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ROMAN IMPERIAL LEAD SEALING FROM RAMAT RAHEL EXCAVATIONS

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## ROMAN IMPERIAL LEAD SEALING FROM RAMAT RAHEL EXCAVATIONS\*

During the 2006 excavations at Ramat Raḥel a lead sealing (bulla) was discovered.<sup>1</sup> The bulla was found in area D1, L446, Reg. No. 4305. This locus is a mixed fill and thus, unfortunately, no information can be gleaned from its find-spot.

The bulla is circular in shape (diam. 11 mm) and weighs 0.72 gr. (Fig. 1a–b).



1:1



Fig. 1a (obverse)



Fig. 1b (reverse)

1:3

On the obverse of the bulla there is a Latin inscription consisting of three lines:

IMP  
[H?]ADRIAN  
[A]VG

The reverse of the bulla is blank except for the negative of the string which closed the document and on which the bulla was applied. On the left side a small piece of the bulla is broken and thus some of the letters are partly missing. In the second line, the right hand part of the letter 'A' can be seen before the letter 'D' and from the first letter in the third line, (i.e. another 'A') only the upper left small bar has survived. At the end of the second line, after the letter 'N', there is a vertical line. It is hard to say if this is part of the circular line around the bulla or the letter 'I'. If the latter is correct it supports the reading of the inscription presented below. It should be noted that, with the exception of a partial thin circular line, no clear evidence for the border of the seal is seen on the bulla. This suggests the possibility that part of the seal was not impressed on the lead.

Due to the size of the bulla and the similarity of the division of the inscriptions to a similar bulla of the Emperor Trajan (see below), it seems that there is no room to reconstruct an 'H' before the letter 'A' in the second line. If so, two options for the writing of the emperor's name are possible. The first possibility is that there was no letter before the 'A' and the Emperor's name was written without the 'H', in the Greek

\* The publication of this bulla is one of the first products of the renewed excavation project at Ramat Raḥel. I am indebted to Prof. Oded Lipschits and Prof. Manfred Oeming, the directors of the excavations, and to Dr. Yuval Gadot, the excavation's field director, for permission to study and publish this bulla, and to Dr. Leah Di-Segni for her help in the preparation of this paper. I wish to thank Pavel Shrago for the pictures and Dr. Guy Stiebel for his useful comments regarding the bulla.

<sup>1</sup> On the 2006 excavation season at Ramat Raḥel, see: Lipschits, Oeming, Gadot and Arubas, forthcoming.

way, i.e. ADRIAN.<sup>2</sup> Although not very common, this spelling appears in Latin inscriptions, in an example from Pannonia Inferior (*AE* 2002, 1183), in another from Pontus in Asia Minor (*AE* 1991, 1496), and in two from Galatia (*AE* 2003, 1713–1714). The first inscription is a dedication by a Roman soldier, possibly of Pannonian origin, and the last three were inscribed on milestones in areas in which Greek was the common language. Thus, ADRIAN, and not HADRIAN, may suggest the influence of Greek script where the aspiration in the letter “alpha” carried no visual expression. If this assumption is correct, one can assume a Greek-speaking/writing provenance for the seal used for the Ramat Raḥel bulla. Less likely is the possibility that a ligature of the letters ‘H+A’ was placed before the letter ‘D’. Ligatures are very common in Latin inscriptions and many examples are known, some of which are very creative.<sup>3</sup>

The following reconstruction can be suggested for the abbreviated inscription on the obverse:

*Imp(eratoris) /*  
*[H]adrian(i) or Adrian(i) /*  
*[A]ug(usti).*

If this reconstruction is correct, the translation would be: “(Seal) of Imperator Hadrianus Augustus”. The inscription indicates that the object to which the bulla was attached belonged to the Emperor, or more likely, the object, which was sent from one place to another, sealed with the bulla, was identified as belonging to the Emperor.<sup>4</sup>

The best parallel, so far, for the Ramat Raḥel bulla is one bearing the name of the emperor Trajan, reading: IM[P]/ TRAI[A][NI]/AVG (Fig. 2),<sup>5</sup> in which one can see a similar depiction of the letter ‘A’ with the small bar in its upper part and a similar division of the entire inscription as well.



Fig. 2. Bulla of Trajan (Dissard 1905: pl. I, no. 12)

There are two main types of Roman lead sealings. The one presented here carries an inscription or non-epigraphic presentation on the obverse, while the reverse is blank and usually bears the negative of the string that sealed the consignment. The second type carries inscriptions or an epigraphic presentation on both sides and has a hole for the string that ran longitudinally through the sealing. Both types can be rect-

<sup>2</sup> I wish to thank Prof. Hannah Cotton and Prof. Peter Weiss for this idea.

<sup>3</sup> Ligatures that follow the shape of two adjacent letters, for instance N and E, are more common, while others, which find ways of joining together letters not easily joined, are more rare. See for example: *RIB* I 141, 150, 155, 587, 590, 640; *RIB* II 2404.51, 2404.61–62, 2411.169–76, 2411.289. Many other Latin ligatures can be traced in: H. Bloch, *The Roman Brick Stamps*. Roma. 1967. However, as far as I know, no ligature of the letters ‘H+A’ either connected to Hadrian or from other Latin sources, is known and thus the appearance of such a ligature on this bulla is very doubtful.

<sup>4</sup> Similar abbreviated inscriptions are common on other minor objects such as lead pigs, see: *RIB* II 2404.14, 2404.28–2404.30.

<sup>5</sup> Dissard 1905: 3 and pl. I, no. 12; Grenier 1934: 649, fig. 228, no. 12.

angular, circular or oval in shape and could be attached to imperial, military or private consignments. They are thought to have sealed official packages or letters.<sup>6</sup> According to Dissard (1905: 3, no. 12) the diameter of the bulla of Trajan is approximately 30mm. The difference in size between this bulla and the one from Ramat Raḥel which is much smaller, might indicate that the former was used to seal an official package while the Ramat Raḥel bulla was used to seal an official letter written on papyrus and probably sealed with only one seal.<sup>7</sup>

Roman Imperial lead sealings,<sup>8</sup> especially those with Hadrian's name,<sup>9</sup> are very rare. This is apparently the first of its kind to be found in Israel. Moreover, no other example of this type, with Hadrian's name, is known so far from the Roman World.

Imperial sealings are evidence of imperial consignments and do not indicate the Emperor's presence.<sup>10</sup> Evidence from Britain,<sup>11</sup> as well as common sense, suggests that lead sealings should be found at their destinations rather than at their places of origin. Thus, the discovery of this bulla in Ramat Raḥel could mean that the site was the destination for an official consignment. This would suggest that during the second century CE the site may have been a temporary or even permanent station of a Roman military unit, or, as recently suggested, a private estate, most likely the property of a high officer or a person connected with the provincial authorities.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Grenier 1934; *RIB* II, p. 87; Clay 1980; Vanderpe 1996, 232.

<sup>7</sup> For the use of seals on papyri see: Vanderpe 1996.

<sup>8</sup> For Roman Imperial lead sealings see Rostovtsev 1897: 473–480; Dissard 1905: 3–8; Grenier 1934: 648–652; Vanderpe 1996: 285, Nos. 302–307; *RIB* II 2411.1–2411.32.

<sup>9</sup> For several lead sealings of Hadrian see Rostovtsev 1897: 474–475; Rostovtsev and Prou 1899: 201.

<sup>10</sup> We know that Hadrian visited Judaea in 130 CE and it was during this visit when he founded Jerusalem as the last 'real' *colonia* in the history of Rome (Millar 1993:107), named after his name "Aelia Capitolina" (Dio, LXIX, 12). It is believed that Hadrian was back in Judaea and took command in person, at least for a short time, during the Bar Kokhba revolt 132–135 CE (Millar 1993: 105,107), but this is not certain (see W. Eck, Rom herausfordern: Bar Kochba im Kampf gegen das Imperium Romanum. Das Bild des Bar Kochba-Aufstandes im Spiegel der neuen epigraphischen Überlieferung, Roma 2007, p. 17 ff.). There is no clear evidence of his presence in Jerusalem or its vicinity but his founding of the city might support the strong assumption that he did visit there.

<sup>11</sup> In Britain, for example, most of the imperial sealings that were found are of Septimius Severus and his sons and come from a port (South Shields) which he used as a base and almost certainly visited during his presence there in 208–211 CE. But sealings of Julian, who was never there, were also found. On the contrary, sealings of Hadrian or Constans, who were in Britain, have not, so far, been found (*RIB* II, pp. 87–88). I wish to thank Prof. Roger Tomlin for the information.

<sup>12</sup> The finding of a Roman bath-building with bricks, stamped with the *Legio decima Fretensis* impressions, installed into its hypocaust (Ciasca 1962, 69), led Aharoni to assume that the site became a strategic Roman military stronghold on the southern access to Aelia Capitolina (Jerusalem). Aharoni dated this phase not earlier than the second half of the third century CE (Aharoni 1964: 38–40; Kochavi 1964: 81–82). However, in light of the data from the new excavations and a re-examination of the evidence, the new excavators of the site provide a new theory which views the bath-building as part of a private estate, possibly, a property of an officer or a person connected with the provincial authorities. They date the type of the stamps on the bricks to the second century CE (B. Arubas, Ramat Raḥel during the Roman and Byzantine Periods: Stratigraphy and Architecture. Unpublished lecture, given in the ASOR annual meeting, Boston, November 2008). See also Arubas, forthcoming.

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