätzeit, Teil IV: Die 26. Dynastie. (G. Vittmann).....	344
Leitz, C.: Geographisch-osirianische Prozessionen aus Philae, Dendara und Athribis. Soubassementstudien II. (G. Vittmann).....	348
Martin, G. T.: Umm el-Qaab VII. Private Stelae of the Early Dynastic Period from the Royal Cemetery at Abydos. (A. von Lieven) .....	352
Stadler, M. A.: Einführung in die ägyptische Religion ptolemäisch-römischer Zeit nach den demotischen religiösen Texten. (M. Westerhoff) .....	353
Stauth, G.: Herausforderung Ägypten: Religion und Authentizität in der globalen Moderne. (U. Brees) .....	356

#### Alter Orient und Altes Testament

Bartelmus, A.: Fragmente einer großen Sprache. Sumerisch im Kontext der Schreiberausbildung des kassitenzeitlichen Babylonien. (J. Keetman) .....	359
Durand, J.-M.; Guichard, M.; Römer, T. (éds.): Tabou et transgressions. Actes du colloque organisé par le Collège de France, Paris, les 11-12 avril 2012. (S. Ermidoro) .....	361

Durand, J.-M.; Marti, L.; Römer, T. (éds.): Colères et repentirs divins. Actes du colloque organisé par le Collège de France, Paris, les 24 et 25 avril 2013. (M. Jaques) .....	364
Espak, P.: The God Enki in Sumerian Royal Ideology and Mythology. (G. Konstantopoulos) .....	369
Gabbay, U.: The Eršema Prayers of the First Millennium BC. (J. Pfitzner) .....	371
Gordin, S.: Hittite Scribal Circles: Scholarly Tradition and Writing Habits. (G. Torri).....	375
Greco, A.: Garden Administration in the Ġirsu Province during the Neo-Sumerian Period. (D. A. Warburton).....	378
Maier, M. G.: Hethitisch <sup>o</sup> uant- und Verwan(d)tes. Untersuchungen zur Vertretung des indogermanischen Possessivsuffixes *-uent- in den anatolischen Sprachen. (M. Frotscher) .....	387
Pinnock, F. (ed.): Paolo Matthiae – Studies on the Archaeology of Ebla 1980-2010. (M. Iamoni) .....	393
Roßberger, E.: Schmuck für Lebende und Tote: Form und Funktion des Schmuckinventars der Königsgruft von Qatna in seinem soziokulturellen Umfeld. (A. Nunn).....	394
Steible, H.; Yıldız, F.: Wirtschaftstexte aus Fara II. Texte der Viehverwaltung von Šuruppak. (I. Schrakamp) .....	397
Volk, K. (Hrsg.): Erzählungen aus dem Land Sumer. (J. Pfitzner) .....	400

## Arabistik

Aarab, A.; Lherminier, P.: Le Livre des animaux d'Al-Jāhiz. (H. Eisenstein).....	405
Blohm, D.; Fischer, W.; Fromm, W.-D.: Lehrgang Arabisch. Standardsprache der Gegenwart. Lehrbuch. Grammatik – Texte – Übungen. (L. Nigst) .....	406
Bruweleit, S.: Aspect, Tense and Action in the Dialect of Beirut. (S. Naīm).....	409
Censi, M.: Le Corps dans le roman des écrivaines syriennes contemporaines: Dire, écrire, inscrire la différence. (W. Trimmel) .....	412
Davey, R.J.: Coastal Dhofari Arabic: A Sketch Grammar. (J.C.E. Watson) .....	414
Diem, W.: Fürsorgebriefe in der arabisch-islamischen Welt des 8.-14. Jahrhunderts. Eine sozial- und mentalitätsgeschichtliche Untersuchung. (U. Brees) .....	416
Holes, C.: Dialect, Culture, and Society in Eastern Arabia, vol. 3: Phonology, Morphology, Syntax, Style. (M. Persson).....	417

Jalaly, A.E.: Initiation à l'arabe parlé au Maroc. Niveau intermédiaire. (J. Sieberer).....	420
Orfali, B.; Baalbaki, R. (eds.): The Book of Noble Character: Critical Edition of <i>Makārim al-akhlāq wa-maḥāsīn al-ādāb wa-badā'i</i> <i>al-awṣāf wa-gharā'ib al-tashbihāt</i> . Attributed to Abū Manṣūr al-Tha'ālibī (d. 429/1039). (R. Weipert) .....	423
Schopen, A.; Strauß, K. W.: Aḥmad ibn Yūsuf at-Tifāšīs „Buch der königlichen Steine“: Eine Mineralienkunde für die arabischen Herrscher des 7./13. Jahrhunderts. (H. Eisenstein).....	425
Spitaler, A.: Erste Halbverse in der klassisch-arabischen Literatur. Posthum herausgegeben, mit Titel, Vorwort und Anhang versehen von Kathrin Müller. (S. Weninger).....	426
Strotmann, V.: Majd al-Dīn al-Firūzābādī (1329-1415): A Polymath on the Eve of the Early Modern Period. (R. Weipert) .....	428

## Iranistik

Gyselen, R. (ed.): Objets et documents inscrits en <i>pārsīg</i> . (J. Wiesehöfer).....	432
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## Islamwissenschaft

Adang, C.; Fierro, M.; Schmidtke, S. (eds.): Ibn Hazm of Cordoba: The Life and Works of a Controversial Thinker. (R. Lohlker) .....	434
Berkel, M. van; El Cheikh, N.M.; Kennedy, H.; Osti, L.: Crisis and Continuity at the Abbasid Court: Formal and Informal Politics in the Caliphate of al-Muqtadir (295-320/908-32). (L. Reinhardt) .....	435
Braun, C.: Das Kitāb Sidrat al-muntahā des Pseudo-Ibn Waḥšīya. Einleitung, Edition und Übersetzung eines hermeneutisch-allegorischen Traktats zur Alchemie. (R. Lohlker).....	437
Dagli, C.K.: Ibn al-'Arabī and Islamic Intellectual Culture: From Mysticism to Philosophy. (R. Lohlker).....	438
Darling, L. T.: A History of Social Justice and Political Power in the Middle East: The Circle of Justice from Mesopotamia to Globalization. (R. Lohlker) .....	439
Determann, J.M.: Historiography in Saudi Arabia: Globalization and the State in the Middle East. (R. Lohlker).....	440
Fowden, G.: Before and After Muhammad: The First Millennium Refocused. (G. Stauth) .....	441

Geissinger, A.: Gender and Muslim Constructions of Exegetical Authority: A Rereading of the Classical Genre of Qur'ān Commentary. (L. Abid).....	444
Gray, D.H.: Beyond Feminism and Islamism: Gender and Equality in North Africa. (L. Abid).....	446
Joseph, S. (general ed.); Booth, M.; Davary, B.; Gualtieri, S.; Shehabuddin, E. (assoc. eds.): Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures. Disciplinary Paradigms and Approaches: 2003-2013. (L. Abid)...	450
Landau, J.: De Rythme & de Raison : Lecture croisée de deux traités de poétique du XIIIe siècle. (R. Lohlker).....	450
Manea, E.: Women and Sharia Law. (R. Lohlker).....	451
Manemann, J.: Der Dschihad und der Nihilismus des Westens: Warum ziehen junge Europäer in den Krieg? (R. Lohlker).....	453
Mikhail, M.S.A.: From Byzantine to Islamic Egypt: Religion, Identity and Politics after the Arab Conquest. (L. Reinhardt).....	455
Moubayed, S.: Under the Black Flag: An Exclusive Insight into the Inner Working of ISIS. (R. Lohlker).....	458
Müller, C.: Der Kadi und seine Zeugen: Studie der mamlukischen Haram-Dokumente aus Jerusalem. (L. Reinhardt).....	459
Pay, V.N.: Republican Islam: Power and Authority in Iran. (A. Hager).....	461
Preuschhaft, M.: Religion, Nation und Identität: Eine Untersuchung des zeitgenössischen saudischen Diskurses zum Umgang mit religiöser Pluralität. (J.M. Determann).....	463
Said, B.T.: Hymnen des Jihads: Naschids im Kontext jihadistischer Mobilisierung (R. Lohlker).....	465
Schulze, R.: Der Koran und die Genealogie des Islam. (R. Lohlker).....	467
Touati, H. (éd.): De la figuration humaine au portrait dans l'art islamique. (N. Ben Azzouna).....	468
Würtz, T.: Islamische Theologie im 14. Jahrhundert: Auferstehungslehre, Handlungstheorie und Schöpfungsvorstellungen im Werk von Sa'd ad-Dīn at-Taftāzānī. (R. Lohlker).....	470

#### Semitistik

Frajzyngier, Z.; Shay, E. (eds): The Afroasiatic languages. (R. Voigt) ..	472
Edzard, L. (ed.): The Morpho-Syntactic and Lexical Encoding of Tense and Aspect in Semitic. (C. Stadel).....	485

## Turkologie

Heinzelmann, T.: Populäre religiöse Literatur und Buchkultur im Osmanischen Reich: Eine Studie zur Nutzung der Werke der Brüder Yazicioğlu. (G. Procházka-Eisl) .....	488
Károly, L.: Deverbal Nominals in Yakut: A Historical Approach. (S. Georg) .....	489
Knüppel, M.; Tongerloo, A. (Hrsg.): Die orientalistische Gelehrtenrepublik am Vorabend des Ersten Weltkrieges: Der Briefwechsel zwischen Willi Bang(-Kaup) und Friedrich Carl Andreas aus den Jahren 1889 bis 1914. (D. Durkin-Meisterernst) .....	493
Landmann, A.: Baschkirisch. Kurzgrammatik. (M. R. Heß) .....	494
Nohl, A. M.; Pusch, B. (Hrsg.): Bildung und gesellschaftlicher Wandel in der Türkei. Historische und aktuelle Aspekte. (H. Doğanalp-Votzi) .....	496

## Varia

Abdulkhaliq, Z.: La construction de l'identité nationale kurde : À travers la presse au Kurdistan d'Irak de 1991 à 2010. (M. Six-Hohenbalken) .....	500
Bono, S.: Schiavi. Una storia mediterranea (XVI-XIX secolo). (W. Sauer) .....	502
Cantera, A.: Vers une édition de la liturgie longue zoroastrienne: Pensées et travaux préliminaires. (M. Hutter) .....	505
Mlodoch, K.: The Limits of Trauma Discourse: Women Anfal Survivors in Kurdistan-Iraq. (T. Schmidinger) .....	510
Soud, S.: L'Arabie saoudite, ce pays méconnu. (J. M. Determann) .....	513

## Inhaltsanzeigen

Boroujerdi, M. (ed.): Mirror of the Muslim Prince: Islam and the Theory of Statecraft. (R. Lohlker) .....	515
Dévényi, K.; Abdul-Fattah, M.; Fiedler, K.: Catalogue of the Arabic Manuscripts in the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. (H. Eisenstein) .....	516
Giunchi, E. (ed.): Adjudicating Family Law in Muslim Courts. (R. Lohlker) .....	517
Jacobs, A.; Flore, D. (dir.): Les combattants européens en Syrie. (R. Lohlker) .....	518



Kendall, E.; Stein, E. (eds.): Twenty-First Century Jihad: Law Society and Military Action. (R. Lohlker) .....	518
Klemm, V.; Al-Sha'ar, N. (eds.): Sources and Approaches across Disciplines in Near Eastern Studies. (R. Lohlker) .....	520
Lange, C. (ed.): Locating Hell in Islamic Traditions. (R. Lohlker).....	521
Laut, J.P., unter Mitarbeit von Barbara Pusch: Literatur und Gesellschaft: Kleine Schriften von Erika Glassen zur türkischen Literaturgeschichte und zum Kulturwandel in der modernen Türkei. (G. Procházka-Eisl) .....	522
Liebrenz, B.: Die Rifa'īya aus Damaskus: Eine Privatbibliothek im osmanischen Syrien und ihr kulturelles Umfeld. (R. Lohlker).....	523
Michalak-Pikulska, B.; Eisener, R. (eds.): Ibadi Jurisprudence: Origins, Developments and Cases. (R. Lohlker) .....	524
Quiring-Zoche, R.: Arabische Handschriften, Teil 7: Arabische Handschriften der Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin – Preussischer Kulturbesitz. (H. Eisenstein).....	524
 <b>Publikationen des Instituts für Orientalistik</b> .....	 526

# Silver Tetradrachms from Kherbit Beit Nasib West of Hebron

By ISSAM K. H. HALAYQA (Birzeit University)

## Abstract

This study deals with six silver coins of the tetradrachm denomination that were found in Kherbit Beit Nasib west of Hebron. The coins are large, undated and struck over Roman coins during the third and last year of the Bar Kokhba's rebellion (134-135 A.D.) against Roman rule. They are relatively well preserved. The motifs and the texts that appear on obverses and reverses of these coins are repeated and homogenous in form and content.

**Keywords:** Silver coins of Bar Kokhba's war against the Romans. Numismatic finds from Hebron, Kherbit Beit Nasib.

## 1. Introduction

The coins were confiscated from antiquities dealers by the Palestinian tourism police in Hebron on 17<sup>th</sup> June 2001. After they were recovered, they were brought to the Department of Palestinian Antiquities and Cultural Heritage<sup>1</sup> and labelled by national serial numbers (HB 4547, HB 4553, HB 4565, HB 4567, HB 4571, and HB 4573). According to the antiquity looter's confession to the police department, the coins were illegally dug up and looted from Kherbit Beit Nasib (2.5 km southwest of Beit Ula and 14 km northwest of Hebron, sea level 500 m, coordinates E-151050 / N-110430, not retrieved in a controlled excavation). Due to these circumstances, specifying their archaeological context is not possible. The coins were not minted but struck over Roman coins<sup>2</sup> and they reference the third year of Bar Kokhba's war (134-135 A.D.). Apart from light decay on the obverses and reverses of some coins, traces of copper patina, and the effacement of some letters as a result of usage, the coins are in good condition.

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<sup>1</sup> My special thanks go to J. Yaseen, the Director of Excavations and Museums, M. Jaradat, and Kh. Khanfar from the Department of Palestinian Antiquities and Cultural Heritage, for granting me access to study this material in April 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Bar Kokhba's large silver coins were struck over Roman tetradrachms from Antioch and Tyre, while most of the smaller silver coins were struck over Roman denarii from Rome, Cappadocia and Bostra (Zlotnik 2008: 139). The overstriking of coins extended from the reign of Augustus until the reign of Trajan and these coins were widely circulated during the time of Hadrian (Meshorer 1982, II: 135).

## 2. Decorative Patterns

Obverses of the coins depict stereotyped, well-known and repeatedly given motifs; they all display a tetrastyle facade<sup>3</sup> with either four pillars or modified Doric columns (Muehsam 1966: 37). Within the facade is a design composed of oval, dotted lines situated between internal columns, like an object hidden behind a veil.<sup>4</sup> A rosette<sup>5</sup> (Meshorer 1982, II: 272; Mildenberg 1984: 141, 152ff.) is seen above the tetrastyle facade. The reverses depict a centrally placed large *lulab*<sup>6</sup> with a straight stem; and a small *etrog* (citron, citrus fruit)<sup>7</sup> appears diagonally placed on the left side of the *lulab* either in the low or high field (Romanoff 1944: 436ff.; Mildenberg 1984: 31f., and note 103; see Meshorer 1982, II: 137f.).

<sup>3</sup> Two interpretations, with no further explanation, have been proposed for this design, either The Temple or a synagogue (Mildenberg 1984: 33). For a representation of The Temple on coins, see Muehsam (1966: 4-18, 37-42). Madden (1976: 239, 244) assumed that this motif depicted the tetrastyle facade and gates with "Solomon's colonnade" below them. Romanoff (1943: 175) holds the design to be the inner part of The Temple. For other proposals, see Meshorer (1982, II: 138-140). Although there was no temple contemporary to Bar Kokhba (Mildenberg 1984: 31, 33 and notes 80, 93), scholars insist that this design represents the facade of The Temple and it appears as a decorative element on all the obverses of the tetradrachms. This insistence was based solely on the description of The Temple given by Josephus (Jewish Ant. III, 6, 4 (122f.); ib., III, 7, 7 [181f.]).

<sup>4</sup> Two identifications for this design were made: The Ark of the Covenant and the Torah Shrine. See Mildenberg for the discussion (1984: 33-46).

<sup>5</sup> This motif is attested on many coins; some scholars consider it either to be the star that signifies divine glory (Romanoff 1943:17 ) or an allusion to Bar Kokhba's nickname "Son of the Star" (Rogers 1914: 53; Madden 1976: 239).

<sup>6</sup> The *lulab* consists of three bundled branches (palm, willow, and myrtle) together in a bunch, from the centre of which a tipped palm protrudes and is flanked by two tipped branches, on the right myrtle, and on the left willow. The bundle is surrounded by small pellets – an indication of fruits (Romanoff 1944: 437; see 1942: 7, 14; 1943: 172 note 157; Mildenberg 1984: 123). Four species of plants were used during the feast of the Tabernacles: the *lulab* (palm branch) is tied together with the willow and myrtle branches and the *etrog* (Meshorer 1982, II: 138). The use of these plants was not only religious and political but it was also a reaction against the Roman laws that forbid the use of these plants in the feast (Meshorer 1982, II: 141). See <http://www.wildwinds.com/coins/greece/judaea/t.html>. Accessed 10 July 2015.

<sup>7</sup> For its usage and appearance on coins, see Madden (1976: 73, 203).

### 3. Texts

Texts that appear on these coins are short in form and present ten characters<sup>8</sup> that are repeatedly used on both sides of the coins. The inscriptions on the obverses of the six coins are written in two groups of letters with the same placement: two letters on the right side, and three on the left side of the external pillars. They form the well-known personal name  $\text{šm}^{\text{[3]}}\text{[10]}$ <sup>9</sup> "Simon".<sup>10</sup> Reverses display homogeneity in content and in placement of the letters that form the phrase  $\text{ל}^{\text{[1]}}\text{[11]}\text{[12]}\text{[13]}\text{[14]}\text{[15]}\text{[16]}\text{[17]}\text{[18]}\text{[19]}\text{[20]}$  "for the freedom of Jerusalem".<sup>11</sup> This text is usually divided into parts that are inscribed on the right and the left sides of the *lulab* and the *etrog*, and it reads counter clockwise from the lower right. The texts do not indicate a date, but they are usually attributed to the year three (134-135 A.D.) (Kanael 1963: 60; Kindler 1978: 59).

### 4. Analysis

#### 1. HB 4547

**Object:** Tetrachem. Material: silver. Diameter: 18.7 mm. Weight: 14.27 g.

**State:** Obverse: well preserved, traces of copper patina are evident on the upper and left parts. The three letters on the left side are partially damaged. Reverse: well preserved, half of the dotted border line remains on the left and lower sides. The *lamed* is erased and the *taw* on the right side is broken.

**Motif and legend:** Obverse: tetrastyle facade with four fluted columns, and an ark and scrolls in centre (viewed from the end). An inscription is written in two parts (two letters on the right, and three letters on the left) on both sides of the external pillars: it reads  $\text{šm}^{\text{[3]}}\text{[10]}$  "Simon".

Reverse: *lulab* with a straight stem in the centre and *etrog* placed diagonally in left field against the *lulab*, both motifs are encircled by an inscription that reads counter clockwise from the lower right:  $\text{ל}^{\text{[1]}}\text{[11]}\text{[12]}\text{[13]}\text{[14]}\text{[15]}\text{[16]}\text{[17]}\text{[18]}\text{[19]}\text{[20]}$  "for the freedom of Jerusalem".

**Find spot:** Kherbit Beit Nasib, find context: unknown.

**Date:** undated, attributed to the year three (134-135 A.D.).

**Parallels:** Muehsam 1966 Type VII 13a, 15b,c,e-g, 16c, 18a, 19a, 20a; Reifenberg 1969 nos. 166-168; Meshorer 1978 nos. 199, 199A; Mildenberg

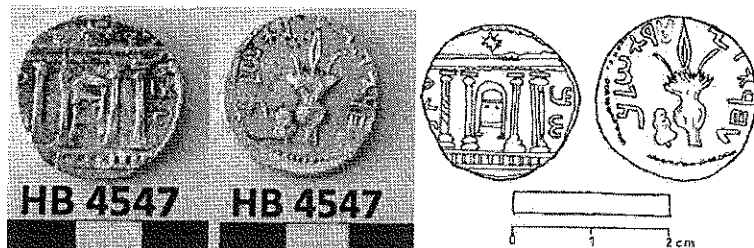
<sup>8</sup> For the shape and the development of the letters on the coins during the period of this revolt, see Kadman (1954: 157-169); Madden (1976: 33f., table p.42); Mildenberg (1984: 349-350).

<sup>9</sup> The *shin* in  $\text{šm}^{\text{[3]}}\text{[10]}$  and  $\text{yrwšlm}$  is round in the lower part, characteristic of this period (Kindler 1978: 61).

<sup>10</sup> On this name which appears commonly on coins see Zeitlin 1952: 77-82; Madden 1964: 20-21; 1976: 193.

<sup>11</sup> The coins that bear this phrase are usually dated to the third year of the Bar Kokhba's war (Kanael 1963: 60; Kindler 1978: 59), and such a phrase is attested on more than half of the coins of Bar Kokhba up to date (Meshorer 1978: 94).

1984 nos. 49, 54-57, 59-60, 62, 65, 67, 70, 73, 77-78, 80, 87, 96, 102-103;  
Hendin 1987 nos. 162, 163; Meshorer 1982, II nos. 52.



## 2. HB 4553

**Object:** Tetradrachm. Material: silver. Diameter: 18.7 mm. Weight: 14.08 g.

**State:** Obverse: well preserved, traces of copper patina evident. Reverse: in good condition; motifs and letters are clearly discernible.

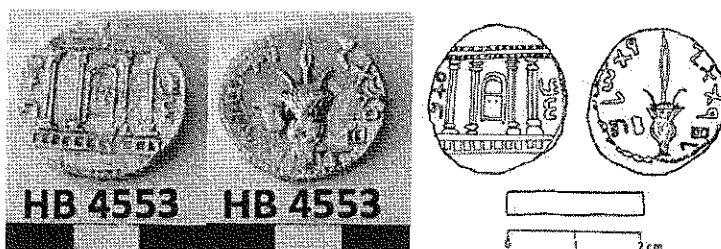
**Motif and legend:** Obverse: traces of a rosette above the tetrastyle facade with four fluted columns and an ark and scrolls in the centre (viewed from the end). An inscription is written in two parts on both sides of the external pillars (two letters on the right, and three letters on the left):  $\text{šm}^{\text{w}}$  "Simon".

Reverse: shorter *lulab* in the centre and an *etrog* placed on the left side of the *lulab*. Both motifs are encircled by a text that reads counter clockwise from the lower right:  $\text{ל}^{\text{w}}$  *yrwšlm* "for the freedom of Jerusalem".

**Find spot:** Kherbit Beit Nasib, find's context: unknown.

**Date:** undated, attributed to the year three (134-135 A.D.).

**Parallels:** Muehsam 1966 Type VII 13b-15a, 16a,d,f., 17a, 20b-f, 21a; Reifenberg 1969 nos. 166-168; Meshorer 1978 no. 200; Mildenberg 1984 nos. 46-48, 51, 61, 63, 66, 68-72, 79, 81-85, 88-95, 101.



**3. HB 4565**

**Object:** Tetradrachm, Material: silver. Diameter: 18.6 mm. Weight: 14.76 g.

**State:** Obverse: remains of copper patina, the five letters on both sides of the external pillars are slightly erased. Reverse: traces of black and brown dirt, and remains of copper patina can be seen below the *etrog*.

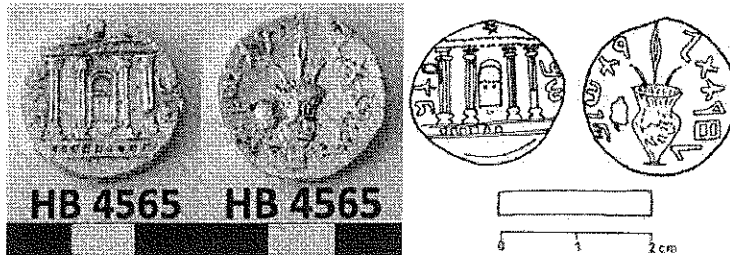
**Motif and legend:** Obverse: tetrastyle facade with four fluted columns and an ark and scrolls in the centre (viewed from the end), no rosette was noticed. On both sides of the external pillars, an inscription is written in two parts (two letters on the right, and three letters on the left):  $\text{šm}^{\text{BC}}\text{w}^{\text{h}}$  "Simon".

Reverse: *lulab* in the centre and *etrog* in higher left field, encircled by an inscription that reads counter clockwise from the lower right:  $\text{l}^{\text{BC}}\text{w}^{\text{h}}\text{y}^{\text{r}}\text{w}^{\text{h}}\text{s}^{\text{h}}\text{l}^{\text{m}}$  "for the freedom of Jerusalem".

**Find spot:** Kherbit Beit Nasib, find's context: unknown.

**Date:** undated, attributed to the year three (134-135 A.D.).

**Parallels:** Muehsam 1966 Type VII 13a, 15b,c,e-g, 16c, 18a, 19a, 20a; Reifenberg 1969 nos. 166-168; Meshorer 1978 nos. 199, 199A; Mildenberg 1984 nos. 49, 54-57, 59-60, 62, 65, 67, 70, 73, 77-78, 80, 87, 96, 102-103.

**4. HB 4567**

**Object:** Tetradrachm. Material: silver. Diameter: 19.4 mm. Weight: 14.27 g.

**State:** Well preserved. Obverse: cracks on the left side and traces of black silver patina and dirt can be seen, the *nun* on the left side of the pillars is erased. Reverse: it shows brown dirt, slit of breakage on the right edge, remains of the dotted border line on the left and lower sides of the coin. The letters *lamed*, *het*, and *resh* on the right side of the *etrog* are effaced.

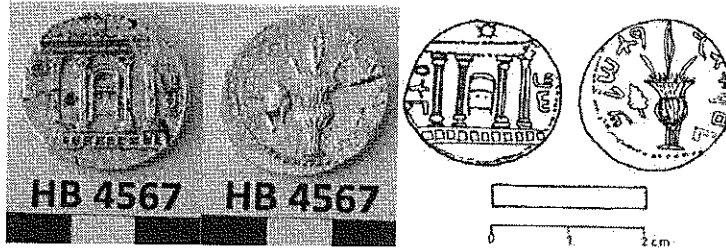
**Motif and legend:** Obverse: traces of a rosette, tetrastyle facade with four fluted columns and an ark and scrolls in the centre (viewed from the end). On both sides of the external pillars an inscription is written in two parts (two letters on the right, and three letters on the left), it reads  $\text{šm}^{\text{BC}}\text{w}^{\text{h}}$  "Simon".

Reverse: *lulab* in the centre and *etrog* placed diagonally high in the left field, encircled by text that reads counter clockwise from the lower right:  $\text{l}^{\text{BC}}\text{w}^{\text{h}}\text{y}^{\text{r}}\text{w}^{\text{h}}\text{s}^{\text{h}}\text{l}^{\text{m}}$  "for the freedom of Jerusalem".

**Find spot:** Kherbit Beit Nasib, find's context: unknown.

**Date:** undated, attributed to the year three (134-135 A.D.).

**Parallels:** Muehsam 1966 Type VII 13a, 15b,c,e-g, 16c, 18a, 19a, 20a; Reifenberg 1969 nos. 166-168; Meshorer 1978 nos. 199, 199A; Mildenberg 1984 nos. 49, 54-57, 59-60, 62, 65, 67, 70, 73, 77-78, 80, 87, 96, 102-103.



### 5. HB 4571

**Object:** Tetradrachm. Material: silver. Diameter: 17.7 mm. Weight: 14.73 g.

**State:** Well preserved. Obverse: the three letters on the left side are partially erased. Reverse: the dotted border line is seen on the lower and the left side of the coin, letters on the right side of the *etrog* are slightly erased but their remains are still discernible.

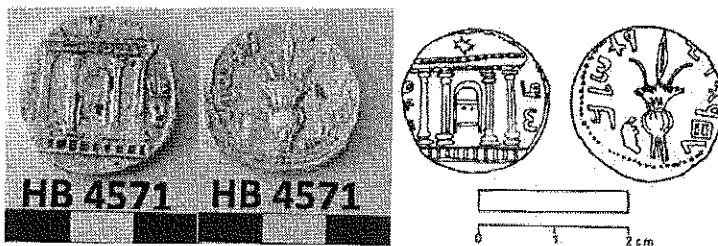
**Motif and legend:** Obverse: it depicts a rosette over the tetrastyle facade with four fluted columns and an ark and scrolls in the centre (viewed from the end). A text is written in two parts on both sides of the external pillars (two letters on the right, and three letters on the left): it reads *šm* [ ] "Simon".

Reverse: *lulab* in the centre and *etrog* to the left of it, surrounded by a text, *l* [ ] *wt yrwšlm* "for the freedom of Jerusalem".

**Find spot:** Kherbit Beit Nasib, find's context: unknown.

**Date:** undated, attributed to the year three (134-135 A.D.).

**Parallels:** Muehsam 1966 Type VII 13b-15a, 16a,d,f., 17a, 20b-f, 21a; Reifenberg 1969 nos. 166-168; Madden 1976: 239 no. 18; Meshorer 1978 no. 200A; Mildenberg 1984 nos. 46-48, 51, 61, 63, 66, 68-72, 74, 79, 81-85, 88-95, 101. Meshorer 1982, II nos. 51, 53-53c.



## 6. HB 4573

**Object:** Tetrachram. Material: silver. Diameter: 19.5 mm. Weight: 14.37 g.

**State:** Obverse: well preserved, but it has traces of black silver patina and brown dirt, the motif is clear, three letters on the left side of the pillars are partially damaged but still legible, on the lower right edge there is small breakage. Reverse: it has small breakage on the edge of the left side of the *etrog*. The letters *yod*, *resh* and *waw* that form part of the word *yrwšlm* "Jerusalem" on the upper left side of the *etrog* are erased.

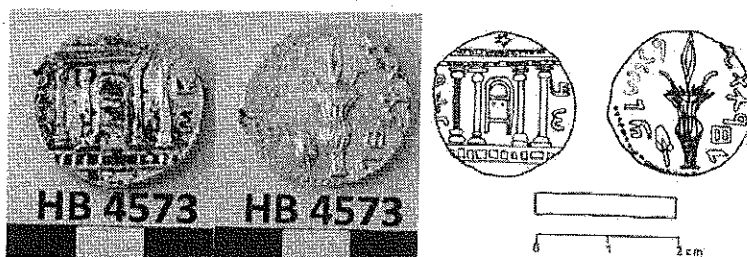
**Motif and legend:** Obverse: a rosette above the tetrastyle facade with four fluted columns and an ark and scrolls in the centre (viewed from the end). On both sides of external pillars a text is written in two parts (two letters on the right, and three letters on the left): it reads *šm* <sup>l</sup>*l* "Simon".

Reverse: *lulab* in the centre and *etrog* placed diagonally in the left field, and an inscription appears on both sides: the text reads counter clockwise from the lower right: *l* <sup>l</sup>*l* *yrwšlm* "for the freedom of Jerusalem".

**Find spot:** Kherbit Beit Nasib, find's context: unknown.

**Date:** undated, attributed to the year three (134-135 A.D.).

**Parallels:** Muehsam 1966 Type VII 13b-15a, 16a,d,f., 17a, 20b-f, 21a; Reifenberg 1969 nos. 166-168; Madden 1976: 239 no. 18; Meshorer 1978 no. 200A; Mildenberg 1984 nos. 46-48, 51, 61, 63, 66, 68-72, 74, 79, 81-85, 88-95, 101. Meshorer 1982, II nos. 51, 53-53c.



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