

A Ring from a Cave in 'En Gedi and the Conflict Between Herod the Great and Mattathias Antigonus (40–37 BCE)¹

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Abstract

This paper presents a rare bronze finger ring that was found more than half a century ago and bears a symbol known mainly from the coins of Mattathias Antigonus. A teenager recovered it from one of the burial caves in the cliff of Nahal David at 'En Gedi. Although the cave was later excavated by Nahman Avigad, the ring was forgotten and was not incorporated in the excavation report. This paper discusses the ring, the symbol it bears, and its relation to the coins of Antigonus. I suggest a date and identification for the burials in the cave that associates them with the conflict between Herod and Antigonus.

Keywords: coins; burials; finger ring; conflict

¹ This paper builds and expands on a previous paper in Hebrew (Farhi 2016).



1. The Story of the Discovery

In the winter of 1959/60, while on a school trip, Yitzhak and Eliyahu Meyuchas, eleventh-grade twin brothers from Kibbutz Giv'at Ha-Shelosha, climbed into one of the hewn caves in the marl cliff of Nahal David near 'En Gedi: "... we had to crawl; the dust made us cough.... I was digging with a small wooden stick ... all of a sudden, a small bone was revealed, wearing a green metal ring on it. I took off the dust from it..." (Meyuchas 2014: 15).² A few months later, Yitzhak sent a letter to the Department of Antiquities informing them of the discovery (Fig. 1; Y. Meyuchas to Department of Antiquities, 10 April 1960), enclosing the ring and a tooth he found next to it.

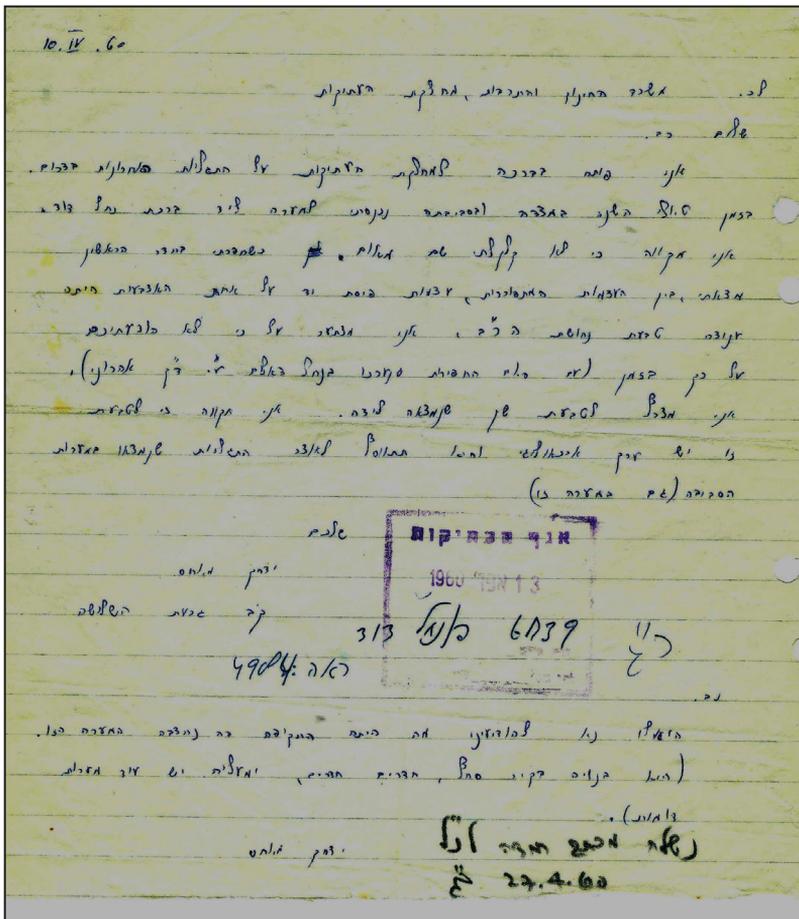


Fig. 1. Meyuchas's letter to the Department of Antiquities.

² The ring was donated by Yitzhak to the Israel Museum and its number in the collection is 2015.28.35.

Ram Gophna, Department of Antiquities southern district inspector, sent a thank you letter to Meyuchas (R. Gophna to Y. Meyuchas, 22 April 1960) and, a few days later, handed the ring to Prof. Nahman Avigad, who surveyed the area of Naḥal David, for inspection (R. Gophna to N. Avigad, 28 April 1960).

Nearly a year later, Avigad sent the ring back to Gophna, stating that he "... cannot say anything certain about the date of the ring. It could be very late. Anyway, its significance ought to be gauged in relation to where it was found. Mr. Meyuchas's letter does not afford to locate the cave exactly" (N. Avigad to R. Gophna, 12 February 1961). The next day, Gophna sent the ring back to Meyuchas. He enclosed Avigad's letter and briefly stated: "...from this letter, you will learn that they could not determine the precise meaning of the ring..." He went on to propose that Meyuchas ask the Israel Exploration Society about the next season of excavations at 'En Gedi and join the expedition (R. Gophna to Y. Meyuchas, 13 February 1961).

A month later, on March 14–27, 1961, an expedition set out to survey and excavate some of the Judean desert caves. Among them were the caves at Naḥal David, including where the ring was found. Unfortunately, Meyuchas was unable to join, but he wrote to Gophna, specifying the cave's location and adding: "...I hope you will not get this letter too late and that you will let the excavation team know. I mention this because I believe the cave was not studied thoroughly, as I found the ring only about 15 cm deep..." Meyuchas ends his letter congratulating the excavation team for its discoveries, wishing its participants success on their second week of excavations, and thanking Gophna for returning the ring to him (Y. Meyuchas to R. Gophna, 20 March 1960).

As Meyuchas's letter reached the Department of Antiquities, Nahman Avigad's expedition was already excavating the cave (Avigad's Cave 1; Fig. 2). A preliminary report of this excavation was published a year later (Avigad 1962: 181–183; for a more comprehensive report, see also Hadas and Peleg-Barkat, forthcoming). Significantly, the ring goes completely unmentioned in Avigad's records. Perhaps, Meyuchas's second letter never reached him, for there is no further record of this matter in the Israel Antiquities Authority archive.



Fig. 2. The cave in Nahal David where the ring was found (photo: Yoav Farhi).

2. The Ring and its Interpretation

The item in question is a small bronze ring (16 mm in diameter) with an oval bezel (8 mm across; Fig. 3). The bezel carries a schematic engraved pattern encircled with a dotted oval frame. The central design is interpreted as consisting of two cornucopias joined at the base with a tall ear of corn rising between them.



Fig. 3. The ring from the cave in Nahal David (photo: Tomer Applebaum).

A similar ring, albeit of unknown provenience, is on display in the Kadman Numismatic Pavilion in the Eretz Israel Museum, Tel Aviv (Fig. 4). Its diameter is 16.5 mm, and the bezel measures 9 × 6 mm. The similar dimensions and design suggest that the two rings were produced in the same workshop (see below). However, given that the ring in the Kadman collection is more finely fashioned, different artisans are likely to have been involved.



Fig. 4. The ring from the Kadman Numismatic Pavilion (reg. no. K-298.95; photo: Tomer Applebaum).

Similar motifs consisting of a double cornucopia with a high ear of corn between them have been observed on small bronze coins bearing the name of Mattathias Antigonus (Fig. 5; Meshorer 2001: 220, Nos. 39–40; Goldstein and Fontanille 2013: Types IV–V), the last Hasmonean king, who ruled over Jerusalem with the support of the Parthians during the years 40–37 BCE (Stern 1995: 249–274; Rappaport 2013: 424–427). Notably, the double cornucopia motif was applied throughout the Hasmonean reign.³ However, initially, the design incorporated a pomegranate/poppy between the cornucopias, whereas the ear of corn was specific for Antigonus's reign.

³ For a discussion of the cornucopia as a Jewish symbol, see Hendin (2010: 176–178 and references therein). For rings with double cornucopia and between them another plant motif, probably a lily, see Hendin (2010: 181, Fig. 6.5).



Fig. 5. Small bronze coins of Mattathias Antigonus decorated with a double cornucopia and an ear of corn (not in scale; Photos courtesy of David Hendin).

Another notable parallel is observed on two rare clay sealings (bullae) of unknown provenience held by the Hecht collection, Haifa. One bulla measures 10×12 mm (Fig. 6a; Meshorer 1990–91: 130, Pl. 24:h; Meshorer 2001: 59, No. 6), while the other measures 9×13 mm. This second bulla is more elaborate than the first, its cornucopias are crossed at their base, and the ear of corn is placed between two leaves (Fig. 6b).

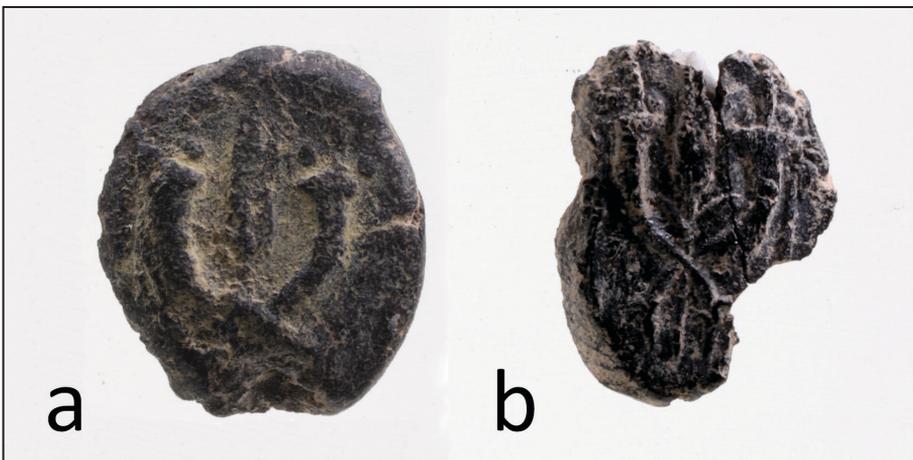


Fig. 6. Clay bullae with a double cornucopia and an ear of corn (scale 2:1): (a) No. R-1219, (b) No. H-2540 (Photo: Shay Levy; courtesy of the Hecht Museum, University of Haifa).

The ear of corn and double cornucopia pattern is exclusively associated with Mattathias Antigonus and is unknown elsewhere in Jewish numismatics or any other media of Jewish art.⁴ Mattathias Antigonus probably sought to differentiate himself while maintaining a historical connection with his predecessors and, thus, retained the overall double cornucopia design but replaced the pomegranate/poppy with the ear of corn. Why he chose the ear of corn is uncertain, and so is his decision to draw it higher above the double cornucopia. Perhaps, he sought another symbol of plenty or an allusion to showbread and its importance to the Temple, as he did with the Menorah and the showbread table on other coins (see Meshorer 2001: 220, No. 41; Goldstein and Fontanille 2013: Type I). Another interpretation is that the ear of corn symbolizes the importance of the grain fields for Antigonus's economy. Josephus's account of Yosef's, Herod's brother, attempt to take over the fields of grain in the area of Jericho may be considered to reinforce this hypothesis (Josephus, *B.J.* 1.323–324).

3. The Ring and the conflict between Herod the Great and Mattathias Antigonus

The conflict between Herod the Great and Mattathias Antigonus lasted three years and ended in 37 BCE with Herod's conquest of Jerusalem and Antigonus's execution by Marcus Antonius (Elitzur 2013). Historical and numismatic evidence suggests that battles were fought in the areas of Jericho, the Judean Desert, and even Masada, where Antigonus enjoyed considerable support (see Stern 1995: 256–274; Ariel 1998; Sion and Ariel 2001; Bijovsky 2004).

Notably, historical accounts indicate that the death toll of these and other battles was very high (Josephus, *B.J.* 1.331–339), a claim that seems to receive considerable support from the caves at 'En Gedi. Thus, Avigad's Cave 3 produced approximately one hundred skulls and a multitude of bones, comprising both primary and secondary interments (Avigad 1962: 182). Avigad argued that this and other caves nearby were designated specifically for burial purposes and that they date from the 1st century BCE and before Herod's reign (Avigad 1962: 183). During 1984–1989, Hadas excavated nine tombs in the vicinity (Hadas 1994). One of them, on the southern bank of Nahal 'Arugot (Tomb No. 2; Fig. 7), might be relevant to the current discussion. "Remains of more than 50 persons

⁴ It is notable, however, that a similar design appears on small and rare bronze coins that were probably minted in Ascalon in the second half of the first century BCE and before the days of Augustus (e.g., Meshorer et al. 2013: 98, No. 46). However, unlike the design on the rings, coins, and bullae discussed above, in this particular design the ear of corn does not project above the double cornucopia.

were found in this tomb; most of the skeletal remains were found in piles which covered the greater part of the tomb's floor" (Hadas 1994:12–17, 1*).

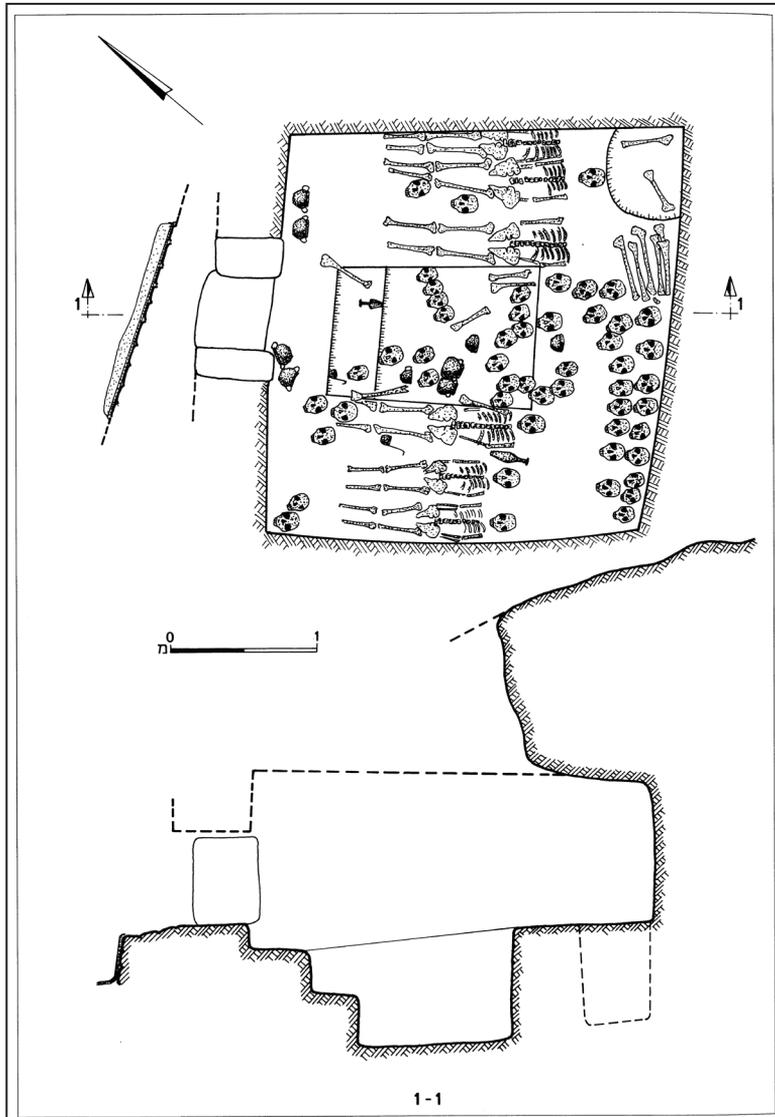


Fig. 7: Plan of Tomb 2, 'En Gedi (after Hadas 1994: 13, Plan 2; courtesy of the Israel Antiquities Authority).

Altogether, 61 individuals were recorded in this tomb: 15 males, 12 females, and 34 children. Notable observations include that one of the adults was decapitated, the overwhelming majority of the females were young ($n=10$; aged 20–25), and the population's overall health condition was good (Arensburg and

Belfer-Cohen 1994: 13*). Furthermore, further analysis of these skeletal remains by Israel Hershkovitz observed that ten of the males were brutally murdered. He also noted that “the fact that only men were massacred does not rule out that women and children were also killed in the same incident, albeit differently, that is, not via a skull injury but, for instance, through a stab in the chest” (Quoted in Becker 2001). Hershkovitz connected these finds to Josephus’s account of a massacre at ‘En Gedi, where more than 700 people were killed at the hands of the zealots (the Sicarii) of Masada (Josephus, *B.J.* 4.402–404). However, none of the finds in the tomb is later than the 1st century BCE (Hadas 1994:7*), rendering it too early to be connected with these raids.⁵

Thus, the evidence from Tomb 2—the skeletal remains’ locations (Fig. 7), the large number of individuals represented, the dominance of young females, the population’s good health, and the brutal murder of at least some of them—suggests that this tomb was used to bury the victims and casualties of the Herod-Antigonus conflict, as was probably also the case for the cave with the ring. Interestingly, although the settlement in ‘En Gedi persisted until the First Jewish Revolt, none of the tombs excavated by Hadas dated later than the 1st century BCE. Thus, insofar as these were family tombs, their failure to continue into the 1st century CE suggests that something dramatic must have happened.⁶ It is thus suggested that these tombs went out of use following the sudden addition of numerous burials due to a violent event. In such a case, the multitude of people brought to burial may have been of no relation to the families who used these tombs for generations.

4. Closing Remarks

On the grounds presented above and based on the suggested date of the burials and the ring, I propose that some of the Naḥal David caves excavated by Avigad and some of the tombs excavated by Hadas were used as mass graves for the casualties of the Herod-Antigonus conflict. The unique design on the ring’s bezel, its resemblance to coins minted by Mattathias Antigonus, and the burial caves

⁵ A six loculi tomb located between the ‘En Gedi youth hostel and Route 90 might be associated with this later event. It was partly excavated by Barag in 1972 (Barag and Porat 1972) and later again by Hadas in 1991 (Hadas 1993). It contained 49 individuals buried in both primary and secondary interments. Bones of at least four people (three men and one woman) exhibited lesions apparently produced by a heavy and sharp implement, possibly a Roman sword (Rak, Arensburg, and Nathan 1976; Arensburg, Goldstein, and Rak 1985). This tomb was dated to the late Second Temple period and, thus, might be connected to the Sicarii raids (Hadas, pers. comm., November 21, 2021).

⁶ It should be noted that out of hundreds of burial caves in Judea dated from the late Second Temple Period only a few with late 1st-century BCE remains did not persist into the 1st century CE.

and tombs' failure to reach the 1st century CE suggest that the ring's owner was buried during Antigonus's days or shortly after.

The discoveries in the caves and the ring, now placed in its appropriate context, agree with the suggestion made by Benjamin Mazar that the citadel at the site was destroyed during the invasion of the Parthians and Herod's war with the last Hasmoneans (Mazar 1993: 404; Stern and Matskevich 2007: 274).

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