

The Bar-Kokhba Revolt

by Peter E. Lewis

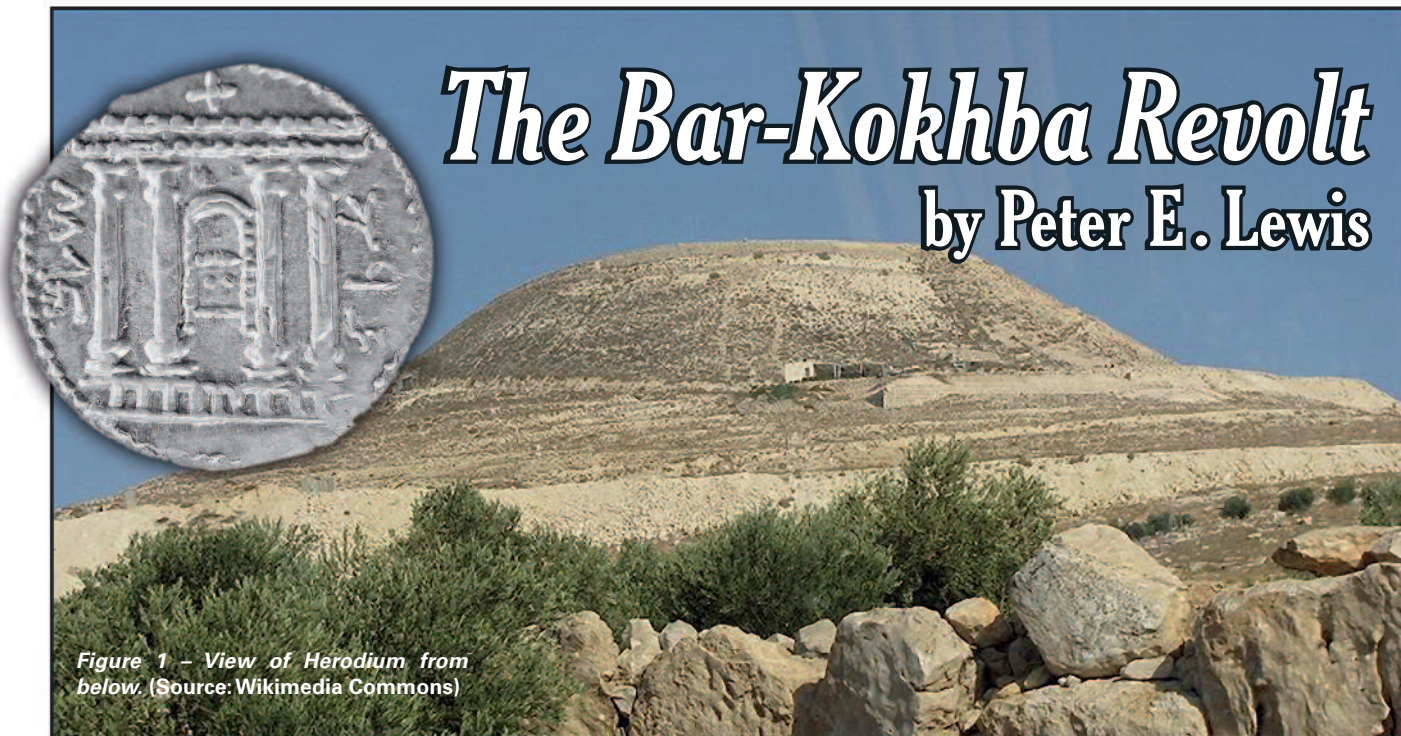


Figure 1 – View of Herodium from below. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

AFTER the First Jewish Revolt (66 – 70 AD) when Jerusalem and the Temple were destroyed by the Romans, Judaea remained firmly under Roman control, but the Jews were restless and eventually they rebelled again under the leadership of Simon Bar-Kokhba (also spelt Kochba). He was a warrior with a lot of charisma and many Jewish men responded to his call. The rebels minted their own coins, not only to avoid handling the hated Roman ones but to spread their message of freedom. It was an effective form of propaganda.

The coins are of silver and bronze. There is a large silver coin (tetradrachm) and a small one (drachm or denarius). The



Figure 2 – Obverse and reverse of a tetradrachm of Bar-Kokhba. Hendin, 5th edition, 1387. (Collection of St John's Cathedral, Brisbane. Image used with permission.)



Figure 3 – Obverse and reverse of a drachm of Bar-Kokhba. Hendin, 5th edition, 1429.

tetradrachms all have the façade of a temple on the obverse, and presumably it is the temple that the rebels hoped to rebuild in Jerusalem. The object inside the temple probably represents the Ark of the Covenant. On the reverse a lulav and etrog are shown. The lulav is a bundle of myrtle and willow tied around a palm frond. With the etrog, a kind of lemon, it was waved during Succoth (also spelt Sukkot), which is the thanksgiving festival that is also known as the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths. For the Jews at that time the lulav and etrog symbolized the hope that the temple would be rebuilt. A typical tetradrachm is shown in Figure 2. The inscriptions are in old Hebrew: 'Jerusalem' on the obverse, and 'Year two of the freedom of Israel' on the reverse. The rebels probably did not hold Jerusalem, at least not for long, because very few Bar-Kokhba coins have been found there. The largest hoard of Bar-Kokhba silver coins ever discovered by archaeologists was found in 2009 in a cave on the western edge of the Jerusalem hills (B. Zissu et

al., *INJ* 17, 113). It consisted of 20 tetradrachms and 63 drachms.

On the drachms there are various symbols that mostly relate to the worship in the temple. On a typical example (Figure 3) the name 'Simon' appears in a wreath on the obverse, and on the reverse there is a lyre with 'For the freedom of Jerusalem'. Music was an important part of the temple worship: 'Praise Him with the harp and lyre.' (Psalm 150: 3b)

The bronze coins are large, middle or small, and they show various symbols. A typical bronze coin is shown in Figure 4. It is of middle size, 26 mms in diameter. On the obverse there is a palm tree with bunches of dates. The date palm was common in Judaea (Bethany means 'house of dates') and it was a symbol of the country. On the coin it has seven branches, reminding the viewer of the Menorah, the great seven-branched candelabra that stood in the temple until it was carried away by the Romans in 70 AD. The inscription on the obverse is 'Simon'. It is interesting to note that until well into the 20th century

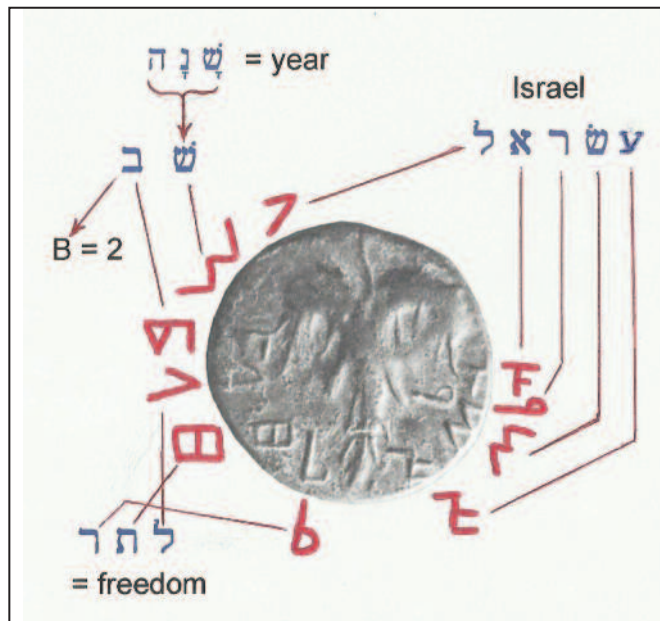


Figure 4 – Obverse and reverse of a bronze coin of Bar-Kokhba. Hendin, 5th edition, 1408a.



Figure 5 – Silver coin (19 mms diam.) with 'Eleazar the Priest' on the obverse and 'Year one of the redemption of Israel' on the reverse. Hendin 1374. It sold at auction in September 2012 for US\$14000 plus buyer's fees. (Image courtesy of Heritage coins, HA.com)

the name 'Simon' was thought to refer to Simon Maccabeus, who led the Maccabean Revolt in 166 BC. On the reverse of the coin there is a vine leaf with 'Year two of the freedom of Israel'. The vine leaf symbolized the chosen people: 'You brought a vine out of Egypt. You drove out the nations and planted it.' (Psalm 80:8)

The coin in Figure 4 is unusual because nearly all the Hebrew letters are clearly shown. With a little knowledge of Hebrew it is not difficult to translate the inscriptions, providing a conversion table (e.g. Table IV in Head's *Historia Numorum*) is used to convert the old Hebrew letters into Classical Hebrew letters. The letter that looks like 'y' (O on the coin) represents a sound like rough breathing. It does not occur in English. On this coin it is out of



Figure 6 – Bronze coin (17 mms diam.) with 'Eleazar the Priest' on the obverse and 'Year one of the redemption of Israel' on the reverse. Hendin 1380a. (Image courtesy of Rosenblumcoins.com)

its usual position: it should be to the left of the M. Don't forget that Hebrew is read from right to left and that vowels are not usually indicated in the ancient Hebrew script. It is very satisfying for a collector to be able to work out for himself the meaning of an inscription on a coin.

Apart from 'Simon', the only other name to appear on the coins is 'Eleazar the Priest'. This name appears on the reverse of small silver and bronze coins. The silver coin has a jug and a willow branch on the obverse and a bunch of grapes on the reverse (Figure 5). The jug was probably used in the temple during Succoth. The bunch of grapes probably represents the fruitfulness of the land and might also refer to Succoth. The bronze coin (Figure 6) has a seven-branched date palm on the obverse and a bunch of grapes on the reverse. But who is Eleazar the priest? It seems that he might have been Simon's



Figure 9 – Obverse of drachm of Trajan with Arabia reverse. SNG, ANS, Part 6, 1157.



Figure 7 – Reverse of the drachm in Figure 3 turned on its side.



Figure 8 – Obverse of the drachm in Figure 3 turned to one side.

uncle and that it was he who hailed him as the Messiah, calling him 'son of a star', referring to the prophecy in Numbers 24:17, 'A star shall come out of Jacob.' The fact that Eleazar's name does not appear on coins bearing the date 'year two' suggests that he fell out with his nephew. According to a rabbinic account Simon killed him.

Unlike the First Jewish Revolt (66 – 70 AD) when coins were struck on new flans of pure silver, all the coins of the Bar-Kokhba Revolt were struck on already minted Roman coins. Remnants of the under-coin are not commonly seen on the tetradrachms, presumably because more care was taken with these valuable coins. They are rarely seen on the bronze coins because the pagan images were filed off,

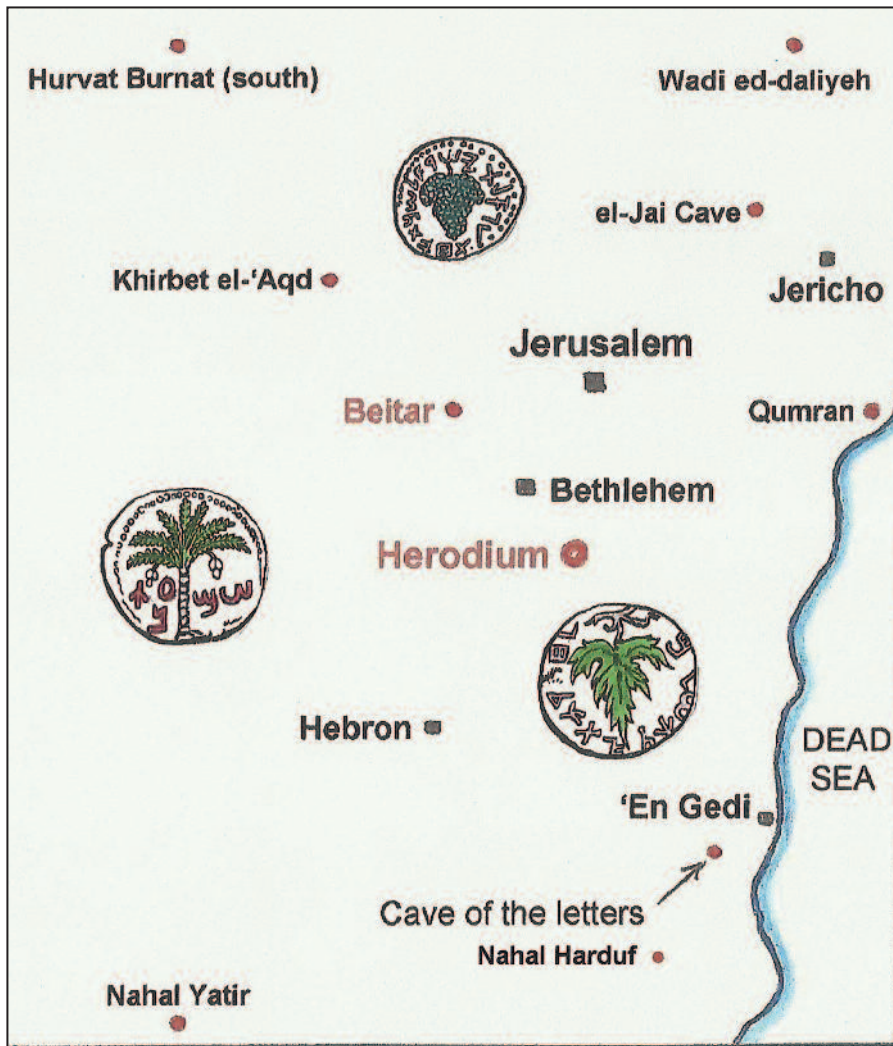


Figure 10 – Map showing find-sites of Bar-Kokhba coins. (Drawing based on the map on page 166 in *INJ* 14, 2000 – 2. The map follows an article entitled ‘The Geographical Distribution of Coins from the Bar Kokhba War’ by Boaz Zissu and Hanan Eshel.)

a wasteful process unsuited to the silver coins. The file marks can sometimes be seen on the bronze coins. But evidence of the over-struck coin is commonly found on the small silver coins. These coins are fun for collectors of ancient coins because with a little detective work it is often possible to work out what the underlying coin is. Let's do this exercise with the coin in Figure 3.

If you turn the page to the right so that the lyre is horizontal, the profile of the emperor Trajan is obvious, as is part of the inscription on the original coin (Figure 7). Looking at the side of the coin bearing Simon's name, if you turn the page it is obvious that the line above his name fits exactly the edge of a figure on a coin of Trajan that was minted at Bostra in the



Figure 11 – Aerial view of Herodium. (Source: Wikimedia Commons)

Roman province of Arabia (Figure 8). An example of the original coin is shown in Figure 9: a woman personifying Arabia stands holding what is thought to be a bundle of cinnamon sticks, while a tiny camel appears on her right. Also on the Bar-Kokhba coin part of the original inscription can be seen, and it reveals a date equivalent to 117 AD. So the Bar-Kokhba Revolt must have begun after 117 AD. Actually, none of the over-struck coins bears a date later than 132 AD, and therefore we can say that the revolt began in 132 AD. As the Bar-Kokhba coins indicate the year of the revolt (except for one group shown by die studies to be from year 3) we can say that it lasted from 132 to 135 AD.

Having worked out the chronology, can the coins be used to work out the geography? An idea of the extent of the territory controlled by the rebels can be obtained by seeing where their coins have been found by archaeologists. (See map, Figure 10) The north-western border is at the village of Hurvat Burnat (south) where 2 bronze coins were found. About 20 kms south of the village fragments of coins were found at the fortress of Khirbet el-'Aqd. They were apparently broken during the overstriking process, which suggests that a mobile mint was there. The north-eastern border is at Wadi ed-daliyeh where a coin fragment was found. About 10 kms NE of Jerusalem in the el-Jai cave 4 coins were found. The south-western border is at the fortified settlement of Nahal Yatir where 3 coins were found. The south-eastern border is at Nahal Harduf where one coin was found.

In the centre of the rebel-held territory one would expect to find the main mint, and the large number of coins found at Herodium (Figures 1 and 11) suggests that it was. Herodium was a fortress that King Herod (39 – 4 BC) built into the top of a mountain, and in 2007 his tomb was discovered half way up the mountain by Professor Ihud Netzer. Previously fifteen Bar-Kokhba coins had been found at Herodium and in 1967 a hoard of 822 of his coins was found, and more of his coins were discovered in the tunnels underneath. This also suggests that Herodium was the rebel headquarters, at least for a while, because Simon Bar-Kokhba died at Bethar (Beitar), which is about 15 kms NW of Herodium. The rebels made their last stand at the fortress of Bethar, and the Romans made tremendous efforts to besiege and capture it. They were finally successful in 135 AD.

Little was known about Simon Bar-Kokhba, and the coins have been of great value in telling his story. There is no doubt that the Bar-Kokhba War was a terrible war. Cassius Dio, a 3rd century Roman historian, wrote, ‘Five hundred and eighty thousand men were slain in the various raids and battles, and the number of those that perished by famine, dis-



Figure 12 – Roman legionary re-enactors. (Image used with the permission of the commander of Legion XXIV. Website: LegionXXIV.org Recruits welcome to apply.)

ease and fire was past finding out. Thus nearly the whole of Judaea was made desolate.' He does not record how many Roman soldiers (Figure 12) were killed.

In 1960 the archaeologist, Yigael Yadin, discovered some letters written by Simon in a cave in the wall of a canyon just west of the Dead Sea. They were taken there by a group of his followers hiding from the Romans. In one of the letters he writes, 'Send to the camp, towards you,

palm branches and etrogs. And you, from your place, send others who will bring you myrtles and willows. See that they are tithed and send them to the camp.' This shows that Simon and his men celebrated Succoth. The items used in the festival are shown on the tetradrachm in Figure 2. Other letters found by Yadin revealed that the rebels called the tetradrachm a sela, and the small silver coin a zuz.

Simon's letters revealed that his real

name was Simon Bar Kosiba. The name, Bar-Kokhba (son of a star), was applied to him by his followers. He usually began his letters, 'Simon Bar Kosiba' with the title 'Nasi Y'srael', which in Classical Hebrew means a leader or prince of Israel, but in modern Hebrew means 'president'. Soon after making his discovery an emotional Yadin informed the then president of Israel that he had discovered dispatches 'written or dictated by the last president of Israel 1800 years ago.'

When Yadin and his team began examining the cave they did not know that it had been occupied at the time of the Bar-Kokhba Revolt. In his book, *Bar-Kokhba: the rediscovery of the legendary hero of the Second Jewish Revolt against Rome* (Random House, New York, 1971), he describes what happened. One of the team members went to the edge of the ledge outside the cave to urinate. On his way back he found a small bronze coin with Simon's name on it. On the same side of the coin there was a palm tree, and on the other side, a bunch of grapes and the inscription, 'For the freedom of Jerusalem'. When the coin was discovered, one of the soldiers asked Yadin what it was worth. He replied that the type was common enough and could be bought cheaply from any antiquities' dealer, but when found here in the cave it became priceless.

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