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The Bar Kokhba War Reconsidered

New Perspectives on the Second
Jewish Revolt against Rome

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In Memoriam
Leo Mildenberg
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The Tel Shalem Arch and P. Naḥal Ḥever / Seiyal 8

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In an important paper published in the *Journal of Roman Studies* for 1999 Werner Eck deployed various facts about the legions and commanders involved in the Bar Kokhba war to argue that Hadrian's acceptance of an imperial acclamation at the end of it was a proper reflection of its magnitude.¹ We have to be careful. Not all imperial acclamations can be correlated with strenuous or even worthy achievements, and the issuance of military honors at home in the capital has throughout history, both ancient and modern, not always been a secure indication of what actually happened in the field. But the culminating item in Eck's argument, the *pièce de résistance*, is a reconstructed Latin inscription from an arch that he calls a "new monument." This monument is not exactly new in the sense that the fragments of the inscription were discovered in an Israeli rescue excavation of two Byzantine graves in late January of 1977, therefore twenty-five years ago. But it is certainly new in the sense that Eck himself has recently operated on the fragments with his customary epigraphic finesse and come up with a triumphal arch that he considers a celebration of Rome's victory over Bar Kokhba, initiated by the Roman government and deliberately erected in the former war zone. His arguments appeared in the *Journal of Roman Archaeology* in the same year as his paper in the *Journal of Roman Studies*.²

Since the strength and extent of Bar Kokhba's rebellion remain a much discussed topic, this newly resurrected arch deserves careful re-examination. Clearly if, as Eck maintains, the Senate and the Roman People caused a great monument to be put up in Judaea itself at the

¹ Werner Eck, "The Bar Kokhba Revolt: The Roman Point of View," *JRS* 89 (1999), 76–89.

² Werner Eck and Gideon Foerster, "Ein Triumphbogen für Hadrian im Tal von Beth Shean bei Tel Shalem," *JRA* 12 (1999), 294–313 [pp. 297–313, "Die Inschrift," by Eck]. The topic is revisited with the same interpretation in W. Eck, "Ein Spiegel der Macht. Lateinische Inschriften römischer Zeit in Iudaea / Syria Palaestina," *ZDPV* 117 (2001), 47–63, especially 59–60. In *FAZ* for 28 xii 2001, p. 45, Werner Eck took up the topic once again.

end of the war, it would follow that the Romans felt that they had achieved an extraordinary victory. There are many reasons, with the present state of our evidence, to believe that the Bar Kokhba war was more widespread and disruptive than previously thought, but I believe that the Tel Shalem arch does not constitute one of those reasons.

The Byzantine graves that had preserved the epigraphic fragments lay near a legionary camp not very far south of Scythopolis (Beth Shean). Both the excavator, Gideon Foerster, and Werner Eck plausibly assume that the marble slabs came from a monument relatively nearby and therefore more likely to have been connected with the legionary camp than with Scythopolis itself. There are six separate fragments of the inscription (figs. 1–6). Two of these are themselves made up of perfectly joining smaller fragments. The text is in Latin, and the letters are large (in the top line just over 40 centimeters high). We clearly have the titlature of an emperor. Enough survives, including *Parthicus* in the filiation, to assure that the emperor commemorated here is Trajan's successor, Hadrian. Eck has made a masterly reconstruction of the six fragments (fig. 7), which delivers an unimpeachable text for all but the third line:

IMP CAE[S DIVI T]RA[IANI PAR]
 TH[]CI F D[]IVI NERVAE NEP TR]AIANO [HADRIANO AVG]
 PON[T]IF M[AX TRIB POT XX IMP I]I COS [III P P S P Q R]

If we leave out the third-line restorations, to be discussed below, that line may be provisionally left in the form: PON[T]IF M[AX TRIB POT ---
 ---]I COS [III P P ---]. With the expansion of abbreviations the whole may be read as follows: *Imp(eratori) Cae[s(ari) divi T]ra[iani Par-] / th[]ci f(ilio) d[]ivi Nervae nep(oti) Tr]aiano [Hadriano Aug(usto)] / pon[t]if(ici) m[ax(imo) trib(unicia) pot(estate) - ?8/9 ?-]I co(n)s(uli) [III p(at)ri p(at)riae - ?9/10?-]*. The estimated spaces in the third line reflect the constraints of space imposed by the two upper lines and the fact that the letters in the third line are smaller than those in the second (which, in turn, are smaller than those in the first).

After explaining the rationale for his expert and convincing placement of the extant fragments Eck turns immediately to a detailed account of the evidence for the second imperial acclamation of Hadrian. He does so because he is convinced that in the third line of the inscription the surviving numeral (a vertical hasta, with a line over it) before COS is the last part of a numeral for IMP, and he observes that when the second acclamation appears on inscriptions, as IMP II, it is placed just before the consular number. That number, for all but the first

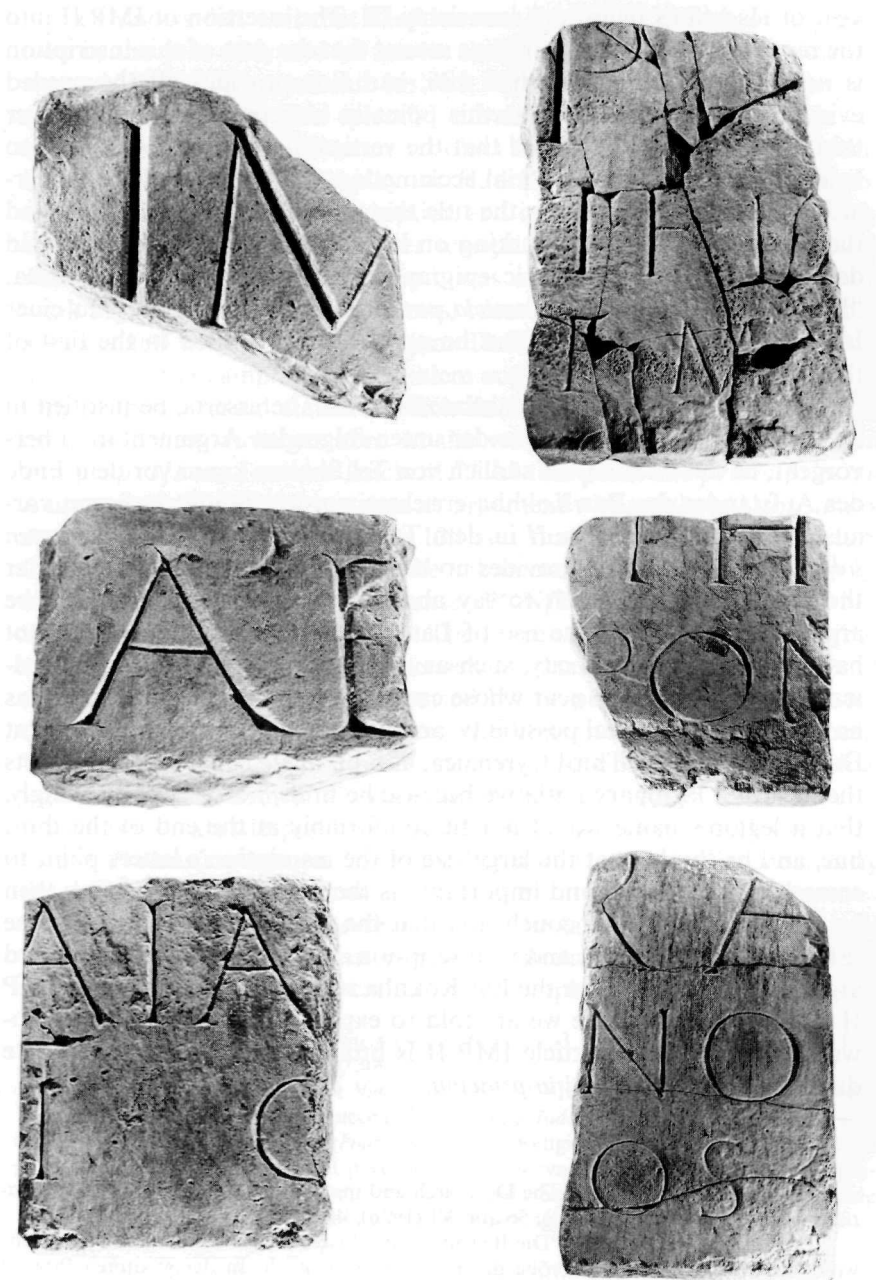


Fig. 1-6

year of Hadrian's reign, was invariably III. The insertion of IMP II into the reconstruction of the third line means that the date of this inscription is not likely to be earlier than 136, and Eck provides all the needed evidence for this date. But at this point in his argument he has never told his reader why he thinks that the vertical *hasta* before COS has to belong to a second imperial acclamation at all instead of the numeral for the tribunician power, the title that would certainly have followed the pontificate. Before embarking on his account of the placement and date of IMP II in Hadrianic epigraphy Eck had noted of the *hasta*, "Diese Zahl könnte zur *tribunicia potestas* gehört haben oder zu einer Imperatorenakklamation."³ But he never again returned to the first of these possibilities.

His pursuit of the second acclamation will, he asserts, be justified in arguments to follow: "Wie aus der unten folgenden Argumentation hervorgeht, ist das Monument südlich von Tel Shalem kaum vor dem Ende des Aufstandes des Bar Kokhba errichtet worden. Somit darf man voraussetzen, daß auch *imp. II* in dem Text erwähnt war."⁴ But *die unten folgende Argumentation* provides no basis for dating the monument after the revolt. Eck has much to say about arches and emperors, and he argues plausibly from the use of Latin that this dedication would not have come from a local city, such as neighboring Scythopolis. But dedication from the legion near whose camp the fragments were found is, as he acknowledges, a real possibility, and he adduces the arch for Trajan at Dura, set up by the Third Cyrenaica, as a parallel.⁵ He ultimately rejects the idea of a legionary initiative because he finds, not very convincingly, that a legion's name would not fit comfortably at the end of the third line, and he thinks that the large size of the inscription's letters point to something very grand and important, as they presumably do.⁶ Eck then brings his reader to his conclusion that the Senate and People of Rome (SPQR) put up the arch and its inscription. With all of this the promised argument for dating after the Bar Kokhba revolt never materializes. IMP II is introduced because we are told to expect a late date, and then towards the end of the article IMP II is brought back as proof of a late date. This looks like *petitio principii*.

³ *Op. cit.* (n. 2 above), 301.

⁴ *Op. cit.* (n. 2 above), 303.

⁵ *Op. cit.* (n. 2 above), 305. The Dura arch and inscription: S. Gould in *The Excavations of Dura Europos* IV (1933), 56 and VI (1936), 480.

⁶ *Op. cit.* (n. 2 above), 304: "Die Bedeutung der Inschrift und damit auch des Bogens wird ... vor allem durch die Größe der Buchstaben deutlich. In der gesamten Provinz Iudaea / Syria Palaestina scheint es unter den bisher bekannt gewordenen lateinischen Inschriften nichts auch nur annähernd Vergleichbares zu geben." This is no longer true, as will be seen.

Eck knows full well that Hadrian was in the Near East on a grand tour in the year 130, and he knows that a number of important arches were erected to commemorate his visit.⁷ He also knows that near the site of the Byzantine graves a splendid cuirassed statue of Hadrian was accidentally discovered, and many scholars had naturally assumed that this image was a part of the display for Hadrian's tour.⁸ It would seem obvious that the Tel Shalem inscription and its arch, which Eck reasonably believes it adorned, were another recognition of the same imperial *adventus*. But he denies this because it was not initiated by a local city – a weak argument, as he clearly knows, because of the parallel of the Dura arch erected by a legion for Trajan. There is no reason why the legion installed at the camp near Tel Shalem could not have set up the arch as well as the cuirassed statue. So Eck does not press the point. He then declares, “Weit wichtiger aber ist die wohl zwingende Rekonstruktion von [imp. I]I im Text der Inschrift.”⁹ At this point the *petitio principii* is unmasked. We have never seen an argument why we should not simply assume that this text belongs to 130 and that the vertical hasta before COS belongs to the number for the tribunician power. Line three can be restored perfectly well in this sense: PON[T]IF M[AX TRIB POTE-STAT XIII]I COS [III P P – ? –]. The longer abbreviation for the tribunician power is often found in the very Hadrianic texts that Eck cites at the end of his article and is supported by the preserved longer form for the title of *pontifex maximus* that is incontrovertibly preserved here. There would be no serious problem in naming one of the two possible legions, VI *Ferrata* or X *Fretensis*, at the end of the line, as even Eck's drawings indicate (despite his protestations to the contrary). His drawing with X *Fretensis* is marginally preferable, and it accommodates perfectly the reading with *trib. potestat. XIII* (fig. 8).

As for the inferences he draws from the large Latin letters, he was unaware when he wrote of an even more monumental Latin inscription discovered in 1996 in the so-called Great Temple area of Petra.¹⁰ The size

⁷ Cf. H. Halfmann, *Itinera Principum* (1986), pp. 193 and 206–7, together with Eck and Foerster, *op. cit.* (n. 2 above), 309.

⁸ G. Foerster in *Israel Museum News* 16 (1980), 107–10 and *Atiqot* 17 (1985), 139–60. See also the presentation of this piece in N. Belayche, *Judaea-Palaestina: The Pagan Cults in Roman Palestine (Second to Fourth Century)*, Religion der römischen Provinzen I (Tübingen, 2001), p. 260. On that page Belayche observes, of the cuirassed statue of Hadrian at Tel Shalem, “It was very directly linked to the encampment of the *legio VI* during the Second Revolt and did not gain a following amongst the city's religious trends.”

⁹ *Op. cit.* (n. 2 above), 309.

¹⁰ Stephen Tracy, “An Imperial Inscription,” in Martha Joukowsky, *Petra Great Temple*, vol. 1: Brown University Excavations 1993–1997 (Providence RI, 1998), pp. 371–5 [with figures 8.1 and 8.2]. Cf. Tracy, *JRA*, suppl. ser. 31, *The Roman and Byzantine Near East*, vol. 2 (Portsmouth RI, 1999), pp. 56–8.

IMP·CAES·DIVI·TRAIANI·PAR
 THICIF·DIVI·NERVAE·NEP·TRAIANO·HADRIANO·AVG
 PONTIF·MAX·TRIB·POT·XX·IMP·II·COS·III·P·P·S·P·Q·R

IMP·CAES·DIVI·TRAIANI·PAR
 THICIF·DIVI·NERVAE·NEP·TRAIANO·HADRIANO·AVG
 PONTIF·MAX·TRIB·POTESTAT·XIIII·COS·III·P·P·LEG·X·FRET

of the Tel Shalem letters is dwarfed by the Petra fragments. The first two lines have letters that are nearly 50 centimeters high, and the third line, with smaller letters, nonetheless displays letter-heights of 40 centimeters (the size of the tallest of the Tel Shalem letters). The Petra inscription also gives the titulature of an emperor, since TRIB PO[is clearly legible, but there seems to be no way of determining which emperor was honored inside the city by so magnificent a monument. Perhaps Trajan, who made the city a metropolis and was honored by the city in an extant Greek inscription. Perhaps Hadrian on his grand tour, when the city took the epithet *Hadrianê*, or perhaps Lucius Verus whom very recent discoveries show to have been honored at the Qaṣr al-bint with a large inscription (in Greek).¹¹ Whatever the case may be, the Petra Latin monument outdoes the Tel Shalem one in magnitude, and it is actually inside a great city. Who put it up? The use of Latin implies a Roman initiative, and the governor and his legion seem to be the only plausible dedicators of anything so large. Certainly the Senate and People of Rome cannot be imagined to have set up a great monument inside Petra to celebrate some unknown victory. It is equally impossible to believe that an overwhelming victory warranting the erection of a significant commemorative arch from the Roman Senate and People took place in the vicinity of the legionary camp near Scythopolis without leaving the slightest trace in our sources.

Nevertheless, even if we put the Tel Shalem arch out of consideration for measuring the Bar Kokhba revolt, we are not without other indications of a greater spread of hostilities than had formerly been thought. In a paper in the *Festschrift* for Lidio Gasperini Eck has argued against a view espoused by Maurice Sartre and others (including myself) that the erasures on some inscriptions at Gerasa removed the name of Haterius Nepos, who was the governor of Arabia during some (or even most) of the Bar Kokhba uprising.¹² His argument turns on the fact that Nepos' name is erased nowhere else in the empire and that his career following a consulate in 134 continued to prosper long after his tenure in Arabia was over. This argument presupposes that any erasure would have been an official Roman *damnatio*. Eck has no patience for a zealous local reaction against Nepos. Damnation by the city seemed to him excluded: "Das aber ist auszuschließen, da die Stadtväter von Gerasa schließlich keinen kollektiven Selbstmord plan-

¹¹ See G. W. Bowersock, in *Rome et ses Provinces: Hommages à Jean Charles Balty*, ed. C. Evers and A. Tsingarida (2001), p. 75.

¹² Werner Eck, "Vier mysteriöse Rasuren in Inschriften aus Gerasa: zum 'Schicksal' des Statthalters Haterius Nepos," *ΕΠΙΓΡΑΦΑΙ Miscellanea epigrafica in onore di Lidio Gasperini* (Rome, 2000), 347–62.

ten."¹³ This is to underestimate the fervor and conviction of a people who believe that they have the upper hand. The recent publication of a new Gerasa inscription on which Nepos' name appears intact with the designation *hupatikon* obviously does not prove that his name had never been erased earlier.¹⁴ Nepos was Rome's commander east of the Jordan for three or more years, and we now have good reason to believe that the revolt of Bar Kokhba had spilled over into that region, at least in the north.

Some hint of Nepos' repressive measures appears to lurk in a Safaitic graffito published in 1996 and noted by Eck only in an addendum to his article on the Gerasa erasures.¹⁵ This strange text refers to a Safaitic tribesman who rebelled (*mrd*) for three years against Nepos the tyrant (*nfs zlm*).¹⁶ Eck promises in his addendum that he will return to this text, and naturally we look forward to his interpretation of it. There are undeniably many uncertainties, including the reading of nun-pe-sin as Nepos and the suggestion that other peoples than Jews were caught up in the revolt led by Bar Kokhba. But it is by no means inconceivable that they were. And if the revolt had indeed swept across more than resident Jews in Transjordan the enthusiasm of the *Stadtväter* of Gerasa would be all the more comprehensible. After several years of rebel supremacy the *Stadtväter* themselves may have been an altered group from what they had been previously. The sense of freedom engendered by Bar Kokhba's rebellion is marvelously evoked in the Aramaic and Hebrew papyrus called XHever / Seiyal 8.

This papyrus has been admirably published by Ada Yardeni in the volume of Aramaic, Hebrew, and Greek texts that she published together with her colleague Hannah Cotton.¹⁷ Yardeni has revisited this text in her new textbook of documentary material from the Judean Desert,¹⁸ which I have seen through the courtesy of Professor Cotton. The text is there identified as Naḥal Še'elim 8. It is paralleled by a

¹³ *Op. cit.* (n. 11 above), 358.

¹⁴ P.-L. Gatier, *Syria* 73 (1996), 48–9.

¹⁵ Sabri Abbadi and Fawzi Zayadine, "Nepos the Governor of the Provincia Arabia in a Safaitic Inscription," *Semitica* 46 (1996), 155–64 [with plate 17].

¹⁶ l ḥlṣt bn m'n d'l s'd w mrd ḥlṣ snn mn qbl nfs zlm fhlt w dšr slm l d ḡnz zlm.

¹⁷ Ada Yardeni, "8. XHev/Se papDeed of Sale B ar and heb (135 CE)," in Hannah Cotton and Ada Yardeni, *Aramaic, Hebrew and Greek Documentary Texts from Naḥal Ḥever and Other Sites, Discoveries in the Judean Desert XXVII* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 26–35 [pp. 34–5 on no. 8a].

¹⁸ Ada Yardeni, "Naḥal Še'elim 8 and Naḥal Še'elim 8a," *Textbook of Aramaic, Hebrew and Nabataean Documentary Texts from the Judean Desert and Related Material* (Jerusalem, 2000), vol 1 [Heb.] pp. 67–73 and vol. 2 [Eng.] pp. 33–5 [with refs. to Milik 1954 for no. 8a and to Broshi and Qimron 1986 for no. 8].

second papyrus' text, first published in 1954, which has been given the number 8a in conjunction with no. 8. Both texts are deeds of sale from the same village, called Kfar Baru (*brw*), and both begin with the dating formula, "in the year three of the freedom of Israel." Text:8 adds "in the days of Shime'on, son of Kosiba, Prince of Israel." It is thus a document of the third year of the revolt of Bar Kokhba and clearly emanates from a place, Baru, that acknowledged his sovereignty. Document 8 is particularly remarkable, since it is a stitched double document in which the outer text, accessible to any reader, is written in Hebrew, whereas the inner text; hidden and usable only for purposes of verification, is written in Aramaic. The Hebrew is clearly programmatic, a symbolic assertion of Bar Kokhba's claim to have liberated Israel.¹⁹

We have to ask whether the place of the deed of sale can tell us something about the extent of Bar Kokhba's control in the third year of his war.²⁰ It appears in the form Kfar BRYW in the closely related document, no. 8a. In the initial publication of no. 8 Broshi and Qimron had suggested that this was the site near Machaerus on the Madaba map with the designation *-arou*, conventionally understood to be the Baaras of Josephus, *BJ* 7. 180. The town is twice mentioned in Eusebius' *Onomasticon*, once as Baaru and once as Bare. The problem with identifying the Baru of document no. 8 with this place is that the two letters A would seem to imply an 'ayn (hence an etymology from B'R). There is clearly no 'ayn in the Aramaic deed of sale, but equally there is only one A in the second Eusebius citation. The toponym in the Hadrianic papyrus exhibits the characteristically Nabataean name-ending in long U, an ending that appears both in Eusebius and on the Madaba map, where only one A survives. The double A, when it shows up, must be taken to indicate a long vowel (as with the double A that occasionally appears in the name Markos). Accordingly if we place the site in nos. 8 and 8a near Machaerus, we have powerful evidence for the extension of the Jewish revolt into northern Transjordan and an additional reason to consider the spread of local support among the Safaitic tribes and even at Gerasa.

¹⁹ The same point was made very well by Hannah Cotton in her paper, "The Languages of the Legal and Administrative Documents from the Judaean Desert," *ZPE* 125 (1999), 219–31, especially 225: "The legally binding text, the inner one, is written in the normal language of legal documents at the time, whereas the Hebrew, displayed on the outside, advertises the ideology of the now independent Jewish state. The same ideology stands behind the appearance of Hebrew legends on coins of the two revolts written in the already then obsolete paleo-Hebrew script. Hebrew became the symbol of Jewish nationalism, of the independent Jewish State."

²⁰ The argument in this paragraph was adumbrated by the present writer in *JRA* 14 (2001), 658.

Hannah Cotton has recently reinterpreted one of the Bar Kokhba papyri in Greek (P. Yadin 52) to reveal a Nabataean collaborating with the rebels in the last year of the revolt. Her argument turns on the name of the author of the document, a certain Soumaios. She has acutely and compellingly discerned that this ought to be a Nabataean name on the basis of two parallel examples in the subscriptions in the Babatha archive.²¹ This is undoubtedly a Greek form of the name *šmy*, which is already reflected in similar Greek names but is so far unattested in Nabataean itself. The Aramaic form has, however, turned up in Palmyrene on one inscription.²² Cotton aptly compares Cassius Dio's observation (69. 13. 2) that many other nations, apart from the Jews, joined the revolt for gain.

As we try to determine the nature and extent of the revolt of Bar Kokhba, I suggest that we must abandon the idea that there was some kind of unattested but fierce fighting in the vicinity of Scythopolis, so as to explain a Roman triumphal arch planted there. I believe that the arch belongs with all the others from Hadrian's tour in 130. But if we give up Scythopolis we can, even more dramatically, add at least the north-western part of the province of Arabia to the realm that proclaimed the freedom of Israel, and we can add at least one Nabataean to the supporters of Bar Kokhba in Palestine. I continue to think that Haterius Nepos was prolonged in his Arabian province to contain a spreading rebellion, and that his efforts to do this explain why he was hated. They would equally explain why he went on to receive greater honors, including the *ornamenta triumphalia*, from the Roman government.

²¹ H. Cotton, in *The Documents from the Bar Kokhba Period in the Cave of the Letters. Hebrew, Aramaic and Nabatean-Aramaic Papyri*, ed. Y. Yadin, J. Greenfield, A. Yardeni, and B. Levine (Jerusalem, 2002), p. 361.

²² J. Cantineau, *Inventaire des Inscriptions de Palmyre VIII* (Beirut, 1932), p. 14, no. 16 (nšry br šmy). For a Greek form *Somaïos* and other apparent representations of this name, see H. Wuthnow, *Die semitischen Menschenennamen in griechischen Inschriften und Papyri des vorderen Orients* (Leipzig, 1930), p. 172.