Iraq al-Amir

Contributed by Micah Key and NET Staff

At Iraq al-Amir, ten miles west of Amman in Wadi Seer, a man named Hyrcanus built a palace in the 2nd century BC. Josephus describes the structure and the nearby caves (Antiquities of the Jews, Book 12, Ch. 4):

Hyrcanus… seated himself beyond Jordan, and …erected a strong castle, and built it entirely of white stone to the very roof, and had animals of a prodigious magnitude engraved upon it. He also drew round it a great and deep canal of water. He also made caves of many furlongs in length, by hollowing a rock that was over against him; and then he made large rooms in it [the rock], some for feasting, and some for sleeping and living in. He introduced also a vast quantity of waters which ran along it, and which were very delightful and ornamental in the court. But still he made the entrances at the mouth of the caves so narrow, that no more than one person could enter by them at once…Moreover, he built courts of greater magnitude than ordinary, which he adorned with vastly large gardens.

The castle collapsed in the earthquake of 363 AD, but it has been reconstructed with the original stones:

This Hyrcanus (not to be confused with Hasmoneans of that name) was a member of the Jewish Tobiad family. Some see an ancestor in the 5th-century "Tobiah the servant, the Ammonite," whom Nehemiah {jtips2} Nehemiah 13: 5-9: "Before this, Eliashib the priest had been put in charge of the storerooms of the house of our God. He was closely associated with Tobiah, and he had provided him with a large room formerly used to store the grain offerings and incense and temple articles, and also the tithes of grain, new wine and oil prescribed for the Levites, singers and gatekeepers, as well as the contributions for the priests. / But while all this was going on, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king. Some time later I asked his permission and came back to Jerusalem. Here I learned about the evil thing Eliashib had done in providing Tobiah a room in the courts of the house of God. I was greatly displeased and threw all Tobiah's household goods out of the room. I gave orders to purify the rooms, and then I put back into them the equipment of the house of God, with the grain offerings and the incense."|evicted from the Temple.{/jtips2} The identification seems likely. Nehemiah wants to exclude him from the assembly of God, because he is an "Ammonite," but the name Tobiah is Hebrew, meaning "Yah is good." (As for "servant," it may refer to a position as appointee of the Persian king.) Further, Nehemiah's Tobiah, as an Ammonite, comes from the same area as the later Tobiads.

In the time of conflict between the {jtips2}Ptolemy was a general of Alexander the Great. After Alexander's death, he and his successors controlled Egypt, from which their rule extended to both sides of the Jordan.|Ptolemies{/jtips2} and the {jtips2}Seleucus, another of Alexander's generals, held a huge territory including Mesopotamia and Syria. His successors were pushed out of Mesopotamia by the superior cavalries of the Parthians. Wanting to make up for the loss, the Seleucids cast their eyes to the south. By 200 BC, they had taken both sides of the Jordan from the Ptolemies. Their rule was short lived, however. Locally, they lost out to the Maccabees, and more broadly, they were no match for the rising power of Rome.|Seleucids{/jtips2}, the Tobiads were a powerful Jewish family. The graven images on the palace are no disproof of their Jewishness: before the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 AD, there were strong variations in ways of being Jewish. Nearby, carved in the rock of the cliff, are several elaborate dovecots, which some have taken to indicate worship of Aphrodite (her symbol was the dove). The argument is weak. Apart from their use for meat and fertilizer, doves were vital in Jewish ritual too: every woman was obliged to sacrifice two pigeons after giving birth.

In the 3d-century-BC {jtips2}Zeno, assistant to the finance minister of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, King of Egypt from 281-246 BC. He wrote assiduously about his services to the minister as well as his own business ventures. Some 2000 of his documents, in Greek, were discovered in the late 19th century at the site of the ancient Egyptian village of Philadelphia. Among these, 40 refer to the situation in Syria/Palestine. In 259-258 BC Zeno traveled through this region on behalf of his employer, accompanied by business specialists. His itinerary included the Amman area.|Zeno Papyri{/jtips2}, we find that the Egyptian official Zeno met, in or near Iraq al-Amir, with a local sheikh/cavalry officer named Tobias (the Greek

form of Tobiah), who was in the service of Ptolemy. The papyri include letters written by Tobias to Ptolemy, to whom he sent various animals. He also sent to Zeno's boss a young eunuch and four black-eyed slave-boys, two circumcised and two not. The accompanying letter includes the standard Greek greeting, "Many thanks to the gods!" (This is the only firm evidence suggesting a pagan inclination, but it may rather indicate a combinaton of convention and pragmatism.) Tobias also sold Zeno a slave girl. It is clear from the letters that the Tobiads were wealthy landowners who maintained a cavalry unit.

To this time or a little earlier, {jtips2}F. M. Cross, "The Development of the Jewish Scripts," in G.E. Wright, ed., The Bible and the Ancient Near East, Garden City: Doubleday, 1961|Frank Moore Cross{/jtips2} and other scholars date the inscription "Tobiah," which appears twice beside entrances to the caves mentioned in the quoted passage above. But the Tobiads may go further back at Iraq al-Amir: {jtips} B. Mazar, "The Tobiads," Israel Exploration Journal 7, 137-145, 229-238.|Benjamin Mazar{/jtips} dated the same inscriptions to the 6th or early 5th century BC—that is, to a time before Nehemiah's Tobiah. This would make them very early examples of the squarish Hebrew script in use today.

In dating the inscriptions thus, both Cross and Mazar diverged from a consensus based on Paul Lapp's excavations (1961-62) at the ancient village nearby (also called Iraq al-Amir). Lapp interpreted his results as representing a long gap in the occupation of the site: he found a stratum which he dated to the 11th century BC, suggesting it might be Ramath Mizpeh of {jtips}"And their border [the border of Gad] was Jazer, and all the cities of Gilead, and half the land of the children of Ammon, unto Aroer that is before Rabbah; and from Heshbon unto Ramath-mizpeh, and Betonim; and from Mahanaim unto the border of Lidbir."|Joshua 13:26,{/jtips} and directly above this another stratum from the 2nd century BC. However, archaeologist C. C. Ji, on re-examining Lapp's reports, realized that some of the pottery that Lapp had attributed to the 11th century belonged to a period as late as the 5th BC. Moreover, {jtips}F. Larché, F. Villeneuve, F. Zayadine, "Recherches archaéologiques à Iraq al-Amir," Liber Annus, 31 (pp. 337-342), 1981, and 32 (pp. 495-498), 1982.|Larché et al.,{/jtips} digging from 1976-1982, found indications that that the village was inhabited from the 6th century BC through the Persian period and into the Hellenistic. There was, then, little or no occupation gap. Iraq al-Amir was probably the ancestral land of the Tobiads throughout the centuries we are considering.

Recent {jtips}J.M. Dentzer, F. Villeneuve and F. Larché, "Iraq al Amir: Excavations at the Monumental Gateway," A. Hadidi, ed. Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan, Vol. I, Amman, 1982, pp. 206-7.|excavations{/jtips} in the area, writes {jtips} J. Pastor, Land and Economy in Ancient Palestine, London: Routledge, 1997, p. 33.|Jack Pastor,{/jtips} "reveal that the heart of the Tobiad estates, Iraq el-Emir, was a paradeisos of at least 2000 dunams, including terraces, irrigation works, and supporting and enclosing walls. Researchers have also come to the conclusion that there was an animal-breeding farm on the estate."

The Tobias of the Zeno Papyri was brother-in-law to Onias II, the High Priest in Jerusalem. It was a case of intermarriage between two powerful families, the Oniads and the Tobiads, often at each other's throats, who maneuvered between more powerful but distant rivals: the {jtips2}Ptolemy was a general of Alexander the Great. After Alexander's death, he and his successors controlled Egypt, from which their rule extended to both sides of the Jordan.|Ptolemies{/jtips2} and the {jtips2}Seleucus, another of Alexander's generals, held a huge territory including Mesopotamia and Syria. His successors were pushed out of Mesopotamia by the superior cavalries of the Parthians. Wanting to make up for the loss, the Seleucids cast their eyes to the south. By 200 BC, they had taken both sides of the Jordan from the Ptolemies. Their rule was short lived, however. Locally, they lost out to the Maccabees, and more broadly, they were no match for the rising power of Rome.|Seleucids.{/jtips2} If this situation has a whiff of the mafia, we should not be surprised: when central authority disappears, as after the destruction of the Temple in 586 BC, local governance reverts to the level of the basic biological unit, and the stronger families vie with each another. It was this tendency that Nehemiah attempted to controvert by restoring the Torah as authority, but in the Ptolemaic period conditions again {jtips}Lester L. Grabbe, A History of the Jews and Judaism in the Second Temple Period, New York: T & T Clark, 2008, Vol. II p. 314|"lent themselves to mafia-style tactics."{/jtips}

That much is evident in the Tobiad story {jtips}Antiquities of the Jews, Book 12, Ch. 4|as told by Josephus.{/jtips} Onias II withheld the tribute that he was obliged to send Ptolemy. He did so, Josephus says, because of greed, but on {jtips}P. Schäfer, The History of the Jews in the Greco-Roman World, Routledge, 2003.|Peter Schäfer's view,{/jtips}the real motive was probably Onias' assessment (backed no doubt by a party in Jerusalem) that the Seleucids would soon be taking over.

Ptolemy saw the danger and threatened to establish a military colony in Jerusalem, an act that would have ended the limited autonomy the Jews then had. Into this situation came Joseph, the son of the Tobias whom we know from the Zeno papyri. He "became spokesman for the opposition to the High Priest and demanded that he abandon his anti-Ptolemaic policies and seek reconciliation with the king. Onias II had to bow to the opposition, which apparently had strong popular support, and thus in effect gave up the political leadership of the people" (Schäfer, p. 20). Onias remained High Priest, but Joseph the Tobiad became the Jewish people's political representative before Ptolemy. He went to the king in Alexandria and, outbidding all competitors, promised to collect double the usual taxes. Ptolemy duly appointed him chief tax collector for the entire province, giving him 2000 soldiers. Joseph promptly voiced his tax demands at Ashkelon and Scythopolis. When these cities refused to cough up, he executed the wealthiest citizens and confiscated their property. By such techniques, Joseph not only raised the promised taxes, but, writes Josephus, "made great profits," which he used to consolidate his power. If the tax collectors in Jesus' day were at all like him, it is no wonder that people frowned when Jesus dined with them.

Joseph the Tobiad remained chief tax collector under Ptolemy for 22 years (a term that would not shame Tony Soprano), from about 240 until 218, when he sensed that the wind was changing in favor of the energetic new Seleucid king, Antiochus III.

Schäfer (p. 21) thinks "that the policies of the Tobiads played a significant role in the intensification of social conflict in Palestine and the consequent emergence of apocalyptic tendencies and revolutionary currents. He sees this as the background for texts like {jtips}"If you see the oppression of the poor, and the violent perverting of justice and righteousness in the state, marvel not at the matter; for one higher than the high is watching, and there are higher than they."|Ecclesiastes 5:7.{/jtips} "It was doubtless in the Ptolemaic period that the fateful equation of 'poor' with 'pious' and 'rich' with 'Hellenized' originated, a mixture of social with religious categories which was subsequently to prove dangerous."

Josephus tells us that Joseph the Tobiad had seven sons by one wife—and then a son by his brother's daughter, whom he named Hyrcanus. The historian delivers a series of scarcely credible tales about this Wunderkind, but the upshot is that he was persecuted by his half-brothers and took refuge east of the Jordan, on the old familial estate, where he built the palace-fortress described above. Here he became a scourge to the Arabs. Because of his anti-Arab acts, writes Josephus, Hyrcanus feared punishment from {jtips}The Seleucid king whose repressive acts sparked the Maccabean revolt|Antiochus IV Epiphanes{/jtips} and killed himself to avoid it.

After Hyrcanus' death, the palace fell into ruin, succumbing easily to the earthquake of 363. Its stones, though as large as 21 feet by 9 feet, were not more than 16 inches thick, and the whole structure must have collapsed quite quickly amid the tremors. The heaps of large white stones and carved animals inspired the locals, who remembered the building in Arabic as Qasr al-'Abd, the Palace of the Slave (or Servant). This may reflect the honorary title held by the Tobiads from the time when the pater familias was the servant of the Persian king. A local legend arose, however, offering a different explanation (and showing how the peasants viewed their social situation): The palace was erected by a love-smitten slave who wanted to win the hand of his master’s daughter in marriage. The master agreed on condition that the slave build her a palace beyond compare. The slave set to work, toiling with stone to fashion animals and columns. Yet when the master saw that the slave was in reach of fulfilling the command, he slew him and destroyed the structure, for he would not have his daughter wed to a slave!

Hyrcanus surrounded the palace with a moat. The grounds were filled with gardens and trees, and he named his estate “Tyros” (Tyre). Tyros in Greek is related to the Hebrew “Tsur”: rock or fortress. It’s possible that this name is preserved in that of the nearby wadi, as-Seer.

Thanks to a decade’s work of reconstruction, the palace stands again. Many of its carved animals have disappeared, either stolen or destroyed by iconoclasts. Some that were buried survived, including the carved lioness that graces the back corner of the roof. The stonemason’s skill is evident in the attention to detail, which includes a cub underneath the lioness and her swollen teats. Inexplicably, she also sports a full mane. On either side of the palace are fountains embellished with leopards of stone. The forms of lions and eagles can also be discerned along the edges of the roof, a hint of former grandeur.