



**Compte-rendu de Bezalel Porten et Ada Yardeni,
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► **To cite this version:**

Michaël Girardin. Compte-rendu de Bezalel Porten et Ada Yardeni, Textbook of Aramaic Ostraca from Idumea. Vol. 4. University Park: Eisenbrauns, 2020. Review of Biblical Literature, 2021. hal-03831700

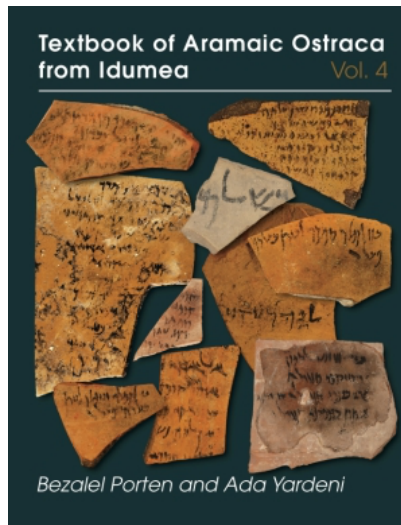
HAL Id: hal-03831700

<https://hal.science/hal-03831700>

Submitted on 28 Oct 2022

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Bezael Porten and Ada Yardeni

Textbook of Aramaic Ostraca from Idumea: Volume 4

University Park, PA: Eisenbrauns, 2020. Pp. xlv + 523.
Hardcover. \$149.95. ISBN 9781575067346.

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The presentation of the corpus of Idumean ostraca, the nearly two thousand Aramaic documents that appeared in the antiquity market since the early 1990s, is now all but complete. In this fourth and penultimate volume, Bezael Porten and the late Ada Yardeni pursue their enterprise of a comprehensive and rational edition of the entire corpus that opens an unprecedented window into fourth-century BCE Idumea. Each of the 377 ostraca is represented by a photograph, a drawing, a transliteration, a translation, and then a commentary. The ranking continues the initial program, as this volume contains six dossiers (B–G): 54 payment orders, 77 accounts, 74 workers texts, 62 names, 87 jar inscriptions, and 23 letters. Numerous tables will be of great interest for future research on onomastics in this area, listing 322 personal names according to whether they were already found in the first three volumes or appear here for the first time (one can discover 142 unpublished names). The many comparisons with other corpora (e.g., Elephantine, Bactria, Murabbaʿat, Masada¹) place these documents within a vast set, allowing the discussions of scribal practices, economic data, linguistic realities, and so on. Some administrative elements are to be found: the possibility of the existence of a **אדום מדינתא** (province of Edom: B2,31) or mention of a

1. One could regret the absence of the inscriptions of the Mount Gerizim, published by Yitzhak Magen et al., *Mount Gerizim Excavations I: The Aramaic, Hebrew, and Samaritan Inscriptions* (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 2004) and then by Jan Dušek, *Aramaic and Hebrew Inscriptions from Mt. Gerizim and Samaria between Antiochos III and Antiochos IV Epiphanes* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), or the final publication of the documents from Bactria by Joseph Naveh and Shaul Shaked, *Aramaic Documents from Ancient Bactria from the Khalili Collection* (London: Khalili Family Trust, 2012). In fact, only nine entries in the bibliography are more recent than 2010.

פקיד (paqid, F5,5 and 6), for instance, are very interesting. The quality and usefulness of the work is indisputable.

However, a number of choices could be questioned, beginning with some minor details. On page xxv, while discussing units of measure, the editors repeat identically the paragraph inserted in the first three volumes. Balancing diverse ancient sources, they omit a few scholars estimating the seah to be around 7 liters,² mention three New Testament references supposed to make an equivalence between the seah and the Roman *modius* (in fact, there is no mention of seah there), then give their preference to the Mishnaic (thus tardive) value of 8 liters for estimating the standard of the fourth century BCE. In view of the uncertainty surrounding these units of measure, to adopt an estimate range would have been preferable to opting for nonassured mass. In the same way in the table of names by frequency, 119 names (on 142) appear only once, and their relative ranking is not explained.

As for the documents themselves, the following can be said: Ostrakon B3,2 has an “obscure” expression on the first line (52) translated: “may the camels increase *°h tr°*.” The spelling of the problematic word could be enlightened by the comparison with the manuscript A1 from the Khalili collection: it looks like the word הלך of the Bactrian manuscript and could define a fiscal payment; the context is identical (an obscure matter of camels), and the idea to “increase” could thus make sense. A few “payment orders” in fact could be receipts, since they do not begin by the order הב nor make use of the *lamed* preposition before the names (B2,1–4, 6, 9–33, 35). Ostrakon B4,6 presents a difficulty (63–64) because it mentions barley on line 3 and both wheat and barley on line 4; it may just be a summary of at least two separate payments or payment orders. The word נדבא in C1,3 has been translated “donation”; it could, however, designate an offering (Ezra 8:28), which would be coherent when compared to D1,1, evoking an expiatory sacrifice. Twice the editors prefer to translate גבא (C1,9; cf. AL 116) and גברא (G2,1, perhaps גביא; cf. EN 199) “man” instead of “tax collector,” on the grounds that, if ever the גבא meant a tax collector, “we would have expected it to be preceded by the preposition ‘to’ rather than ‘from’” (84); the second instance lacks any explanation (where the *lamed* preposition is written). In fact, in the present state of our knowledge on Achaemenid taxation, a payment from the collector would be far from an aberration. Michael Jursa, for instance, has demonstrated that a great deal of “fiscal” payments in Achaemenid Babylonia were actually compensatory payments whose aim was to be spared from corvées. The grain or the money was immediately reinvested in the local economy by funding a man working instead of the payer, for the purpose of the state was not to receive money but labor; thus “no record of the pertinent transaction would have reached the royal administration.”³ On C2,1, the

2. For exemple, André Lemaire, *Nouvelles Inscriptions araméennes d'Idumée* (Paris: Gabalda, 1996), 131.

3. Michael Jursa, “Babylonia as a Source of Imperial Revenue from Cyrus to Xerxes,” in *Die Verwaltung im Achämenidenreich: Imperiale Muster und Strukturen*, ed. Bruno Jacobs et al. (Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2017), 722–24.

editors concede that “it is apparent that the scribe used a formal script because of the official nature of the document” (91), but immediately they insist on the lack of care by the scribe, who notably forgot seven times out of twelve the D for seah. As a matter of fact, such absence is reminiscent of the scribal practices of Murabba‘at on documents that seem to be fiscal.⁴ Finally, a few “letters” classed in the dossier G could be accounts, in view of their poor state of preservation (G1,2; 2,4, 5).

Some much more serious choices could also be questioned. One knows that the editors contest the fiscal nature of the Idumean ostraca,⁵ defended notably by André Lemaire.⁶ It is a pity that, while studying the accounts (dossier C), the editors did not seek to address these recent works. In fact, the editors themselves ask pertinent questions: “At the end of the day, however, the question remains – why do we have so many commodity chits and relatively so few of each of the six dossiers presented here in TAO vol. 4?” (xxiv). Or about a person named Wah(a)bi (C2,1), from whom none of the payers listed on the ostrakon is a relative: “on what basis, then, does he hold claim to payments of grain from these dozen persons? A definite answer eludes us” (91). If these documents were fiscal, the answer is obvious. The same could be thought concerning the other types of documents: the accounts, the considerable number of which must be only the tip of the iceberg;⁷ the seventy-four worker texts that could attest the practice of corvée in Idumea (known in the entire Achaemenid world, then in Seleucid and Roman Judaea⁸); or again the land descriptions (dossier H remains unpublished but see C6,5, which looks like an account in which fields are measured by their seeding capacities, as one would suspect in the case of cadastral document⁹). The presence of so many commodity chits, a number of accounts defined here as “commodity chits with more than one entry” (72), the overrepresentation of agricultural products (70 percent of the goods) and in particular of barley and wheat (40 percent of the goods), majority commodities in fiscal archives like the one of Murabba‘at,¹⁰ the presence of a memorandum (C2,1) and of many

4. Michaël Girardin, “Dans le quotidien du collecteur: L’impôt romain d’après l’archive de Murabba‘at,” *RevQ* 113 (2019): 14.

5. Bezalel Porten and Ada Yardeni, “Makkedah and the Storehouse in the Idumean Ostraca,” in *A Time of Change*, ed. Y. Levin (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 125–70.

6. André Lemaire, *Nouvelles inscriptions araméennes d’Idumée* (Paris: Gabalda, 2002), 2:224–30; Lemaire, *Levantine Epigraphy and History in the Achaemenid Period (539–332 BCE)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 101–17; Lemaire, “The Idumaeen Ostraca as Evidence of Local Imperial Administration,” in *Die Verwaltung im Achämenidenreich: Imperiale Muster und Strukturen*, ed. Bruno Jacobs et al. (Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz, 2017), 469–88.

7. The expression is borrowed from Lemaire, “The Idumaeen Ostraca,” 475 n. 63, showing that, if ever all of these documents had their origins in a private enterprise, “such would presuppose this so-called ‘private enterprise’ controlled most of the economy of the country.”

8. Ostrakon D9,1 makes reference to “gatemen”; forced labor would have to be understood in the wider sense (revealed by the Babylonian documentation), including military service. On forced labor in the successive fiscal systems of Judaea from the turning of our era, see Michaël Girardin, *La fiscalité dans le judaïsme ancien (VIe s. av. J. C.–IIe s. apr. J. C.)* (Paris: Geuthner, 2020), *passim*.

9. In fiscal context, see P.Yadin 16 and XHev/Se 62.

10. Michaël Girardin, “Dans le quotidien du collecteur,” 32.

accounts providing a total (C1,2, 12 ; 2,1-4, 16 ; 4,6 ; 8,6), the “formal script” linked with the “official nature” of C2,1 (91)—all of these provide a set of clues.

In addition, André Lemaire underlined the fact that the various documents listing “2 ר” could point to the existence of a capitation tax of 2q(arters of a shekel); that Makkedah seems to already have been an administrative center at the time of the First Temple; that payments are performed between Siwan and Ab, that is, after the harvest of cereals, while the workers are employed between 25 Marcheshwan and 20 Kislev, that is, during a quiet period for agriculture, pointing to the existence of corvée instead of to a full season of recruiting day laborers.¹¹ The editors themselves write concerning workers: “we may assume that each clan had a daily quota” (199). Such a “quota” could have been linked to a requirement of forced labor.

All in all, the publication and the work of material decipherment of the ostraca are precious, and the work is of the greatest quality. But it is not at all certain that the huge work performed by the editors in order to produce this volume renders obsolete prior publications, since the overall interpretation of the corpus continues and will continue to be debated.

11. André Lemaire, “The Idumaeian Ostraca,” 470, 476, 478.