

'Shimeon Bar Kosiba to Yehonathan  
and to Masabala . . . let all  
men from Tekoa and other places  
who are with you, be sent to me  
without delay. And if  
you shall not send them, let it  
be known to you, that you will  
be punished. . . .'

En-gedi, being far away from the battlefield, was a natural haven for shirkers and Yehonathan and Masabala were apparently accused of giving them shelter.

c) The arrest of Yeshua bar Tadmoraya: the order proceeds to decree: 'And seize Yeshua bar Tadmoraya [= the Palmyrenian?] and send him to me in safe custody.' Who was this Yeshua? We do not know, but most probably he was an officer: 'and do not neglect to take off his sword'. The letter is signed by a certain Shmuel bar 'Ami.

### A call for help

In a short letter, written on a long papyrus (twenty-one by nine centimetres) which is rather difficult to decipher in its entirety, Bar-Kokhba asks for reinforcements: 'Shimeon bar Kosiba to Yehonathan son of Be'ayan and to Masabala . . . get hold of the young men [or: servants] and come with them; if not – a punishment. And I shall deal with the Romans.' This is the only document of Bar-Kokhba in which the Romans are so designated. Normally they are referred to as the 'gentiles'. The order proceeds with a demand that Yehonathan and Masabala bring with them a certain Thyrsis son of Tinianus (or Theodoros) 'since we need him'. Thyrsis was apparently a non-Jew who may have co-operated with the forces of Bar-Kokhba. Or the reference may, of course, be to a man who was captured. The letter ends with the usual greeting 'Be well' (literally: Be in peace).

En-gedi, the only village in Bar-Kokhba's realm situated on the shores of the Dead Sea, is the subject of a very simple request written informally in Aramaic by a crude hand: 'From Shimeon to Yehonathan and Masabala, peace! . . . send to the camp four [donkey] loads of salt. . . .'

In another short letter (in Aramaic) but written by a very trained scribe, we read the following:

'Letter of Shimeon bar Kosiba, peace!  
To Yehonathan son of Be'aya [my order is] that  
whatever Elisha  
Tells you do to him and help  
him and those with him [or: in every action].  
Be well.'

The subject of this letter, addressed only to Yehonathan, was

*opposite above* A papyrus letter beginning 'Letter of Shimeon bar Kosiba, peace. To Yehonathan bar Be'aya.' It deals with an unspecified mission of a certain Elisha

*opposite below* The top of a letter ordering Eleazar bar Hitta to be sent to Bar-Kokhba before the Sabbath

### A secret mission

קארטא ש"ע בר 2017 ל' תמוז  
אונזער געזונט צו אונז  
ל' תמוז זאגט און  
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apparently confidential, but Elisha (whoever he may have been) was authorised to transmit it by word of mouth to Yehonathan. Incidentally, this is the only letter which actually begins with the word 'letter'.

#### Eleazar bar Hitta

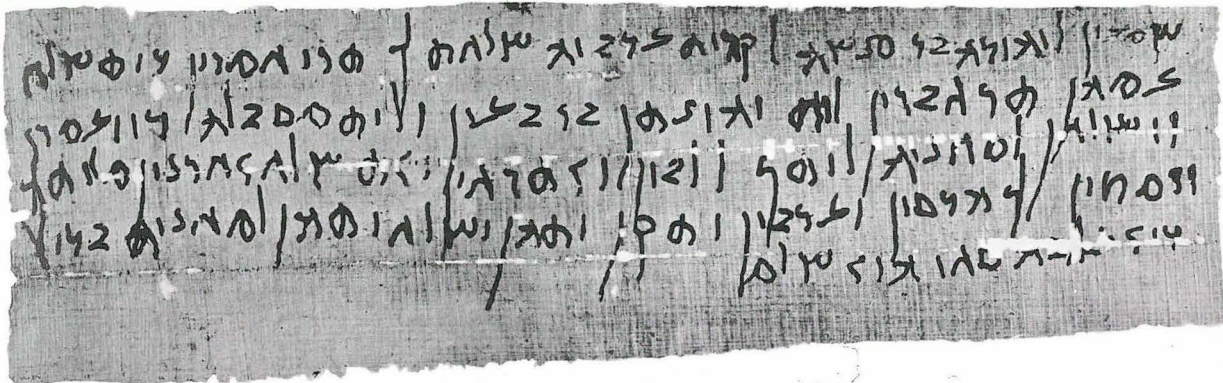
One of the most interesting orders dealing with an important citizen of En-gedi, is again written in Aramaic, on a medium-sized papyrus (twelve by seven centimetres). The letter is preserved in its entirety, and it contains thirteen short lines, which, in typical Bar-Kokhba style, deal with the arrest and confiscation of property of a certain Eleazar bar Hitta (see picture on page 127):

'Shimeon bar Kosiba  
to Yehonathan bar Be'ayan  
and to Masabala bar Shimeon  
[my order is] that you will send to me Eleazar  
bar Hitta immediately, before  
the Sabbath [or: the end of the week].'

This Eleazar became known to us later from other documents discovered as a wealthy landowner in En-gedi (see Chapters 12 and 16). Apparently he did not co-operate whole-heartedly with Bar-Kokhba. The order goes on to specify what should be done with his property: 'The wheat and fruit should be confiscated and if anyone oppose you, send him to me and I shall punish him.' Yehonathan and Masabala are ordered to see that the herds should not trample and destroy the trees; then again a warning of 'a severe punishment' and finally: 'and as for the spice orchard, let no one get anywhere near it'! At the end there is the following signature: 'Shimeon bar Yehudah has written this,' obviously the scribe. The particular order to protect the 'spice orchard' is of great importance. En-gedi was renowned for its various spices, particularly the balsam shrub. Its quality was so well known that according to Pliny in *Historia Naturalis*, when the Romans conquered En-gedi in the First Revolt, they had to fight over every shrub against the Jews who wanted to destroy them and deprive the Romans of these precious spices.

#### The 'four kinds'

We come now to one of the most interesting letters in Aramaic consisting of five long lines (the papyrus is twenty-two by six centimetres). It deals with a request by Bar-Kokhba to supply him with the 'four kinds' – the *lulav* (palm branch), *ethrog* (citron), *hadas* (myrtle) and *arava* (willow) – required for the feast of Succoth (the feast of booths or tabernacles). The pathetic nature of the request lies in the fact that it is made in the midst of the war (or more probably towards its end) and Bar-Kokhba goes into great trouble to get them. It is also a testimony to Bar-Kokhba's strict religious piety. There are many problems concerning this letter, so it might be best to present it as it is and then single out the main points:



- 1 'Shimeon to Yehudah bar Menashe to Qiryath 'Arab(v)aya I have sent to you two donkeys that you shall send
- 2 with them two men to Yehonathan bar Be'ayan and to Masabala in order that they shall pack
- 3 and send to the camp, towards you, palm branches [*lulavin*] and citrons [*ethrogin*]. And you, from your place, send others
- 4 who will bring you myrtles [*hadasin*] and willows [*aravin*]. See that they are tithed [literally: set in order] and send them to the camp.
- 5 (the request is made) since the army is big [in Aramaic: *bdyl dy 'okhlesa sgy*]. Be well.'

This is the only letter of Bar-Kokhba not addressed to Yehonathan and Masabala, but to a person unknown to us named Yehudah son of Menashe, who dwells in Qiryath 'Aravaya. Bar-Kokhba is sending him two donkeys to take two people to Yehonathan and Masabala who, as we know, were in En-gedi. They are to load the donkeys with palm branches and citrons (for which En-gedi was famous) and send these towards Yehudah. Bar-Kokhba also orders Yehudah to send other men to the surrounding area of Qiryath 'Aravaya for myrtles and willows – for which the area is presumably known. It is interesting that Bar-Kokhba gives specific orders to Yehudah to 'set [the citrons] in order'. 'Setting in order' is a common expression in Talmudic literature, referring to setting aside the tithe. Bar-Kokhba wants to receive the donkeys' load of citrons after tithing 'since the army is big', i.e. he needs quite a lot! That Bar-Kokhba specifically orders them to be tithed, indicates that he does not trust Yehonathan and Masabala, who must have been considered '*am ha'ares* (literally: people of the land; a rabbinic usage to designate unlearned people not to be relied upon to keep to the letter of the law).

The fact that Bar-Kokhba himself had to send the donkeys from his camp to carry the 'four kinds' indicates the inadequate transport at the disposal of his subordinates. It also reflects the measure of his uncertainty as to whether his orders would be carried out unless he sent the necessary transport.

The letter of the 'four kinds' in which Bar Kokhba requests palm branches, citrons, myrtles and willows – the 'four kinds' needed for the feast of Succoth – to be sent to him

Where was  
Qiryath 'Aravaya?

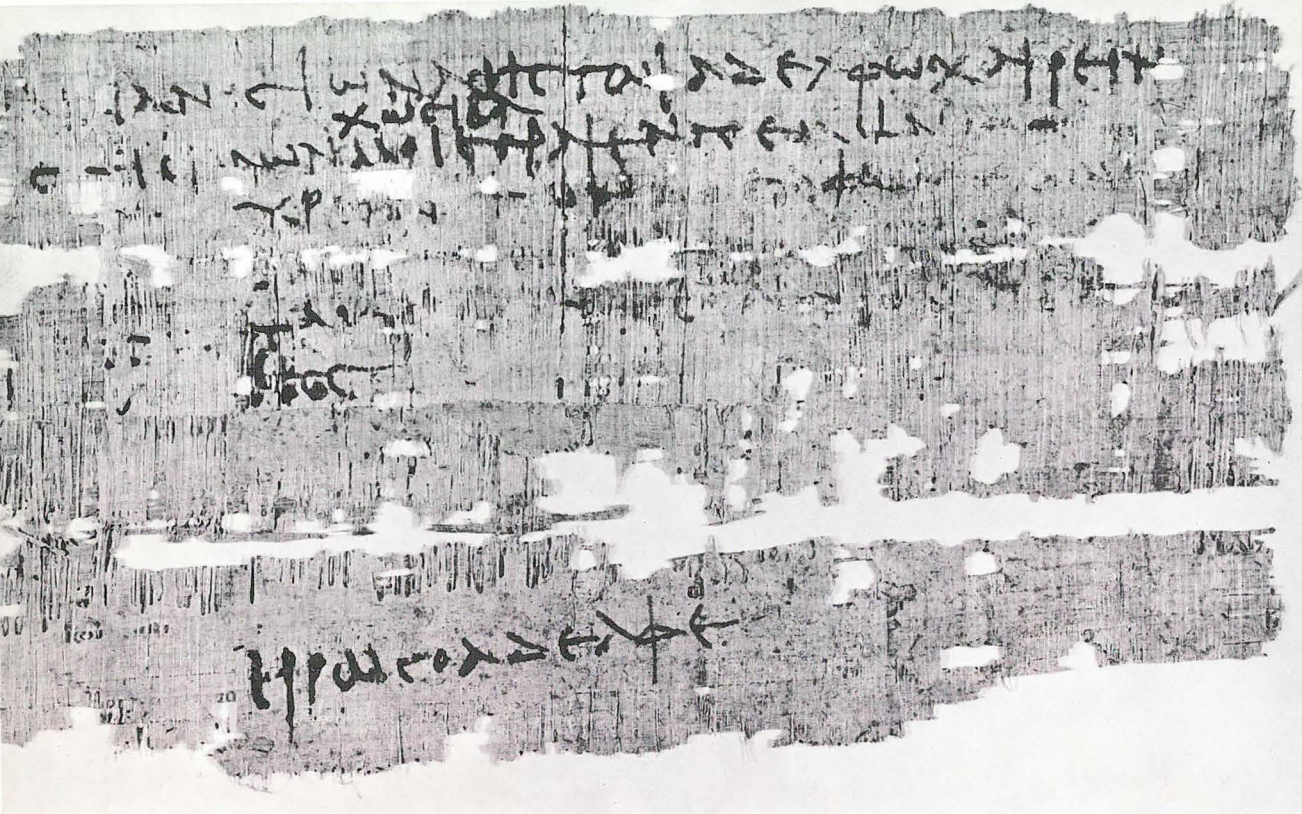
The inclusion of this letter in the bundle kept by Yehonathan and Masabala may be explained thus: when Yehudah sent the donkeys, he sent the letter along as confirmation of Bar-Kokhba's order, and the letter remained in the possession of those in En-gedi. Yehudah's post – Qiryath 'Aravaya – was obviously situated between Bar-Kokhba's main camp (Bethar?) and En-gedi. But where exactly? The name Qiryath 'Aravaya is otherwise unknown. Its literal meaning is 'the town [or village] of the Arabs [*'Arvaya*]', or, more probably, in the light of the contents of the letter, 'of the willows [*'Aravaya*']'. A possible key to the location of this site lies perhaps in a most intriguing legend preserved in the Midrash on Lamentations 1:15 (which is full of stories concerning the two revolts). According to this legend, a certain man from Judaea (or: a Jew) was ploughing his field and his cow lowed. An Arab (or as we may now think a man from 'Arvaya) passed by and told him to set free his bullock and plough because the Temple had been destroyed. When the cow lowed a second time, he told him to harness his bullock and plough for the King Messiah had been born. When the ploughman asked the name and birth-place, he was told that the name was Menahem ben Hezekiah, and the birth-place was 'the fort (or town) of 'Arva of Bethlehem in Judah'. The site of this place was identified by scholars with a ruin – 'Arib – near a village rich in springs and orchards which lies on the main route between Bethar and En-gedi, north-west of Tekoa. Another possible site to fit that description could, in my opinion, be 'Arub, – a village between Bethlehem and Hebron – in which very recently caves had been found with objects from the Bar-Kokhba period, including coins. The letter was written on the eve of the Succoth feast, and we may assume that the date was the autumn of AD 134, since by Succoth of 135 (around September) – if we are to accept the Jewish tradition – Bar-Kokhba was no longer alive.

'Written in Greek'

Another letter – obviously connected with the request for the 'four kinds' – is one of the two Greek letters found in the bundle. It sheds further light on the above episode; but its main interest lies in the additional information it gives us on the composition of the Bar-Kokhba army.

The letter is addressed to Yehonathan (son of) Be'ayan and Masabala, yet the sender is not Bar-Kokhba but someone else, whose name is unfortunately not well preserved: So . . . ios, most probably not a Jew. S-s informs Yehonathan and Masabala that he is sending them a certain Agrippas, so that they should send back with him palm branches and citrons 'for the camp of the Jews'. He urges them to be 'as quick as possible – do not do otherwise'. Then comes a surprise: 'the letter is written in Greek as we have no one who knows Hebrew [or Aramaic]' and he could not delay writing it 'because of the holiday'. The letter concludes again with the warning 'Do not do otherwise' and the usual 'Be well'.





A Greek letter with Bar-Kokhba's name: 'Simon Khosiba'. Note the insertion of the word *xwsiba* above the line

### Simon Khosiba and Ailianos

Yehudah bar Menashe was seemingly not around when the previous letter arrived, and a member of his staff hastened to forward it to Yehonathan and Masabala with a covering note. The sender was probably a non-Jew. This is indicated by the language of the letter, and particularly by his use of the phrase 'camp of the Jews' to refer to Bar-Kokhba's camp – a usage which was perhaps common among the non-Jewish members of Bar-Kokhba's army. The existence of gentiles in the Bar-Kokhba ranks is further corroborated by Dio Cassius's hostile words: 'And many outside nations [i.e. non-Jews] were joining for eagerness of gain.'

An unexpected confirmation comes from the second Greek letter. This letter is badly preserved, but what remains is of considerable interest. It is the only document found with Bar-Kokhba's name preserved in Greek, thus: 'Ailianos to Yonathes the brother, greetings. Simon Khosiba has written to me that you must send the . . . for the needs of the brothers . . . [Ailia]nos. Be well, my brother!'

Several points merit elaboration. The sender of the letter is a non-Jew, as his name implies: Ailianos in Greek is equivalent to the Latin Aelianus. This name was quite common from the days of Trajan and Hadrian (Publius Aelius Hadrianus). Ironically our Aelianus collaborates with the rebels. Aelianus began by writing just 'Simon' and then added 'Khosiba' on top of it for further identification, since 'Simon' was quite a common name. Here we learn for the first time that Shimeon's patronym was pronounced

with an i: *Kosiba*. Like the writer of the previous letter, Aelianus too was stationed somewhere between Bar-Kokhba's camp and En-gedi, most probably in the same Qiryath 'Aravaya. It is a pity that the nature of goods requested is obliterated, but apparently he too refers to the same request for citrons and palm branches which Yehonathan and Masabala, it seems, were not so quick in supplying. Lastly, an interesting point emerging from this letter is that the Bar-Kokhba fighters used to refer to each other as 'brothers', a usage not uncommon in revolutionary movements. The same appellation is also used by Bar-Kokhba himself in the last letter to be discussed, the most touching of all.

A large (nineteen by nine centimetres), badly-preserved papyrus is one of the few letters written in Hebrew; it is also perhaps the most indicative of Bar-Kokhba's desperate situation at the end of the revolt. This letter concerns the cargo of a ship in the port of En-gedi, with which Yehonathan and Masabala did not deal properly. The letter begins:

'From Shimeon bar Kosiba to the men of En-gedi  
To Masabala and to Yehonathan bar Be'ayan, peace. In  
comfort you sit, eat and drink from the property of  
the House of Israel, and care nothing for your brothers.'

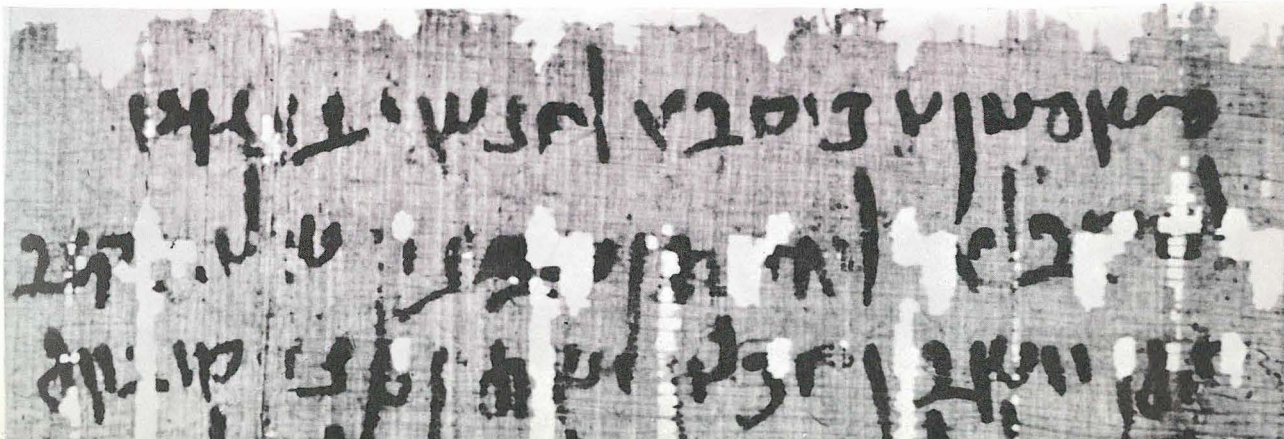
What a touching and tragic note is in these words, written by the failing Prince of Israel!

Found with the letters was a tiny piece of clay, bearing a seal impression and with a bit of string still clinging to it, which had originally bound the folded papyrus. This impressed clay served – like wax nowadays – to seal off the letter and had a dual purpose: to prevent its opening by the 'postman' and to guarantee its authenticity – the seal of the sender being known to the receiver. The interest in our seal impression is mainly its motif: a bearded man in a short tunic, struggling with a lion standing on his hind-legs and grasping the man with his forelegs. Although this motif was quite common in Graeco-Roman *intaglios* representing Hercules killing the Nemean lion, in the Bar-Kokhba headquarters it might have symbolised the struggle against Rome. The design and figures on the impression are in relief (*cameo*), which means that the

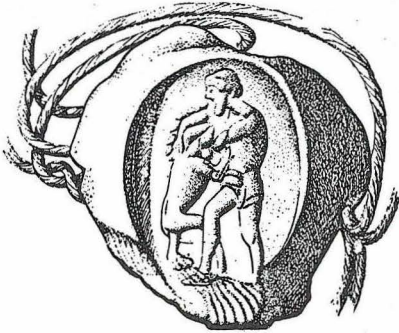
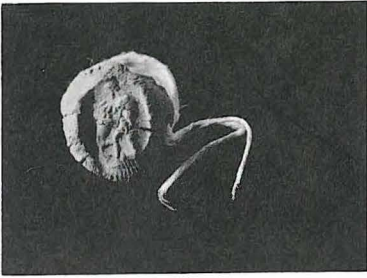
'You care nothing for  
your brothers'

The seal

A Hebrew letter to 'the men of  
En-gedi', Yehonathan and Masabala,  
discussed on this page







above The seal impression with string found with the letters (scale 1:1) and an enlarged drawing of the impression. It originally sealed one of the letters

The other culprit –  
Yeshua ben Galgoula

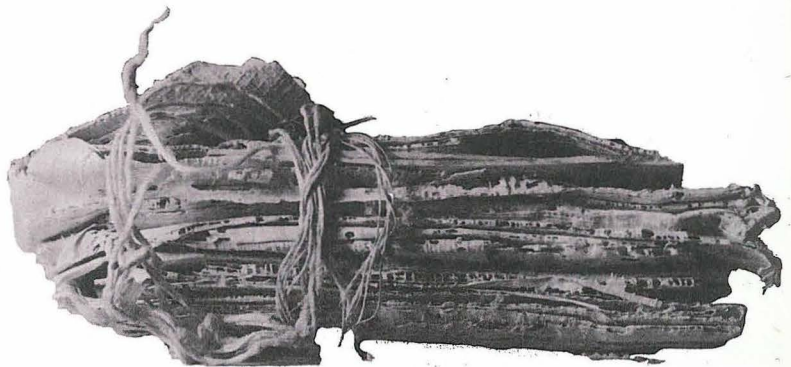
right A side view of the bundle of letters, as they were found  
opposite A letter found in Wadi Murabba'at from the administrators of Beth Mashkho to Yeshua ben Galgoula. Note the signatures

actual seal, or ring, bore a design in *intaglio*. According to some rabbis this was permissible despite the injunction against 'graven images', to quote the following: 'A ring on which there is an image, it is permissible to seal with it. R. Hanania b. Gamaliel says: [they] of my father's household would seal with a signet having images' (Tosefta, Abodah Zarah v:2).

Another seal impression was found only later, but also belonging to the same batch of documents. Since the two seal impressions tally with the number of the Greek letters sent by non-Jews, it is possible that they were actually attached to these letters. Such clay impressions are quite rare. The only other one known from the Bar-Kokhba period is from Murabba'at and was attached to a Jewish document (a deed of sale) bearing the date: 'Year Two of the Redemption of Israel in Jerusalem.'

The goat-skin with the batch of letters most probably belonged to the wife of Yehonathan son of Be'aya, who, when she fled with the others to the cave, took with her, in addition to the family belongings, part of the personal archive of Yehonathan – although it did not show him in a favourable light. Whatever we may think of Bar-Kokhba's harsh tone, it is quite clear that Yehonathan was not the most loyal of subordinates. Why he should carry with him the incriminating letters is anybody's guess; was it a memento of the illustrious but unfollowed leader? Or perhaps – to our modern way of thinking – an alibi for the confiscation of property? Whatever the case, Yehonathan and Masabala were not the only in-subordinate commanders in Bar-Kokhba's army – at least not towards the end of the revolt. Nothing fails like failure!

In a cave twenty kilometres to the north of the Cave of Letters, in Wadi Murraba'at, another commander took refuge with his family: Yeshua ben Galgoula. He, too, carried with him some letters received from his subordinates and, above all, from Bar-Kokhba. These letters, as mentioned earlier, were partly bought from the Bedouins and partly found on the spot by Père R. de Vaux and his colleagues. They were published by a member of de Vaux's team, Father J. T. Milik.





The first of these letters to be discussed here is written to Yeshua ben Galgoula by the administrators of the village of Beth Mashkho, which came under the command of his 'camp'. In it his title is 'chief of the camp' (see page 135):

'From the administrators of Beth Mashko, from Yeshua and from Eleazar to Yeshua ben Galgoula chief of the camp, peace. Let it be known: to you that the cow which Yehoseph ben Ariston took from Ya'aqov ben Yehudah, who dwells in Beth Mashko, belongs to him [i.e. to Ya'aqov] by purchase were it not for the Gentiles [i.e. the Romans] who are near us, I would have gone up and satisfied you concerning this, lest you will say that it is out of contempt that I did not go up to you. Be you well and the whole House of Israel.

Yeshua ben Eleazar has written it [i.e. dictated it]

Eleazar ben Yehoseph has written it

Ya'aqov ben Yehudah, for himself

Sha'ul ben Eleazar, witness

Yehoseph ben Yehoseph, witness

Ya'aqov ben Yehoseph, testifies [scribe or notary?].'

There are some minor divisions of opinion among scholars concerning some details, but I believe that the meaning is quite clear. Yehoseph ben Ariston (a soldier of ben Galgoula?) took a cow from a resident of Beth Mashkho (wherever that was), which comes under the jurisdiction of the two administrators. They claim the cow on his behalf but cannot come to ben Galgoula because the Romans are in their vicinity. This last point shows that at that time Bar-Kokhba's units and the Roman units were stationed not far away from one another.

'Chief of the camp'

The main point, though, for us is that Yeshua ben Galgoula is 'chief of a camp' which explains better the letters addressed to him by Bar-Kokhba. Apart from that, we know little about him except for what we can gather from a Greek document, also found in Murabba'at. It is a contract of remarriage of ben Galgoula's sister, Salome. It is from this document, too, that we learn the vowels of his father's name; GLGLA(H), since in Hebrew only the consonants are given. The contract is dated Year Seven of Hadrian (also indicated by the consuls of that year), i.e. AD 124. We do not exactly know where his camp was, but the contract was drawn up in the district of Herodium near Bethlehem. This may explain the fact that Yeshua ben Galgoula later took refuge in the caves of Wadi Murabba'at, the canyon emanating from the vicinity of Herodium.

Amongst the two complete (although somewhat damaged)

From Shimeon ben Kosiba to Yeshua  
 ben Galgoula and to the men of the fort,  
 peace. I take heaven to witness against me  
 that unless you mobilise [destroy?] the Galileans who  
 are with you  
 every man, I will put fetters  
 on your feet as I did  
 to ben Aphlul.

'letters' written by Bar-Kokhba to ben Galgoula, the following is the more important:

'From Shimeon ben Kosiba to Yeshua  
 ben Galgoula and to the men of the fort,  
 peace. I take heaven to witness against me  
 that unless you mobilise [destroy?] the Galileans who  
 are with you  
 every man, I will put fetters  
 on your feet as I did  
 to ben Aphlul.'

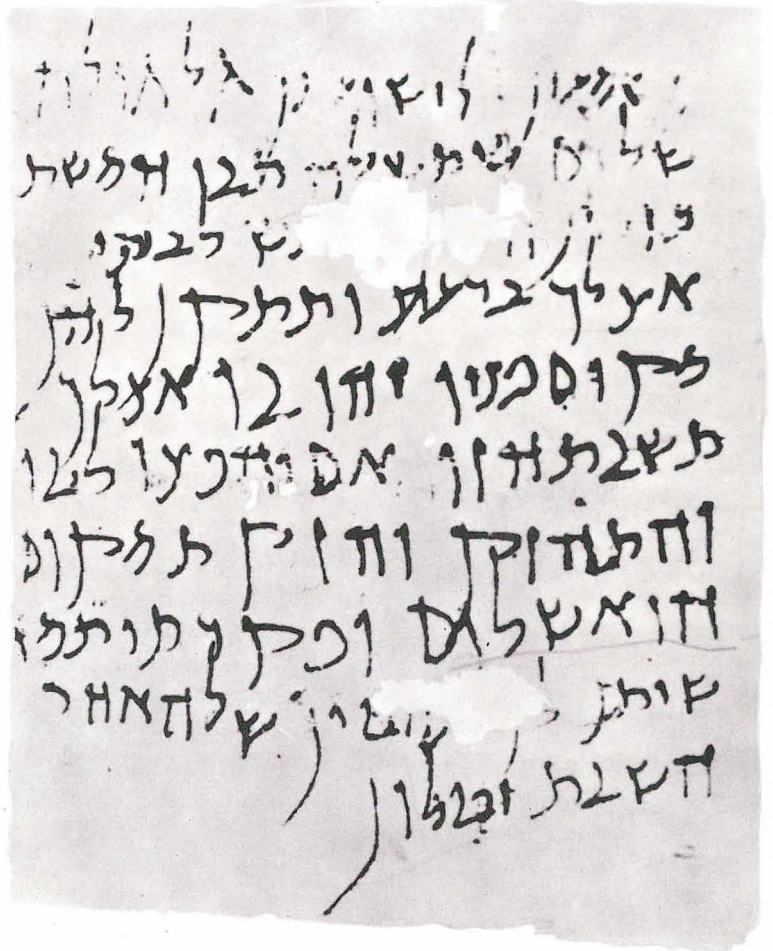
There is a sharp division amongst scholars about the word in line 4, which is damaged and illegible. It is quite clear though, that ben Galgoula was ordered to do something 'negative' to the Galileans. Bar-Kokhba is not sure that the order would be obeyed, so he resorts to an oath to strengthen his warning: ben Galgoula and his men shall be arrested; and lest ben Galgoula think this to be an idle threat, let him remember poor ben Aphlul, most probably a notorious case, of which unfortunately we know nothing.

A letter from Bar-Kokhba to ben Galgoula in which he threatens to put fetters on ben Galgoula's feet. The letter was found in Wadi Murabba'at

This letter reminds me of the one in our cave in which Bar-Kokhba orders Yehonathan and Masabala not to give shelter to anyone from Tekoa. Isn't this case similar? The Galileans took refuge with ben Galgoula and he is ordered to punish them. The solution depends on the understanding of the word 'Galileans'. Some scholars interpret it as 'Christians', but this does not make sense for the term *Galilean*, without further qualification, was generally used to denote people from Galilee (including famous sages) and I believe it should be understood here in the same way. The only possibility, perhaps, in which the 'culprits' were not people from Galilee in the north of Israel, is to assume that a location called Galil – and unknown to us – existed in Judaea, and its people are referred to by Bar-Kokhba as *Galileans* in the same way as he calls the people of En-gedi *Engedites*.

'Send wheat'

The next letter of Bar-Kokhba is less menacing, and it concerns food supplies, although some words are unclear:



Another letter found in Wadi Murabba'at in which Bar-Kokhba requests wheat from ben Galgoula

'From Shimeon to Yeshua ben Galgoula,  
peace! send cereals five  
kors of wheat to. . .

.....  
Be strong and strengthen the place.  
Be well.'

Then, a sort of *post scriptum*:

'I have ordered someone  
to give you his wheat  
after Sabbath they will take.'

A third letter is unfortunately very fragmentary, and even the names of the addressers and addressees are lost. More is the pity, since this letter refers to some military exploits or catastrophes; here are some intelligible phrases, a dirge whose pathos bridges the centuries in the mournful music of desolation and defeat:

'... till the end . . .  
. . . they have no hope . . .  
. . . my brothers in the south . . .  
. . . of these were lost by the sword . . .  
. . . these my brothers. . .'