

NOTE

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The Jewish Seal from Frattaminore JIWE I 24

Among the Jewish antiquities from Campania there is a bronze seal (JIWE I 24) considered lost until today (fig. 1).¹ It was donated by Pietrantonio Vitale, parish priest of Frattaminore, area of ancient Atella,² to Alessio Simmaco Mazzocchi between the 17th and the 18th century. It was later published by Theodor Mommsen in CIL X 8059.484 (fig. 5).³

Actually, the seal is not lost. It was purchased in the early years of the 18th century by Father Pierre Robinet from a lot of seals for the Antiquities Cabinet of the Royal Library of Madrid.⁴ Later, in 1867, the seal with the other pieces of the lot was transferred by royal decree

¹ Quoted in CIJ I 557 and ILCV 4946; believed lost in JIWE (p. 42); Lacerenza 2003: 88.

² CIL X 8059.484 mentions a locality named *Frattae picciolae*. By royal decree no. 6871, in 1890 the towns of Fratta piccola, Pomigliano di Atella and the old small village of Pardinola became the town of Frattaminore. See Libertini (1999: 53). Erroneously located “north of Minturno” in Castellano 1999: 90, it is instead 14 km north of Naples.

³ The presbyter Mazzocchi (1684-1771), a well-known connoisseur and collector of antiquities, described the piece in a manuscript *sylloge*, which Mommsen copied the inscription from. As for Vitale, parish of the San Maurizio church from 1726 to 1762, he was an antiquarian-historian and coin collector – “che di quelle fa professione”, according to a letter by G. Maglioli (Ussia 1977: 85, note 115; see also 18, 48) – and “studiosissimo di medaglie” (Mazzocchi 1741: 39). In 1746 Vitale published his *Riflessioni su le nuove scoperte di Lodovico Antonio Muratori*.

⁴ A French Jesuit and Royal Confessor of Philip V, Robinet (1652-1753) also proposed the creation of the Royal Library of Madrid, founded in 1711. The purchase, recorded in a document of 1715 in the Archive of the National Library of Madrid (Castellano *et al.* 1999: 90), probably occurred when Philip of Anjou went to Naples, during the War of Spanish Succession (1701-1714).

from the ancient collection of the National Library of Madrid to the permanent collection of the National Archaeological Museum of Madrid, where it is still located today.⁵

The bronze seal, more precisely a cast copper alloy, has a rectangular shape with a circular ring handle on the back (fig. 2).⁶ It is likely that it was cast in a mould. On the front, a *menorah* is flanked by two lines of inscribed Latin letters in relief and reverse. The arms of the seven-branched *menorah* start parallel and equal from a single horizontal bar and the same goes for the three feet of the tripod base. It is noteworthy that the *menorah* in this seal flanks the text and does not divide it, unlike other seals.⁷

Jewish stamp-seals were made of different materials and used for several purposes. Metal stamps were almost certainly intended to mark bread or cheese, as in this case.⁸ Bread seals were used to certify ritual purity (*kosher*) or origin (Myers 1975: 155). Clay, limestone and wooden stamps were impressed on containers of flour, oil, water, or medical ointments, or, as is stated in various sources,⁹ on wine containers. Amphorae stoppers and jar handles bear a great deal of these impressions.¹⁰ However, stamping in antiquity was not limited to food and liquid containers. Bricks, tiles and wet plaster, as shown in Roman catacombs,¹¹ were impressed with the names of magistrates, workshops, estate owners from whom the material came, and the names of individual makers.

As for the reading, Mommsen read the letters as:

SAN
IES

It may have been that he had a defective copy or drawing. This mistake left open the possibility «although unlikely» of interpreting

⁵ Castellano *et al.* 1999: 90, inventory no. 20108.

⁶ The seal measures 5.4 × 2.3 cm, and is 2.5 cm deep, and weighs 46 g. The letters are about 0.7-0.8 cm high. It is complete and intact.

⁷ Friedenberg 1994-95: figs. 4-6, 8.

⁸ Rectangular framed bronze seals with letters in relief (*signacula*) were widespread in the Roman world. Usually they were not impressed on clay (as is often said). Amphorae stoppers, jar handles, bricks and tiles show stamped impressions in relief. See Manganaro Perrone 2006: 13-17.

⁹ See Talmud Babli, 'Avodah Zarah 29b, 31a, 61a-b.

¹⁰ For examples found at Bova Marina, see Costamagna 2003: 105-106, fn. 47.

¹¹ Ferrua 1986.

the text as an abbreviation of *sanctus Iesus*.¹² However, the text clearly reads SAMVES (fig. 4), probably as an abbreviated genitive form of Samuel (*Samuelis*), or a corruption of the name שמא or שמוע.¹³ Genitive forms are common on rings, to identify the owner.¹⁴ This mistaken reading has made the recovery of the seal more difficult until today. The name SAMVES can also be read in an epitaph from Pannonia, which is almost certainly Jewish.¹⁵

As regards the dating, the lack of provenance information makes it difficult. This type of object (*signacula*) was used from the 1th to the 4th century.¹⁶ The use of Latin rather than Hebrew indicates that it is more likely to be ancient than medieval. Moreover, a convincing palaeographic parallel with a seal dated no later than the 4th century¹⁷ makes it likely that this seal dates from about the same period.

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- CIJ = Frey, J.-B. 1936¹ *Corpus Inscriptionum Iudaicarum*, I. *Europe*. Città del Vaticano [repr. *Corpus of Jewish Inscriptions*, with a *Prolegomenon* by B. Lifshitz, Ktav, New York 1975].

¹² On this misunderstanding see Noy in *JIWE I*, p. 42. More recently, Pezzella (2002: 98-99) argued that the seal – presented as a marble slab – should be regarded as Christian. About the occasional difficulty in distinguishing Jewish from Christian symbols, see for instance Kramer (1991: 141-162).

¹³ Reymond 1995: 433.

¹⁴ The *-es* genitive ending is found at Venosa (e.g. *JIWE I* 90), usually as a feminine ending, but occasionally also found in the masculine; Adams (2003: 443) attributes it to convergence with Greek.

¹⁵ CSIR-OE-1-4, 00498: *Tertius / Samues / f(ilius) an(norum) XX / h(ic) e(st) s(itus) p(ater) p(osuit) f(ilio)*. The Jewishness is suggested by some symbols on the upper part of this epitaph: a stylized menorah in the center, two dolphins, two six-petaled flowers (symbols of life?), and a crescent.

¹⁶ Loreti 1994: 645.

¹⁷ *JIWE I* 190 for several readings and dating, and Friedenberg 1994-95: fig. 8.

- CIL = Mommsen, T. 1963² *Corpus Inscriptionum latinarum* X: *Inscriptiones Bruttiorum Lucaniae, Campaniae, Siciliae, Sardiniae latinae*, de Gruyter, Berolini.
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- CSIR-OE = Krüger, M.-L. 1972 *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani. Österreich* I.4: *Die Reliefs des Stadtgebietes von Carnuntum*, Bohlaus, Wien.
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Figs. 1-3: Seal from Frattaminore: photo Gonzalo Cases Ortega, inv. n. 20108, courtesy Museo Arqueológico Nacional, España.



Fig. 4 (fig. 1 reversed).

484 Vitalis parochus Frattae picciolae [dono
dedit Mazochio].

SAN ☩
IES ☩

Mazochi syll. ms.

Fig. 5 (CIL).