REVIEWS

THE NEAR AND MIDDLE EAST

DANIEL M. FRIEDENBERG:
Sasanian Jewry and Its Culture: A Lexicon of Jewish and Related Seals.
xiv, 74 pp. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2009. $40.
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Although Sasanian Babylonia became the most important Jewish centre outside of the Land of Israel in late Roman and early Byzantine times, very few physical remains of its Jewish population have come down to us as the political situation has prevented proper excavations. This renders the two exceptions, Jewish incantation bowls and seals, all the more important. The seals, most of which have already been published by Shaul Shaked, are republished here together with seals whose Jewishness is doubtful. The latter, which may more probably be Christian or Zoroastrian, provide comparable material for identifying the specific elements of the Jewish seal impressions. Publishing the relatively small number of undisputedly Jewish seals in a lexicon-style book format makes them more accessible to scholars of ancient Judaism, Persian, and talmudic history than would a journal article, which would have actually sufficed to represent and rediscuss the material.

Since the author is a museum curator of coins rather than an expert on rabbinic Judaism and Babylonian Jewish history, the introductory chapters on Babylonian Jewish history, which make up almost half of this slim volume, are rather disappointing and do not add anything new to scholarship. The author is not familiar with recent studies on Babylonian Jewry published by Yaakov Elman, Richard Kalmin and Jeffrey Rubenstein. He rather summarizes the antiquated opinions of scholars such as Baron and Graetz, who wrote fifty and even a hundred years ago. Not being aware of methodological changes in the study of the Babylonian Talmud and Babylonian Jewish history during the last decades, he assumes that fixed local rabbinic academies with a hierarchical leadership structure and internal succession existed in Babylonia in amoraic times (the third and fourth century). He also constantly tries to identify the names in the seal inscriptions with rabbis known from the Babylonian Talmud, obviously not cognizant of the methodological pitfalls of such identifications, which have already been discussed at length in connection with Shaye J. D. Cohen's study of "Epigraphical rabbis" (*JQR* 72, 1981–82, 1–17) as far as Roman Palestine is concerned.

The main body of the work (pp. 27–60) provides a brief description of fifty-seven seals, of which approximately half can be identified as Jewish and have already been published by Shaked. The Jewish identification rests on Hebrew inscriptions and the use of the Jewish symbols of *etrog* (citron) and *lulav* (palm branch), which are found on eleven of the seals. The majority of seals lack inscriptions but have scenes which may be identified as representing the biblical stories of Abraham's Binding of Isaac and Daniel in the Lion's Den. The Aqedah (Binding of Isaac) image was also used by early Christians and resembles the Zoroastrian depiction of offering a sacrifice on the fire altar. Therefore the Jewish, Christian, or Zoroastrian identity of the owners of these seals remains uncertain.

The author's recurrent attempts to identify the names mentioned in the inscriptions with rabbis known from rabbinic sources seems ineffectual and unconvincing.

Although the names of "Huna" and "Nathan" occur numerous times in the literary sources and were probably very common amongst Babylonian Jews, Friedenberg claims that a "Huna bar Nathan" mentioned on one of the seals (no. 9) "could well be . . . the Babylonian exilarch and *amora* of the same name" (p. 32). A certain "Abbua" (no. 4) is identified with "Abbayye", because Neusner allegedly refers to this amora frequently. The more similar name "Abbahu" does not appear to be known to the author.

Most of the seals that lack inscriptions and depict the Binding of Isaac and Daniel in the Lion's Den, sometimes with a cross symbol, are identified as "more likely" Christian than Jewish. Others depicting Zoroastrian worship were obviously Zoroastrian. The small photos of the seals accompanying the descriptions show the similarity "in superficial iconography" (p. 41) which may point to a common repertoire of ancient Middle Eastern stock images: "One may speculate that this symbolic convergence of the Zoroastrian representation with the biblical theme may indicate that both flow from what had been a much earlier common tradition" (ibid.).

The seals with images of human figures (nos 27–29) are particularly striking, due to their Sasanian analogies. A seal with a Hebrew name inscription, a bearded bust with wings underneath it may suggest that "Jews were employed by the government as officials, especially for the purpose of taxation" (p. 43). Other symbols, such as stars over crescent moons, scorpions, lions, and other animals also point to a shared cultural heritage from which the makers of the seals could draw. A seal made for "Aha Son of Sumaqa", one of the few Jewish seals with patronym inscriptions, reveals the trade of the owner's family to be clothes dyers or sellers of red dye (sumac), an important branch of the ancient textile industry.

The volume closes with a list of a few observations on the specific character of the known Sasanian Jewish seals. The author suggests that the etrog and lulav symbols, which are "the only specific Jewish feature not appearing on non-Jewish Sasanian seals", may indicate that the owners "were high religious figures" (p. 62). He has already admitted earlier, however, that these symbols also appear on the tombstones of lay members of the Jewish community and may merely underline these individuals' Jewish identity (see p. 16). All in all the seals provide a very interesting glimpse into Babylonian Jewish life, although their number is very limited and only property-owning males are represented by them.

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ROBERT HILLENBRAND and SYLVIA AULD (eds):
Ayyubid Jerusalem: The Holy City in Context 1187–1250.
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This volume is the third in a series of publications on Jerusalem by the World of Islam Festival Trust and its successor, the Altajir Trust. The two preceding volumes covered the architecture and history of Jerusalem during the Mamluk (1987, ed. M. Burgoyne) and the Ottoman periods (2000, ed. Hillenbrand/Auld). The present volume on the Ayyubid period covers a relatively short time span of sixty-three years. However, this is a crucial period that followed the some ninety years during which the city had been part of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem. The city's history