

In for a Penny

How did hundreds of thousands of tiny Hasmonean coins, all worth very little, find their way to the bottom of the Dead Sea? Did King Alexander Jannaeus have problems paying his mercenaries? Or was something more complex at work?

In recent years, hundreds of thousands of tiny Hasmonean coins have been recovered from the Dead Sea, together constituting one of the largest archeological treasure troves in the world. Despite the highly corrosive chemical environment of the Dead Sea, these coins are astonishingly well preserved, apparently a byproduct of the lack of oxygen in the salty water in which they were found. As a result, the coins are easily identifiable. Most are also, surprisingly, identical.

News of the underwater cache spread quickly among antiquities dealers, who market them to Christian buyers as the coins mentioned in the New Testament story of the Widow's Mite (Mark

12; Luke 21). Archeologists, however, are more interested in the real story behind the coins, and have come up with some interesting possibilities.

The coins are mainly from the time of King Alexander Jannaeus, and may well be connected to two phenomena that occurred during his reign (103–76 BCE).

Paying in Loose Change

The Dead Sea treasure was discovered in the area of Ein Fashkha, just a few meters from the shore. The main credit for the find really goes to the Dead Sea's receding waterline, which has exposed many of the coins over the past twenty years. The coins were found not far from a Hasmonean fortress where ships once moored, giving rise to the theory that the coins fell overboard as a ship set

sail. If, as some speculate, they were earmarked for soldiers' salaries, that would perhaps allow us to calculate the magnitude of Jannaeus' army, which is known to have been immense. His reign was marked by numerous conquests, including cities east of the River Jordan, and these coins may have been intended to pay soldiers who fought in those areas.

The coin that makes up most of the cache is one of Jannaeus' most common mints, and reflects his political aims. Decorated with a star surrounded by a crown and an anchor, the coin expresses the king's dominion. The anchor, traditionally an emblem of strength and stability, may also symbolize his conquest of the coastal towns of the kingdom. These victories, the pinnacle of his military achievements, granted him control of imports and exports as well as territorial contiguity.

There is, however, a flaw in this theory. Each of the coins

had the same minuscule value. Therefore, each soldier would have had to receive a ridiculous number of coins as his salary, and many thousands of coins would have been needed. Surely Jannaeus would not have complicated matters for his soldiers and paymasters by requiring such a large number of coins for every salary paid. It may, of course, be argued that the king deliberately paid with coins of his own minting, perhaps to emphasize his power, but it seems illogical that he would create such an administrative headache purely for the sake of a symbolic gesture.

Cultural Tensions

Another possible explanation for this unique find begins with a mishna discussing items that under certain conditions should be hurled into the Dead Sea: "If one set aside...coins for a sin offering and then lost them, and purchased a sin offering with other coins, and then found the original coins – he should cast them into the Dead Sea" (*Terumot* 4:2). Coins consecrated to the Temple may not be used for mundane purposes.

The trove of coins from Khirbet Mazin, south of Ein Fashkha by the Dead Sea

Photo: Ze'ev Radovan, courtesy of Donald Ariel and Prof. Yitzhar Hirschfeld, z"l



Therefore, if they fail to reach the Temple, they must be disposed of. A mere garbage dump doesn't solve the problem – someone could find the coins and use them. The solution was therefore to throw them into the Dead Sea, because the area there was sparsely populated, so anything cast into the sea would be lost forever.

Many Jews in Judea during the Second Temple period were farmers, who were required to set aside a second tithe from their produce along with *neta revai* – the fruits of a tree's fourth year – all of which was to be eaten only in Jerusalem. Because of the difficulties involved in transporting fresh produce, the Torah allowed these fruits to be “redeemed” for money, and that money used to buy food in Jerusalem: “And if the way be too long for you, so that you are not able to bear it.... Then shall you turn it into money, and take the money in your hand to the place that the Lord your God will choose” (Deuteronomy 14:24–26).

Thus, the coins may have been cast into the Dead Sea by the Pharisees’

opponents to protest the Sages’ control over the Temple. They preferred to avoid the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to redeem their tithes, so their money would not go to the Temple. Because the Torah forbade the use of consecrated money for any unholy purpose, the only solution was to cast the coins into the Dead Sea. The trove of coins was found near the Kidron estuary, which is flanked by trails leading down from Jerusalem. The coins were apparently hurled into this stream en route to the Dead Sea.

The sheer number of coins discovered may reflect the cultural tensions prevailing in the Land of Israel during the Hasmonean period. This era was characterized by extreme friction between the various denominations of Judaism. The disputes among these factions intensified under Jannaeus, whose controversial actions sparked considerable resistance. Jannaeus adopted Greek customs, humiliated the rabbinic establishment, and sought to achieve the status of a Hellenistic king, as he indeed designated himself on his coins. His

actions caused great unrest, especially among the Pharisees, and they appealed to Demetrius III, the Seleucid ruler of Syria, who helped them undermine Jannaeus’ power. Demetrius fought against Jannaeus and defeated him in battle in 88 BCE. Ultimately, Demetrius returned to Syria, and Jannaeus overcame his opponents and punished them.

The huge cache of coins suggests that during this period, the Pharisees were not the only rebels. Their opponents, too, used various means to advance their aims. The extraordinary number of coins – estimates exceed 300,000 – may indicate that a surprisingly large number of people engaged in civil disobedience by casting their coins into the Dead Sea instead of donating to the Temple.

The discovery of the coins raises a halakhic issue too: if this theory is correct, no benefit may be derived from these coins – not even by antiquities merchants. ■



Map showing approximate position of treasure trove. The arrow represents the route of coins washed downstream from Jerusalem to the Dead Sea

Top left: copper coin of Alexander Jannaeus (1 cm. diam.), inscribed in Hebrew and Greek. A few examples of this coin were recovered from the Dead Sea. Similar coins made up the majority of the coins found

Courtesy of Robert Brenchley

Segula

THE JEWISH JOURNEY THROUGH HISTORY

Website: www.segulamag.com e-mail: sara@segulamag.com Fax: 077-727-7702

Customer service: Sun-Thu 09:00 – 16:00 (Israel time) 02-727-7700, ext. 9

הסכם לרכישת מנוי חדש

Sub in past		Yes / No		Sub #			
First Name		Last Name		ID #		Date of birth	
Home phone #		Cell phone #		Work phone #		Fax #	
Address		Apt	City	State / Province	P.O.B	Postal Code	
Country		E-mail					
Yearly Subscription to "Segula Magazine" – 6 magazines Delivery by mail							
Israel: 216 shekel United States: \$66 Europe: \$60 / €48 Other: _____							
Price includes delivery							

Visa / Mastercard (16) (Diners (14) American Express (15) Card Number / ___/___/___/___ - ___/___/___/___ - ___/___/___/___ - ___/___/___/___ Expiry date ___/___/___ - ___/___/___ ID number / ___/___/___/___/___/___/___/___/___/___ Name on card _____ Signature _____		Method of payment
_____(require a receipt address (if different <input type="checkbox"/>		Receipt
1. Special offer, the subscription to "Segula" magazine can be cancelled at any time (after receiving the first edition). In such a case, the customer will be charged only for the months that he was a subscriber at the price of 39 shekels per month / magazine + shipping 2. The customer must inform customer service in the event of not receiving a magazine. If no such information is received, it will be taken as an admission that the magazines were received on time throughout the subscription period. 3. In the event that this subscription was agreed upon via the telephone, no further notice from either side is necessary, the magazines will be supplied and the customer will be charged without further notice 4. "Segula" magazine is a bi-monthly product. The magazines will usually be supplied to the customer by the end of every second calendar month.		Terms and conditions
<input type="checkbox"/> Given on site <input type="checkbox"/> To be sent by post		Gift