

THE JESELSOHN COLLECTION  
ARCHAEOLOGY — WRITING

Ada Yardeni

THE  
JESELSOHN  
COLLECTION  
OF  
ARAMAIC  
OSTRACA  
FROM  
IDUMEA

Ada Yardeni | THE JESELSOHN COLLECTION OF  
ARAMAIC OSTRACA FROM IDUMEA

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### Corpus of the Ostraca

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## FOREWORD

The present volume represents the first publication of the Archaeology collection, subset Writings, from The Jeselsonn Collection (also known as The David and Jemima Jeselsonn Collection), presenting 574 ostraca. Almost all of them are Aramaic ostraca from the fourth century BCE from Idumea, which lies within the boundary of present-day Israel.

They can be categorized as follows:

Aramaic, fourth century BCE <sup>1</sup>	560
Aramaic, first century CE	5
Phoenician, seventh to fifth century BCE	2
Greek, fourth to first century BCE	3
Greek, first to third century CE	4
Total	574

The ostraca began surfacing in the antiquities market at the beginning of the 1990's. They are usually short notes, written with ink on pottery sherds from broken and discarded household and storage vessels, comparable to what we would call today bookkeeping records on paper slips. Their importance lies in the information they reveal about the daily life of the rural population in that part of the Land of Israel at a crucial turning point of history. This time period spans the transition from millennia of hegemony of Eastern empires and kingdoms including Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and Persia as well as Israel and Judea on the one hand, and the dawn of the western empires of Greece and Rome, introduced through the conquests of Alexander the Great, on the other.

The exact location where the ostraca, or at least the bulk of them were found, is unknown. The site most often cited on the ostraca themselves is Maqqedah or Manqqedah, the biblical Maqqedah, identified with or near the modern Khirbet el-Kom, west of Hebron. Also the Phoenician and Greek ostraca originated almost certainly from the same location, perhaps with the exception of JG 4–7.

An important step in the preparation of the ostraca for study and publication, was attempting to find the pieces which belonged to the same ostrakon. This involved many hours of leaning over hundreds of pieces spread out on large tables at our home, trying to solve these intricate jig-saw puzzles. My wife, Jemima, enthusiastically worked at this detective-like task, trying to find matching colors, fabrics, broken edges, and writing

1 JA 392 seems to be from the late seventh century BCE, JA 408, 471, and 572 from the fifth century BCE.

styles of the ancient scribes. Some of the matching pieces were discovered only after the numbering was completed, some only after Ada Yardeni has already used the designated numbers in her work. Only then did it become clear that JA 123, 149, and 248 had to be transferred to the Hebrew corpus (to be published separately), that JA 51, 527, and 543 had to be attached to JA 50, 484, and 540 respectively and that JA 558 had to be removed from the grouping because it had a stamped mark, not an inscription. The number of Aramaic ostraca was, therefore, reduced from 572 to 565. This also explains why no other numbering system of the ostraca, for example a chronological order, was any longer possible.

Fifty-seven Aramaic ostraca were illegible and therefore cannot be dated.<sup>2</sup> It was nevertheless decided to leave them in the corpus in order to establish a better visual and conceptual idea as to the original, “raw” state in which the ostraca were found.

Although several ostraca have been published before, this volume can be regarded as an “editio princeps.” It is the first time that all ostraca are published using the original sherds, not simply from photos, and also the first time that a detailed ceramic analysis with exact dimensions, color description, and photos is included.<sup>3</sup>

My thanks for the present publication go to several people. First and foremost to Ada Yardeni who has been working on those ostraca for decades. She had come to Zurich to examine them and I have admired her patient, accurate, and meticulous way of leaning over the ostraca, deciphering, reading, outlining, and copying them in her very special way. The same is to be said about the ensuing work of interpretation and preparation of the glossaries and concordance.

Incidentally, it was during that visit to Zurich that she examined and copied the text of the Jeselsohn Stone, written some time during the first century BCE / first century CE, the text of which has become known worldwide as the Gabriel Revelation.

2 JA 58 115 118 120 152 154 159 164 184 199 210 217 236 238 247 273 279 282 285 291 297 298 300 301 302 303 304 305 306 308 309 310 316 317 333 335 341 348 350 385 386 411 412 413 429 435 447 542 544 545 546 547 548 549 550 551 568.

3 Many of the photos have been “enhanced” in order to facilitate the readability of the script. These causes a shift in the colour scale. To determine the exact, actual colour of the ostraca, one has to consult the *Munsell Soil Color Charts* as indicated in the ceramic description of each ostrakon.

My thanks are due as well to her mentor and colleague Bezalel Porten, who also spent long hours studying the ostraca and whose guidance and advice were very important. Eugen Han, who was the prior owner of some of the ostraca, was also helpful in preparing a first draft of the readings. Avner Ecker assumed the task of deciphering and describing the Greek ostraca. Oren Tal who specializes in the history, archaeology, and numismatics of this period, has kindly agreed to prepare a historical and archaeological introduction to the book. The excellent photos were taken during several visits to Zurich by Zev Radovan, who spared no efforts in order to make the writing as clearly legible as possible. I also wish to thank Alexander Zukerman for the ceramic analysis and description. (The ceramic analysis and description of ostraca JA 563–572 and JA 552–556 were done by myself.)

Thanks are also due to all those engaged in the production of this printed book. The people at Yad Ben-Zvi Press in Jerusalem – Ya'acov Yaniv, the Director General; Benny Wexler, Head of the Publishing Department, who have spent years devotedly working on the three published series of The David and Jemima Jeselsohn Library, and Yohai Goell who did the linguistic editing. In addition many thanks to my longtime secretarial assistant Elfriede Ochsner, who was of much help with the computer work of typing and setting the various tables.

Last but not least it is my privilege to thank Nomi Morag, who succeeded again in creating a very handsome and user-friendly book, something she has already succeeded in doing with the first book for our collection (*Masorah and Text Criticism in the Early Mediterranean: Moshe Ibn Zabara and Menahem di Lonzano* by Jordan Penkower) as well as in another book of The David and Jemima Jeselsohn Library (*The Cairo Geniza Collection in Geneva* by David Rosenthal).

The cleaning, indexing, and preparation of the ostraca for photography, study, and publication was done by myself as well as the editorial work of this volume.

I do hope that this book will help to elucidate several cultural and material aspects of this period, which otherwise is not very rich in historical and archaeological source material.

David Jeselsohn