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THE DATE OF THE FALL OF MASADA: THE EVIDENCE OF THE MASADA PAPYRI

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Masada's fall is dated by month and day to 15 Xanthicus (Jos. BJ 7.401). The year 73 is arrived at by inference: the last date mentioned in the *Bellum* before the fall of Masada is the fourth year of Vespasian, i.e. July 72 to 30 June 73 (BJ 7. 219).² 15 Xanthicus 73 was, therefore, the traditional date, generally accepted³ until challenged twenty years ago by Eck, who proposed Spring 74 instead.⁴ His new date is based on a re-consideration of two inscriptions recording the career of the conqueror of Masada, L. Flavius Silva (AE 1969/70 183). The two inscriptions record the posts held by Silva in a strictly inverse chronological order, making it impossible for him to have become governor of Judaea before Spring 73⁵ Hence the traditional date of Spring 73 for the fall of Masada can no longer be upheld.⁶

¹ The papyri referred to here were excavated by Y. Yadin in 1963/4, see Y. Yadin, *The Excavation of Masada 1963/4. Preliminary Report*, IEJ 15 (1965), 110ff. They will be published in *Masada: The Latin and Greek Documents*, eds. Hannah M. Cotton and Joseph Geiger (forthcoming). I would like to thank Professor Geiger and Mr. Ari Paltiel for discussing patiently and critically every detail of this paper with me. I should also like to thank Dr. Dov Gera, whose unpublished M.A. dissertation 'The Roman Administration and Army in Judaea (70-132)' (Jerusalem 1977, in Hebrew) first alerted me to the subject. Dr. Seth Schwartz read and commented on an early version of this paper. The imperfections left are, of course, my responsibility.

² B. Niese (*Zur Chronologie des Josephus*, Hermes 28 (1893), 212) takes it to imply 1 Xanthicus 72 to 1 Xanthicus 73, since he believes that regnal years were counted according to the Jewish calendar; but see E. Schürer, G. Vermes, F. Millar, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ I* (Edinburgh 1973), 488-9, n. 16.

³ See E. Schürer, G. Vermes, F. Millar, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ I* (Edinburgh 1973), 512, n. 139; with the dissenting voice of B. Niese, *Zur Chronologie des Josephus*, Hermes 28 (1893), 209-212, who takes it to be 15 Xanthicus 72, see previous note.

⁴ W. Eck, *Die Eroberung von Masada und eine neue Inschrift des L. Flavius Silva Nonius Bassus*, ZNTW 60 (1969), 282ff.; and more fully argued in 'Senatoren von Vespasian bis Hadrian' (München 1970), 93-111.

⁵ The crucial lines are restored by Eck (*Senatoren von Vespasian bis Hadrian* (München 1970), 97, the second inscription) as follows:

[L. Flavius ... f. V]el. Silva Nonius Bassus cos., pont., /

[legat. Aug. pro. pr. pr]ovinciae Iudaeae, adlectus inter patricios /

[ab divo Vespasiano et di]vo Tito censori bus, ab iisdem adlectus inter pr.

The order makes it quite clear that this inclusion among the patricians and his adlection *inter praetorios* occurred during Vespasian's and Titus' joint censorship and must have preceded his appointment as governor of Judaea; since the joint censorship began after early April 73, the beginning of Silva's rule must be put sometime after this date.

⁶ The new date of Spring 74 is accepted by E. Schürer, G. Vermes, F. Millar, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ I* (Edinburgh 1973), 512; 515.

Those who contest the new date do so, I believe, because they think that it clashes with Josephus' timetable and that the latter should be preferred to the epigraphic evidence.⁷ But does Josephus' timetable clash in fact with the new date of Spring 74?

In BJ 7. 409 Josephus puts the riots which broke out in Alexandria, instigated by a group of *sicarii*, after the fall of Masada: μετὰ ταῦτα συνέβη. These riots broke out when Tiberius Julius Lupus was Prefect of Egypt. He died in office and was succeeded by Paulinus (Λούπου δὲ μετὰ βραχὺ τελευτήσαντος Παυλῖνος διαδεξάμενος τὴν ἡγεμονίαν, BJ 7. 434). P. Oxy. X 1266 mentions a Paulinus active in Egypt in the fifth year of an emperor. This Paulinus was taken to be Lupus' successor. Hence the need arose to terminate Lupus' office between February - March and some time before 29 August 73 (i.e. the beginning of the sixth year of Vespasian in Egypt). The evidence of P. Oxy. X 1266 combined with Josephus' testimony that the riots in Alexandria broke out after the fall of Masada cannot be reconciled with the new date.

However, since it is now known that the Paulinus of P. Oxy. X 1266 active in Egypt in the fifth year of an emperor was a military tribune, Curtius Paulinus, from Nero's time,⁸ and not the successor of Lupus, it is no longer necessary to terminate Lupus' office before the end of August 73. The next prefect, C. Aeternius Capito, is attested in 78/9⁹. Hence the riots in Alexandria can easily be fitted in after Spring 74¹⁰

So far for the sequel to the fall of Masada. What about the chronological framework preceding it? The last regnal year mentioned before the story of Masada is the fourth year of Vespasian (see above). There is no indication that a new regnal year had begun prior to the fall of Masada. Are we therefore still in the fourth year of Vespasian when Masada falls?

⁷ C.P. Jones in a review of Ecks 'Senatoren von Vespasian bis Hadrian' (München 1970), AJP 95 (1974), 89-90 (see also Gnomon 45 (1973), 688) and GM. Bowersock, Old and New in the History of Judaea, JRS 65 (1975), 183 4. Bowersock mentions the numismatic evidence to which I shall refer later. Both suggest that the epigraphic evidence presented by Eck be approached with some flexibility.

⁸ See J. Rea ad P. Oxy. XLVI 3279 and P. Mich. XIV 676 (= P. Mich. Inv. 1935, discussed by P. J. Sijpesteijn, Flavius Josephus and the Prefect of Egypt in 73 A.D., Historia 28 (1979), 117-125).

⁹ Aeternius Fronto is attested in office in the eleventh year of Vespasian (Egyptian counting), i.e. from the end of August 78 until the end of August 79; see AE 1937 236 (= SB 8958) with BL IV p. 84; it is supported by P. Oxy. XXXVI 2756, 1.14. He may have been in office already in 75/6; see Lewis, Notationes Legentis, BASP 14 (1977), 149f., who regards the [S]ept[imius] Nu[]? of P. Med. Inv. 71.44.1. 13 (O. Montevecchi, Dichiarazione per l'Epikrisis, Aegyptus 54 (1974), 24; see p. 26) as a ghost name and proposes to read instead the name of Aeternius Fronto; G. Bastianini, (Lista dei prefetti d'Egitto dal 30^a al 299P. Aggiunte e correzioni, ZPE 38 (1980), 78, n.2) cautiously suggests to read the name of Valerius Paulinus, who in this case was still in office in 75/6.

¹⁰ So much was already said by D.B. Campbell in a recent article in this journal (Dating the Siege of Masada, ZPE 73 (1988), 156-8), but it was necessary to recapitulate the argument here, especially in view of what I have to say later about Ti. Iulius Lupus.

I submit that in order to answer the preceding question we must look at Josephus' practice elsewhere in the *Bellum*.¹¹ As anyone familiar with the work knows, events are dated mostly by month and day.¹² There are infrequent references to years.¹³ Furthermore, Josephus seems to feel no compulsion to alert his reader to the transition into a new year. There is no announcement of the commencement of the fourteenth year of Nero's principate,¹⁴ or of the year 69,¹⁵ or of Vespasian's first year.¹⁶ The last dated event by day, month and regnal year, before the one we are discussing, is the fall of Jerusalem on 8 Gorpaeus of the second year of Vespasian (i.e. August / September 70, BJ 6. 435). There is nothing about the commencement of the third year of Vespasian's principate, although the reduction of Machaerus (perhaps also of Herodium) by Lucilius Bassus, (BJ 7. 163), must have taken place in that year.¹⁷ Josephus does not use an annalistic framework. Thus the lack of transition to the fifth regnal year of Vespasian does not necessarily prove that Masada fell in the fourth regnal year; Josephus' silence here as elsewhere is anything but informative.

Thus the chronological sequence preceding the fall of Masada does not stand in the way of accepting the new date of Spring 74 any more than the chronological sequence of the events following it. Josephus' timetable, in other words, does not contradict the new date. However, how reliable and consistent is this timetable? Is the chronological sequence sustained throughout?

¹¹ For the discussion of dates in the *Bellum* I would like to thank Dr. Jonathan J. Price for allowing me to use the relevant parts of his unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, *Jerusalem under Siege* (Princeton 1988).

¹² See list in B. Niese, *Zur Chronologie des Josephus*, *Hermes* 28 (1893), 197-9. Generally Josephus uses the Jewish calendar employing the Macedonian equivalents of the Jewish months, see E. Schürer, G. Vermes, F. Millar, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ I* (Edinburgh 1973), 156ff.

¹³ Niese, *op. cit.*, 208 for a list of references to regnal periods in the BJ, and *ibid.*, 209 for a list of regnal years. Note also the reference to "The seventeenth (year) of the reign of Agrippa", mentioned together with "the twelfth year of the principate of Nero" in BJ 2. 284.

¹⁴ See Tac. Ann. 12. 69 for his *dies imperii*. The thirteenth year of Nero's principate commenced on 13 October 66. In BJ 3. 339 Josephus reports: "Thus was Jotapata taken in the thirteenth year of the principate of Nero on the new moon of Panemos", i.e. June/July 67. By the thirteenth of October 67 the fourteenth year of Nero's principate would begin. Nevertheless the occupation of Gadara in March 68 is dated by month and day alone: "He (Vespasian) accordingly marched on Gadara ... and entered it on the fourth of the month Dystrus" (BJ 4. 413). Nowhere between the two events is there a hint of the transition into a new regnal year.

¹⁵ Admittedly there were no regnal years to refer to. I doubt that the list of regnal periods in 4. 491 (Nero); 499 (Galba); 548 (Otho); 652 (Vitellius) could be described as part of the chronological framework of the history: how can one learn the absolute dates without reference to external sources? Perhaps the transition was indicated in BJ 4. 577 by "the third year of the war".

¹⁶ See BJ 5. 99 "14 Xanthicus" without reference to the year, although by now we are in the middle of Vespasian's first regnal year.

¹⁷ He is attested in Italy as late as 5 May 71 (CIL XVI 14-16), and the siege of Machaerus lasted a long time as we learn from Josephus, BJ 7. 163ff. Furthermore, if we adhere to Josephus' chronological sequence, as we have done so far, then his arrival was subsequent to the triumph which took place in Rome, in June 71 and preceded the annexation of Commagene in 72/3.

Book 7 of the *Bellum* is noted for its incoherence and the frequent intrusion of disparate material, perhaps caused by more than one revision.¹⁸ In the part we are discussing (7. 219-455) Josephus seems to be following a geographical rather than a chronological order: Commagene - Media - Judaea - Egypt - Cyrene. The last episode suggests that Josephus was not as fastidious with his chronology as we could have wished.

The story of the riots of the *sicarii* in Cyrene follows immediately upon that of the riots in Alexandria (BJ 7. 437). But even the old timetable could not fit them in after (or even at the same time as) the riots in Alexandria, if the latter occurred after the fall of Masada. The riots in Cyrene must have taken place before 73, if the identification of "Catullus", τῆς Πενταπόλεως Λιβύης ἡγεμών (BJ 7. 439) as L. Valerius Catullus Messalinus is correct,¹⁹ since he became ordinary consul in 73. Therefore, either the riots in Cyrene are connected thematically and not necessarily chronologically with those which took place in Alexandria, or both took place before the fall of Masada despite the μετὰ ταῦτα.

Finally, the numismatic evidence: the presence of a great number of Ascalon coins of 72/3²⁰ found on the site does not necessarily support the traditional date; cities did not mint new coins every year, and as a matter of fact, it seems that there was no new minting of Ascalon coins until 76/7.²¹

Josephus' timetable (for all it is worth) and the numismatic evidence can no longer stand in the way of accepting Eck's new date. However, with the decipherment of the military papyri found on Masada, the issue is open once more.

These military papyri were found in the so called Locus of the Scrolls, locus 1039, one of the casements in the north-western section of the wall. As the name indicates, the room contained also the great majority of the Hebrew scrolls. Besides the written documents, a considerable number of disparate objects were concentrated in this room. The sheer volume and diversity of the finds led the excavators to conclude that "articles from various rooms were thrown in disorder into this one, and heaped up there".²² Many considerations point to

¹⁸ S. Schwartz (The Composition and Publication of Josephus' *Bellum Judaicum* Book 7, HThR 79 (1986), 379ff.), regards the annexation of Commagene, the Alanic invasion of Media (NBJ 7. 219-251), the riots in Alexandria and Cyrene (BJ 7. 409-453) as later additions, not fully integrated into the main story.

¹⁹ See S. Schwartz, The Composition and Publication of Josephus *Bellum Judaicum* Book 7, HThR 79 (1986), 383.

²⁰ These will be published by Y. Meshorer as nos. 3719 - 3783; the last two are countermarked on the obverse by the Tenth Legion Fretensis. The Latin papyri found on Masada originated in this legion.

²¹ See G.F. Hill, *Catalogue of the Greek Coins of Palestine I* (London 1914), 112-3, nos. 46-9 (72/3) and nos. 50-55 (76/7); *The Rosenberger Collection of Coins I* (Jerusalem 1972), 40f., no. 52 (72/3) and nos. 53-4 (76/7); Y. Meshorer, *Sylloge Nummorum Graecorum. The Collection of the American Numismatic Society, part 6. Palestine - South Arabia* (New York 1981) nos. 679-82, 688-91 (72/3) and 683 87, 692 (76/7). D. Barag (NC 7th series 28 (1978), 20 and n. 29) suggests that an issue of a new coin type in the 14th year of Agrippa II (which he dates to 74/5) was prompted by the fall of Masada; unfortunately we cannot know how much time elapsed between the fall and the issuing of the new type.

²² See Y. Yadin, *The Excavation of Masada 1963/4. Preliminary Report*, IEJ 15 (1965), 80.

the Romans as those responsible for the collection, not least among which is that it is hard to imagine that the Jews would have lumped together heathen documents and their own sacred texts; for not only were the Latin documents and the Hebrew scrolls assembled in the same room, they were found in close proximity to each other.²³

Now while it is true that the work of amassing and collecting the objects found in this room could have been undertaken at any time between the fall of Masada and 112/3 (the last dated coin on the site from the Roman period), nevertheless it seems more likely that it occurred immediately after the fall of the fortress, when the Romans were still gathering the spoils and settling in. This impression is strengthened by the presence of Jewish texts among the collected material.

The hypothesis that the collection in locus 1039 came into being immediately after the fall of the fortress has a necessary corollary: the Latin papyri found here must have originated in the Roman camps around Masada; thus they probably were written shortly before the fall.

If both hypothesis and corollary are accepted, then the presence of dated Latin papyri in this room may have important implications for the date of the fall of the fortress.

Unfortunately none of the papyri provides a straightforward date which could conclusively decide the issue. Only three may imply a date:

1) A poorly preserved document mentions *xylobalsamum* (Inv. no. 1039-122/1), the cheapest product of the balsam-tree. It was manufactured by the Romans when they took over the cultivation of the balsam groves of Jericho and Ein Gedi:²⁴ "within five years of the conquest of Judaea the actual loppings and shoots fetched 800,000 sesterces. The trimmings are called wood of balsam (*xylobalsamum*)" (Pliny, NH 12. 118). This dates the papyrus to the years after the fall of Jerusalem (70-75), but not more precisely.

2) The mutilated first line of the heading of a legionary pay record (Inv. no. 1039-122) can be restored so as to yield the year 72 (a less likely restoration yields the year 75). If the document is correctly dated to 72, this would be circumstantial evidence for Spring 73: the pay record must have arrived with the soldiers who conquered Masada and have been thrown into locus 1039 shortly afterwards; a soldier is more likely to be carrying his most recent pay record with him than the one of the year before. The latter would be the case if Masada fell in Spring 74.²⁵

²³ Y. Yadin (The Excavation of Masada 1963/4. Preliminary Report, IEJ 15 (1965), 83) observes that some of the scrolls seem to have been torn deliberately.

²⁴ Pliny, writing very close to the presumed date of our document, tells us that the balsam tree was carried in the triumphal procession which celebrated the subjugation of Judaea by Vespasian and Titus (NH 12. 111). He records "pitched battles" fought by the Romans to protect the balsam plant against the Jewish attempt to destroy it. Subsequently it was cultivated successfully by the fiscus (12. 113).

²⁵ If it dates to 75 it must have been composed, by all accounts, after the fall of the fortress. It also does not fit in with the theory about the genesis of the collection suggested above.

3) Our most important chronological evidence is a letter to Julius Lupus (Inv. no. 1039-161). Tiberius Julius Lupus is attested as being in Egypt in the month of Phamenoth, in the fifth year of Vespasian by Egyptian counting (SEG XX 651), that is February / March 73.²⁶ The presence of the letter on Masada can be interpreted in two ways. Either it was received there or, a less likely possibility, it originated there and was never dispatched.²⁷ If it was received there, then its *terminus ante quem* is shortly before 25 February 73. In this case it is likely to have been received in the Roman camps during the siege.²⁸ Thus Tiberius Julius Lupus would have received his promotion to the prefecture of Egypt while serving in the Roman forces besieging Masada.²⁹

This would date the siege to Winter 72/3 and the fall of Masada to Spring 73, as the supporters of the traditional date would have it.

The latter interpretation of this document, together with the apparent absence of documents dated to the latter part of 73 or to 74, are the only arguments that can be offered in support of the traditional date. Josephus' testimony, I hope I have shown, can no longer be adduced for that purpose. Does the circumstantial evidence of the Masada papyri outweigh the straightforward implication of the two inscriptions which describe L. Flavius Silva's career? It seems to me that in the present stage of our knowledge, the evidence itself cannot decide the issue: only the weight the individual historian assigns to it. An explanation, along the lines proposed by C.P. Jones,³⁰ can be constructed in order to reconcile the epigraphic evidence presented by Eck with the traditional date (though one would look for some other examples). But this is necessary only if one accepts the identification of Julius Lupus of the Masada papyrus with the homonymous prefect of Egypt, and believes that the letter to him was received in the Roman camps around Masada.

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²⁶ First published by V.B. Schuman, A Greek Inscription from Karanis, CE 37 (1962), 163-6. See now E. Bernand, Recueil des Inscriptions Grecques du Fayoum I (Leiden 1975), no. 86. See also P. Oxy. XXXVI 2757, col. 2, mentioning Julius Lupus in the fifth year of Vespasian.

²⁷ However, the presence of an address on the back proves that it is not a copy.

²⁸ It is unlikely that it was received at Masada prior to the Jewish conquest in 66 (when hypothetically Lupus may have been an equestrian officer in charge of the garrison) and survived the entire period of the occupation by the *sicarii*, only to be thrown away by the conquering Romans.

²⁹ For swift promotion of equestrian officers who embraced the Flavian cause see R. Syme, Tacitus II (Oxford 1958), 594f.; J. Nicols, Vespasian and the Partes Flaviana (Historia Einzelschriften 28, 1978), 108ff.; P.A. Brunt, The Administrators of Roman Egypt, JRS 65 (1975), 131ff. describes the previous careers of the Prefects of Egypt; note especially the case of Aeternius Fronto (ibid., 143, no. 30), who was *praefectus castrorum* (στρατοπεδάρχης) at the siege of Jerusalem (BJ 6. 238), and is attested as Prefect of Egypt in 78/9, see above, n.9.

³⁰ See AJP 95 (1974), 90.