

The Bronze Coins Minted at Gamala Reconsidered

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DURING the Jewish War against the Romans, a unique coin type was minted in the city of Gamala, on the western slopes of the Golan Heights. Nine specimens of this type are known. Seven were found during the excavations conducted at the site, all of them in the western quarter.¹ An eighth coin was put up for sale in Zürich and may have been looted from Gamala.² A ninth specimen was apparently found a few years ago, at Sartaba-Alexandrion, a desert fortress in the Jordan valley, on the eastern slopes of the Samaria Mountains.³ A renewed survey of these coins leads one to reconsider some of the previously published conclusions concerning this type.

The Type and the Dies

The obverse shows a chalice, similar to the one on the silver Shekels minted in Jerusalem in the first year of the war.⁴ An inscription, written from right to left, surrounds the chalice. The reverse carries another inscription, written in a circle, with no design. The legends are only partly visible on each of the nine specimens. The dies are very crudely cut, and as Meshorer notes: "The crude execution of the Gamla coins is evidence of the lack of skilled artisans in that city, since coinage had never been minted there".⁵ Actually, as far as we know, these coins are the only coins that were minted by Jews outside of Jerusalem during the Jewish War, and are the only issue minted by a Jewish local authority during the history of Jewish minting in antiquity.

Figs. 1–2 present the known specimens, as well as a new classification of the dies.⁶

¹ Syon, 2004, pp. 54–58, 114–116, 336–337.

² Bank Leu, p. 40 lot 188; Superior Galleries, lot 390. See also Syon, 2004, p. 55, n. 20.

³ Syon, 2004, p. 55.

⁴ For a discussion of the Shekels of the first year and the chalice symbol see Meshorer, *TJC*, pp. 115–120.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁶ I wish to thank D. Syon for allowing me to use the following pictures of the coins and to Y. Shalev for assisting me in matters of photography. The information concerning the weight and diameter of coins Nos. 1, 2, 9 was taken from Syon 2004, p. 56. According to Syon the weight of coin No. 6 may be a mistake (*ibid.*, 55 n. 20). According to the Superior Galleries Auction Catalogue the diameter of this coin is 20.5 mm. and not as noted by Syon.

No.	Wt. (gr.)	Diam. (mm)	Axis	Former publications	Dies	
					Obv.	Rev.
1	13.80	24	4	Syon, 1992-93: 55, Pl. 13: 82; Eidlin, 1994: 149; Syon, 1994: 167, 171 n. 102; Syon, 2002: 146-149, Fig. 9,7; Syon, 2004: 337, No.1057.	I	A
2	11.41	24	4	Syon, 2004: 336, No.1054.	I	A
3	12.23	21-23	10	Syon, 2004: 336, No. 1055.	Ia (?)	A1 (?)
4	11.00	22	4	Eidlin, 1981: 94, Fig. 21; Meshorer <i>AJC</i> 2: 263, Pl. 19: 32; Syon, 2004: 336, No.1053.	II	A1
5	11.96	24	4	Syon, 1992-93: 55, Pl. 13: 81; Syon, 1994: 167, 171, No. 101; Syon, 2004: 337, No. 1056.	II	A1
6	7.91	20.5	?	Bank Leu: 40, No. 188; Superior Galleries: 36, No. 390; Hendin, 1996: 181, Pl. 18: 673.	II	A1 (?)
7	12.56	21-24	12	Meshorer, 1986: Pl. 28:2; <i>TJC</i> : 244, Pl. 63: 217; Syon, 2004: 337, No. 1059.	II	B
8	11.94	21	12	Syon, 2004: 337, no. 1058.	II	B
9	12.10	22	?	Syon, 2004: 58 (Sartaba-Alexandria)	II	B

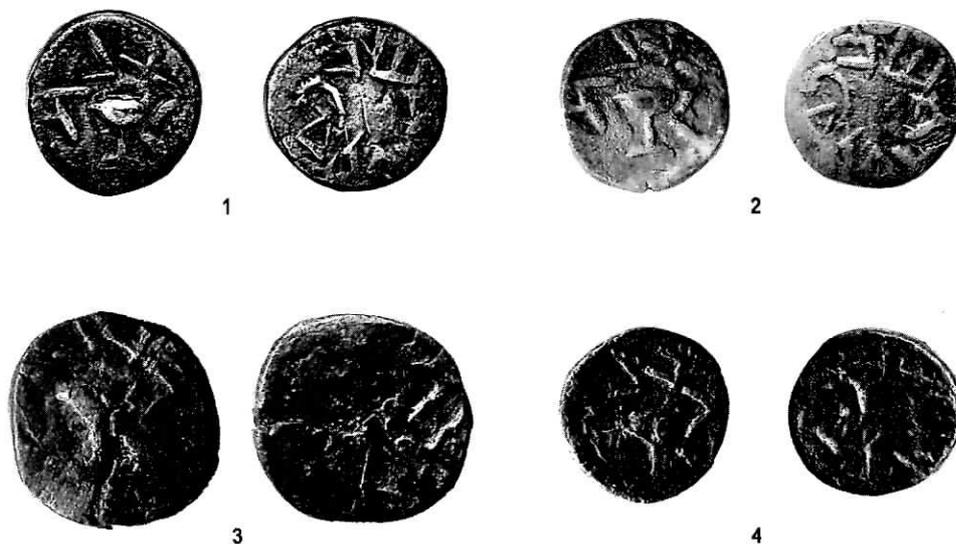


Fig. 1. Coins Nos. 1-4.

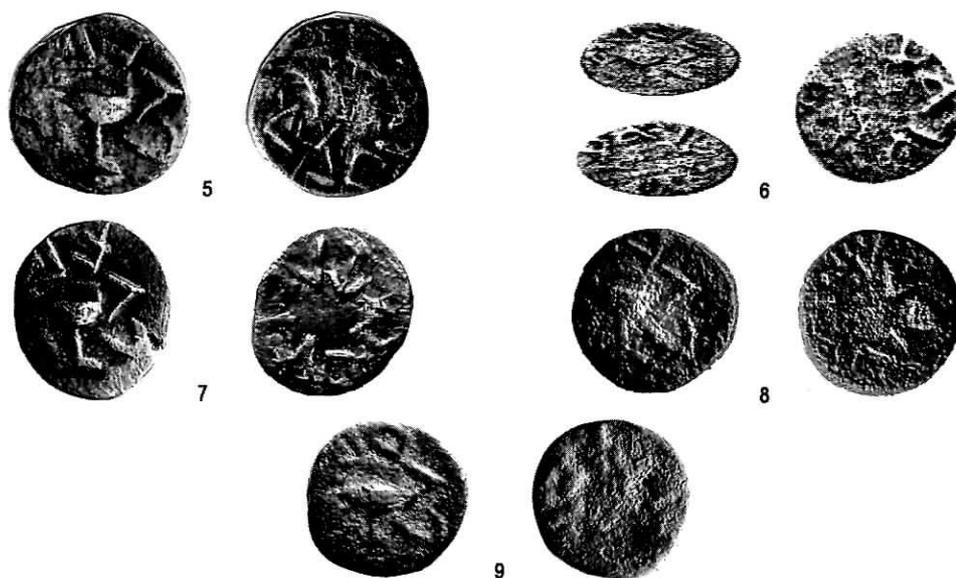


Fig. 2. Coins Nos. 5-9.

According to Syon all nine coins share the same obverse die and two different reverse dies.⁷

After a re-examination of the specimens, it seems that at least two obverse dies and three reverse dies were used for minting these coins. But, while the two (or three) obverse dies represent similar variants of the same type, the three reverse dies represent two different versions of the reverse inscription. The differences between the obverse dies are in the shape of the chalice and in the thickness of the letters (especially the second letter from the right). The differences between the reverse dies are in the form of the letters and the stance.

The die connections in the Gamala coins:

Obv.	Rev.
I-----	A
Ia-----	A1
II-----	A1
II-----	B

It seems that obverse die I was used together with reverse die A. After both went out of use a new obverse die (Ia) was used with a new reverse die (A1). After obverse die Ia went out of use, reverse die A1 continued in use with a new obverse

⁷ Syon 2004, pp. 55, 57.

die (II). After reverse die A1 went out of use, a new reverse die (B) was made and used with obverse die II.⁸ The axis of the coins was also checked.⁹ Coins Nos. 1, 2, 4, 5 have the same axis (4), while coin no. 3 has a different axis (10). Coins Nos. 7 and 8 have the same axis (12).

The Chalice

According to Meshorer, the similarity between these coins and the Jerusalem Shekels testifies that some of the Shekels reached Gamala, and the chalice on them was copied there.¹⁰ However, out of more than 6,200 coins recovered at Gamala,¹¹ not a single coin of the Jewish War, issued in Jerusalem, has been found on the site.¹² Thus, one may assume that when the die-maker made the obverse die for the Gamala coin, he did not have a Jerusalem silver shekel as a model. Whether he was following an oral description of the shekels or used his own memory having seen one remains an enigma.

An interesting point concerning the chalice, as it appears on all the Gamala coins, is that while the left side of the rim is horizontal, the right side is folded upwards. One may assume that this was not a mistake but made on purpose, to avoid depicting an exact replica of one of the temple utensils.¹³ The chalice depicted on obverse II is so crude that it recalls an oil lamp on a stand, with a high handle at its rear (Fig. 1:5,7).

The Obverse Inscription

The obverse inscription is similar in all the specimens and contains five letters, written from right to left around the chalice: **כגאח**. The current reading of this legend is: "לגאח" ("for the redemption").¹⁴ This reading was made when the first

⁸ It seems that the dies were made by hammering the die surface with a chisel and not by engraving. This can be seen by the concave surface alongside the design and the letters (this is particularly clear in coin No. 1). This technique appears also in the silver Shekels minted in Jerusalem. I thank Mr. Sh. Qedar for turning my attention to this technique and sharing this information with me.

⁹ The axis of the coins was checked by looking at the connection between the location of the chalice in the obverse and the letter 'ש' in the reverse. Coins Nos. 6 and 9 were not available for checking their axis.

¹⁰ Meshorer, *TJC*, p. 131.

¹¹ Syon 1992–93, p. 34.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 41; idem, 2004, p. 54.

¹³ The prohibition against depicting temple utensils appears in three different tractates in the Babylonian Talmud: *Rosh Hashanah* 24A; *Abodah Zarah* 43A; *Mnahoth* 28B.

¹⁴ Meshorer, *AJC* 1, pp. 129–130; Eidlin 1994, pp. 148–149; Meshorer, *TJC*, p. 131; Syon 2004, pp. 56–57. The word "לגאח" appears on coins of "Year Four" of the Jewish war and was associated with divine salvation, see Meshorer, *TJC*, pp. 127–128. Thus it is less likely that this word would appear on coins minted in Gamala before it appeared on coins minted in Jerusalem.

specimen, which bore an incomplete inscription, was found.¹⁵ Some of the specimens that were found in following years were in better condition, but the legend was not reconsidered. A renewed inspection of the specimens offers a new interpretation of this legend.¹⁶ The legend is crude and seems to contain both Palaeo-Hebrew letters and letters written in the Jewish (square Hebrew) script of the Second Temple period.¹⁷ The language may be either Hebrew or Aramaic.¹⁸ Some of the letters are retrograde, others are upside down and some are in a rough cursive style. The form of the letters may indicate not only that an unskilled artisan made the die, but also that he was not very familiar with both scripts.

It seems that the letters in the obverse inscription are as follows:

The Gamala letters	Optional Palaeo-Hebrew letters	Examples	Optional Jewish script letters	Examples
𐤊	'ג' (rough cursive)	Meshorer, <i>AJC</i> 1: 163.	'ג' (cursive)	Cross, 1961: 139; Yardeni, 2001: 170–171
	'ז' (upside down and cursive)	Meshorer, <i>AJC</i> 1: 171; Meshorer, <i>TJC</i> : 132.	'ז' (rough cursive and retro-grade)	Yardeni, 2001: 190–191.
𐤅	'ג' (cursive)	Meshorer, <i>AJC</i> 1: 164; Meshorer, <i>TJC</i> : 132.	'ג' (retro-grade)	Cross, 1961: 139; Yardeni, 2001: 172–173.
𐤅	-----	-----	'ח'	Cross, 1961: 139; Yardeni, 2001: 192–193.
𐤆	'ז' (retro-grade)	Naveh, 1973; Meshorer, <i>AJC</i> 1: 171; Meshorer, <i>TJC</i> : 132.	'ז' (cursive and retro-grade)	Yardeni, 2001: 190–191.
𐤆	-----	-----	'ט' (retro-grade)	Cross, 1961: 139; Yadin and Naveh, 1989: 6–7, Pl. 25: 432, 440; Yardeni, 2001: 168–169.

¹⁵ Eidlin 1981, p. 94.

¹⁶ I wish to thank Prof. J. Naveh for discussing with me my proposal. All the conclusions in this paper are, however, mine only.

¹⁷ Although not very common, the use of Palaeo-Hebrew letters alongside letters in the Jewish script appears in the same period in Masada (Yadin and Naveh 1989, pp. 6–7, 17–19) and Jerusalem [M. Rosenthaler: A Paleo-Hebrew Ossuary Inscription. *IEJ* 25 (1975), pp. 138–139], and earlier in Mount Gerizim (Magen et al. 2004, p. 40). For the use of the Palaeo-Hebrew script in the Second Temple period see J. Naveh: *Early History of the Alphabet – An introduction to west Semitic Epigraphy and Paleography*, Jerusalem, 1982, pp. 119–123; Magen et al. 2004, pp. 31–35.

¹⁸ Gutmann assumed that the name 'גמלא', with the letter *Alef* at the end (in Greek: Γάμαλα), indicated that the language of the city inhabitants was Aramaic; see Gutmann 1994, p. 48.

The differences in the shape and thickness between the first and the fourth letter seem to indicate that they are not the same. The fourth letter is a 'ל', *lamed*, written in the Palaeo-Hebrew script, and thus it seems more likely that the first letter is a cursive *bet*, written in the Jewish square script. The second letter is a 'ג', *gimel* written in the Jewish square script (but may also be a Palaeo-Hebrew 'ג'). The third letter is a 'מ', *mem*, written in the Jewish square script and the last letter is a retrograde 'א', *alef*, written in the same script.¹⁹

It seems, therefore, that the preferable reading of the obverse inscription is: 'בגמלא' ('in Gamala'). Another option is that the letter 'ב' stands for the number '2', as in the Jerusalem shekels, and the legend reads "בגמלא" i.e. 'Gamala Year 2 (of the Jewish War)'.

Meshorer suggests that these coins were minted during the siege laid by Vespasian on Gamala,²⁰ which, according to Josephus, lasted one month and ended in Tishri 67 C.E.²¹ A close examination of some of the Gamala specimens reveals that at least some of the coins are fairly worn, an indication that they were in use for some time before they were buried for almost two millennia. If so, it is more plausible that these coins were minted during the seven months of the siege by King Agrippa II on the city,²² before the arrival of Vespasian and his army. According to Josephus, it seems that the Roman siege followed the siege of Agrippa without a significant gap. If so, there was enough time during the second year of the Jewish War (Nisan 67–Adar 68 C.E.)²³ to mint and use these coins until the fall of the city.²⁴

The Reverse Inscription

There are two versions of the reverse inscription [(A+A1) and B], and both seem to contain eight letters, appearing around the field of the reverse, which carries no design. As the obverse inscription, this inscription also seems to contain both Palaeo-Hebrew letters and letters written in the Jewish (square Hebrew) script. The first type (A+A1) is shared by six coins, struck by two dies. It seems that two coins shared the same die (A), while four coins shared a second die (A1). The differences between the two dies are minute but can be discerned in the shape of

¹⁹ It should be noted that a very similar *alef* appears as a mason's mark on a column drum found in area S in Gamala. For a picture see Gutmann 1994, p. 61.

²⁰ Meshorer, *TJC*, p.131

²¹ Josephus: *The Jewish War*, IV, 11–83.

²² *Ibid.*, 10; Josephus: *Vita* 114.

²³ Meshorer, *TJC*, p. 119.

²⁴ According to Josephus the head of the rebels in Gamala was one Joseph, the son of a midwife. He persuaded the people to revolt and gave them hopes that they should recover their liberty (Josephus: *Vita*, 85). May we use this evidence to assume that he is the one who initiated the minting of these coins?

some of the letters. The second type (B) is shared by three coins, all struck by the same die.

Since the inscription is round and there are no gaps between the letters, it is difficult to determine the beginning of the inscription. According to Eidlin and Meshorer (both dealing only with type A1), the inscription reads: 'ירשלם קד' (YRŠLM QD) or 'ירשלם הק' (YRŠLM HQ), i.e. 'holy Jerusalem'.²⁵ Syon, who initially knew only type 'A' takes the reading of this type to be: 'ירשלם הק', but after seeing the second type, he suggests the reading: 'יורשלמהק' (YWRŠLMHQ).²⁶ Eidlin, Meshorer and Syon assume that the full inscription started on the obverse and continued on the reverse, and read: 'לגאלת ירושלים הקדושה' ("for the redemption of Jerusalem the holy" or "for the redemption of holy Jerusalem"). It seems, however, that the reading of the reverse inscription is uncertain, as it is very crude on all specimens and most of the letters are incomplete. Except for the letters ש²⁷ and מ²⁸ of dies A+A1 and the letters ש (ש)²⁹ and ל (ל)³⁰ of die B, the identification of all other letters is uncertain.

The new reading of the obverse inscription calls for a new reading of the reverse inscription as well, but it seems that, until better-preserved specimens are found, the reverse inscription will remain an enigma.

²⁵ Eidlin 1981, p. 94; idem 1985, p. 146; idem 1994, pp. 148–149; Meshorer, *AJC* 1, pp. 129–130; idem, *TJC*, p. 131.

²⁶ Syon 1992–93, pp. 40, 55; idem, 2004, pp. 56–57.

²⁷ The form of the letter 'ש', *shin*, with a horizontal base, is very unusual in the Second Temple period: few rare examples from this period appear in Masada (Yadin and Naveh 1989, p. 58, Pl. 48: 588) and on some crude bronze coins of "Year Four" of the Jewish war (Meshorer, *TJC*, Pl. 63: 214d). One should notice that this type of 'ש' appears also in the Palaeo-Hebrew script and in the Samaritan script (Magen et al. 2004, pp. 255–256, Nos. 384–385; 261–262, n. 393). The form of the letter (as it appears on coin No. 2 in the table above) may indicate that the die-maker kept the tradition of making the central arm of the letter shorter than the right and left arms.

²⁸ The 'מ', *mem*, is written in the Jewish square script, and is very similar to the one on the obverse.

²⁹ The form of the letter is very similar to the 'ש', *shin*, in the square Jewish script of the Second Temple period, although in the Gamala coins the central arm of the letter originates from the meeting point of the right and left arms, and not from the left arm as usual. For example see Yardeni 2001, pp. 208–209.

³⁰ The 'ל', *lamed*, is written in the Palaeo-Hebrew script, and it is retrograde and very similar to the one on the obverse.

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