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CONTENTS

Preface	The Editorial Board	xi*
Hillel Geva, Scholar of Jerusalem	Ravit Nenner-Soriano and Oren Gutfeld	xiii*
List of Contributors		xiv*
List of Publications by Hillel Geva		י
List of Abbreviations		xiv

Non-Hebrew Section

Ilya Berkovich and Amit Re'em		
Broken, Hidden, Rediscovered: the Story of the Cosmatesque High Altar of the Holy Sepulchre		1*
Oded Borowski		
Three Cosmetic Palettes from Tel Ḥalif		18*
Eliot Braun		
Alternate Paradigms for Social Complexity in the Late EB 1 of the Southern Levant		26*
Leah Di Segni		
Chronological Systems in the Territory of Jerusalem in Late Antiquity		40*
Shimon Gibson		
Notes on the “Upper” City Wall and the So-Called “Gate of the Essenes” on the Southwest Slope of Mount Zion—Based on the Results of Bliss and Dickie’s Excavations (1894–1897)		49*
Seymour Gitin		
Ekron of the Philistines: a Response to Issues Raised in the Literature		59*
Benjamin D. Gordon		
The Festival City: Jerusalem after Herod’s Games in Honor of Augustus		69*
Ann Haverkost and Rami Arav		
Bethsaida’s Stratum VI City Gate, High Place, and Iconic Stele		79*

Jodi Magness The Development of Jerusalem's Southeast Sector in the Late Roman and Byzantine Periods	88*
Gabriel Mazor and Walid Atrash Colonnaded Streets in Aelia Capitolina: Monumental Urbanism and Imagery	99*
Kay Prag Kenyon's Site P—For the Record	110*
Lea Rees, Yiftah Shalev, Anat Cohen-Weinberger and Yuval Gadot An Egyptian Deity in Persian Period Judea? On a Locally-Made Bes Vessel from Jerusalem	118*
Leen Ritmeyer Relating the Temple Scroll from Qumran to the Architecture of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem	128*
Renate Rosenthal-Heginbottom Moldmade Lamps in Judea (ca. 50–150 CE)	139*
Jon Seligman The City Was a Camp and the Camp a City—Another Look at the Location of the Camp of the Tenth Legion Fretensis	149*
Yana Tchekhanovets and Kirill Vach On the Provenance of the Jerusalem Inscription of King Uzziah	155*
Bethany J. Walker Did the <i>qaṣr</i> Stimulate Market Agriculture? The Case of Khirbet Beit Mazmīl and Mamluk Jerusalem	162*
English Abstracts of Hebrew Articles	175*

Hebrew Section

Jerusalem and Its Environs

Gideon Avni The Markets of Jerusalem following the Arab Conquest: Communal Identity, Demographic Changes and the Creation of a Multicultural City	1
Shua Amorai-Stark, Malka HersHKovitz and Eli Shukron Three Gemstone Seals of the Second Temple Period Found in Proximity to the Western Wall	9

Ron Beeri and Danit Levi	
When Did <i>Legio X Fretensis</i> Receive the Honorific Title of <i>Antoniniana</i> , and from Which Emperor? New Evidence from the Jerusalem International Convention Center	17
Dan Bahat	
The Date of Wilson's Arch	24
Rachel Bar-Nathan, Shulamit Terem and Gerald Finkielsztein	
Trade and Administration in the Orine Toparchy after the Great Revolt in Light of Finds from Shu'afat	32
Yuval Baruch, Dror Zitron, Orit Peleg-Barkat and Ronny Reich	
The Cradle of Jesus at the Temple Mount: Architectural and Artistic Aspects	44
Alon de Groot and Shlomit Weksler-Bdolah	
The Pool of Siloam and Mount Zion's Fortifications—Another Perspective	56
Shlomit Weksler-Bdolah	
The Extensive Public Construction Projects West of the Temple Mount during the Late Second Temple Period	72
Boaz Zissu, Danny Bickson and Dvir Raviv	
An Archaeological Survey at the Sheluḥat Shalmon Site in the Jerusalem Hills	86
Nahshon Szanton	
The Development of the City Gates in the Vicinity of the Siloam Pool during the Second Temple Period	101
Uzi Leibner, David Adan-Bayewitz, Frank Asaro and Michael D. Glascock	
A Pottery Production Site for Jerusalem and Its Vicinity in the Late Second Temple Period	113
Tehillah Lieberman and Joe Uziel	
The First Wall of Jerusalem in Light of the Wilson's Arch Excavations	127
Neria Sapir, Nathan Ben-Ari, Oded Lipschits and Ido Koch	
A New Corpus of Private-Seal-Stamped Handles from the Excavations at Mordot Arnona: Some First Insights	135
Zeev Safrai	
The Rebuilding of the Temple by Julian—The Reaction of the Jewish Community	143
Orit Peleg-Barkat	
New Light on Herod's Western Palace in Jerusalem	153
Assaf Kleiman	
The Date of the Ophel Pithos Inscription: an Archaeological Perspective	163

Ronny Reich	
On the Function of the Jerusalem <i>Agoranomos</i> (Market Inspector) and the Location of His Workshop in the Early Roman (= Late Second Temple) Period	174
Amichay Schwartz	
The Grave and Chapel of Melisende, Queen of Jerusalem	181
From the Chalcolithic Period to the Iron Age	
Uzi Avner	
Prehistoric Desert Open-Air Sanctuaries and Their Relation to Chalcolithic–Early Bronze Age Temples in the Levant	192
Eran Arie	
Iron Age Strainer-Juglets from the Southern Levant	203
David Ben-Shlomo	
Animal Representations in Iron Age Material Culture: A Comparison between Philistia and Judah	215
Amnon Ben-Tor	
The Ceremonial Palace at the Center of the Upper City of Hazor	226
Saar Ganor and Itamar Weissbein	
Gal'on Fortress, a Fortified Structure from the Beginning of the Iron Age on the Banks of Naḥal Guvrin	238
Nimrod Getzov and Ianir Milevski	
Cities and Lights: Oil Lamps in Southern Levantine Cities of the Early Bronze Age IB	248
Zeev Herzog	
When and Why Were Water Systems Constructed in the Kingdom of Judah?	260
Aharon Tavger, Chris McKinny and Itzhaq Shai	
A High Resolution Archaeological Survey of Tel 'Ether (Khirbet el-'Atar), an Iron Age Site on the Western Border of the Judahite Kingdom	268
Yifat Thareani	
An Archaeological Guide to an Imperial City: Spatial Analysis of Dan during the Neo-Assyrian Period	282
Amihai Mazar	
The Hearth Building at Tell Qasile and the Beginning of Settlement at the Site	295

Avraham Faust		
Where Are the Temples? On the Nature of Israelite Cult		308
Yitzhak Paz and Itai Elad		
Geometric and Figurative Cylinder Seals at ‘En Esur: Their Function and Importance in the Development of Urbanization in the Early Bronze Age IB		322
Irit Ziffer		
A Note on the Reduced Portrait in Ancient Near Eastern Art		332
Mitka R. Golub		
Israel and Judah Illuminated by a Digital Onomasticon		346
From the Hellenistic to the Byzantine Period		
Mordechai Aviam and Dina Shalem		
The Invisible Villages: Byzantine Ruins in the Thicket of the Upper Galilee		353
Emanuel Eisenberg and Rachel Bar-Nathan		
Hellenistic–Hasmonaean Tel Hebron: from Idumeans to Jews		361
Asaf Ben-Haim		
Stone Decoration at the Palace-Fortress of Herodium: Artisans and Styles at King Herod’s Court		373
Oren Gutfeld, Michal Haber and Pablo Betzer		
“Judas and his brothers were warring on the Idumaeans without ceasing”: a Monumental Hellenistic-Period Ritual Compound in Upper Idumea—New Findings from Ḥorvat ‘Amuda		385
Uri Davidovich, Chaim Ben-David and Roi Porat		
The Roman Road Network in Southern Moab and the Suppression of the Bar Kokhba Revolt		397
Shimon Dar		
Roads on Mount Carmel in the Roman and Byzantine Periods		407
Zeev Weiss		
Urban Necropoleis in Roman and Byzantine Galilee		418
Lihl Habas		
The Menas Ampulla from Road 3, Israel—Evidence of the Pilgrim Traffic from Egypt to the Holy Land		428
Yotam Tepper		
Cremation Burials in the Necropolis in the Vicinity of Legio-Kefar ‘Othnay		437

Shulamit Miller	
The Peristyle House at Kh. el-Muraq: a Reevaluation of “Hilkiya’s Palace”	450
Rafael (Rafi) Nezer and Oren Tal	
Between an Archaeological Site and Its Agricultural Hinterland—on the Application of an Archaeological-Ecological-Agricultural Model: Hellenistic Marisa/Maresha as a Test Case	462
Roi Porat	
Herodium and the Battle in the Judean Desert during the Bar Kokhba Revolt	476
Joseph Patrich	
The Ascent from the Harbor to the Temple Platform at Caesarea	491
Tsvika Tsuk, Iosi Bordowicz, Dror Ben-Yosef and Adi Erlich	
The Arched Reservoirs and the Pools in the Ancient Water System of Sepphoris	501
Dvir Raviv	
The Hiding Complexes of Judea: an Update Regarding Their Geographical Distribution, Typology and Function	511
Eyal Regev	
Burying Animal Bones and Vessels at Kh. Qumran: Ritual, Memory and Resistance	520
Ofer Sion and Yotam Tepper	
Prosperity and Decline in the Settlements of the Negev in the Roman and Byzantine Periods: a New Perspective	527

his work and exemplary professional integrity; likewise, he was and remains always attentive to new ideas, precisely and faithfully presenting the archaeological evidence, always pleasantly, with infinite patience and yet a sharp sense of humor.

We take this opportunity to thank you, Hillel, for your true friendship and for all you have taught us. We wish you many more years

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ON THE PROVENANCE OF THE JERUSALEM INSCRIPTION OF KING UZZIAH¹

YANA TCHEKHANOVETS AND KIRILL VACH

The Uzziah Tablet, an epitaph regarded as one of the most intriguing finds in the field of biblical epigraphy, was accidentally noticed in 1931 by E.L. Sukenik in the antiquities collection of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission the Mount of Olives. The present article, based on archival research, sheds light on the provenance of this artifact.

The Uzziah Tablet is a stone plaque with an epitaph text written in Aramaic. It is presently in the collection of the Israel Museum (inv. no. 68.56.38). The tablet is a small, almost square slab, 35x34 cm. in size, and 6 cm. thick, made of local limestone (Fig. 1). A short four-line inscription, surrounded by a double border, reads:

לכה התית
טמי עוזיה
מלך יהודה
ולא למפתח

“Here I brought (?) the bones of Uzziah, King of Judah; and not to open.”²

The Old Testament describes the deeds of Uzziah or Azariah, the tenth king of Judah from the House of David, who lived in the 8th century BCE: his 52-year reign, his wars with the Philistines, and the leprosy that afflicted him (2 Kings 15; 2 Chron. 26). Judging by the script used in the inscription and spelling features of the text, the tablet was made several centuries later, in the 1st century BCE–1st century CE, when the area of Jerusalem had increased considerably and the

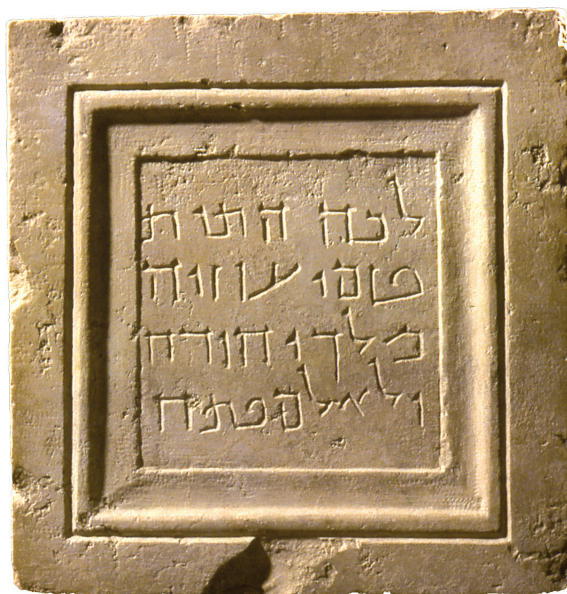


Fig. 1. Uzziah Tablet
(courtesy of Israel Museum, inv. no. 68.56.38)

ancient royal burial had to be moved to a new location.

The stone slab was accidentally noted in 1931 by Prof. E.L. Sukenik of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, who examined the collection of antiquities of Archimandrite Antonin (Kapustin) at the Russian Orthodox Ascension Monastery on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem (Sukenik 1931). About 40 years ago, the inscription was put up for auction in the United States and was then acquired by the Israel Museum.

The origin of the inscription is unknown. Its authenticity immediately raised some doubts:

many scholars considered the Uzziah Tablet suspicious, as an unusual and valuable find without a clear archaeological provenance. Since the mid-19th century, forgery of antiquities, especially ancient texts, became extremely common in Palestine (Clermont-Ganneau 1885). However, Sukenik noted the unusual composition of the text in the inscription, which had not previously been found in epigraphic finds of ancient Judea, and the use of the archaic form of letters, dated much later than the reign of King Uzziah. Sukenik also observed that the inscription had not been published by its Russian owners and for about 40 years lay in the repository of antiquities without attracting any attention: “Seeing that the inscription, was left for a long time, approximately 40 years, in one of the rooms of the Russian Church without anybody paying the slightest attention to it, it is clearly proved that those who discovered it, or sold it to the Russians, did not know its value. A forger would have stressed the importance of the inscription to the prospective buyer” (Sukenik 1931: 221).

At the end of his report, recounting his conversation with the Russian Archimandrite Hieronimos,³ Sukenik notes diary entries of Archimandrite Antonin (Kapustin), unavailable to him, as a potential source of information about the place and circumstances of the discovery of the Uzziah Tablet (*ibid.*).

In general, documentary evidence found in the state archives of the Russian Federation is extremely important for studying the history of archaeological research in Palestine. In this case, it provides answers to questions concerning the provenance of the Uzziah Tablet.

The burial of King Uzziah

According to the Bible, the kings of Judah were buried within the city. This custom was already indicated in the story about the death and burial of David, the first king who ruled in Jerusalem (1 Kings 2:10). The prohibition of burying the dead within the boundaries of the city did not extend to royal burials. The same formula was used in the Book of Kings in recounting the

death of Uzziah/Azariah: “So Azariah slept with his fathers; and they buried him with his fathers in the city of David” (2 Kings 15:7). However, his burial is described differently in Chronicles: “So Uzziah slept with his fathers, and they buried him with his fathers in the field of the burial which belonged to the kings; for they said, He is a leper” (2 Chron. 26:23). Josephus, who lived about eight centuries later, mentioned that the leper king “was buried alone in his own gardens” (*Antiquities*, IX.10.4). Archaeologically, the location of the royal necropolis of Jerusalem has not yet been established. Dozens of rock-cut tombs, including ones of courtiers going back to the times of the Jewish monarchy, have been discovered around the City of David, the oldest part of historical Jerusalem. However, these are all located outside the city boundaries and there were no royal tombs among them (Ussishkin 1993). It is also impossible to identify the place of Uzziah’s gardens. It is known that the “royal gardens” or the “fields of Kidron” (2 Kings 23:4; Jer. 52:7; Neh. 3:15) were located to the south of Jerusalem in a small fertile valley irrigated by the waters of the Kidron stream, but the palace and gardens of the leper king should have been located in a secluded place away from the city (2 Chron. 26:19–21; cf. 2 Kings 7:3–10).

Thus, the original place of Uzziah’s tomb is unknown. It could have been located outside the ancient city boundaries, but with the expansion of Jerusalem under Herod the Great or his successors (1st century BCE–1st century CE), it ended up within the city. Apparently, until that time, the tomb remained intact and was not looted, and therefore the remains of the king would have been moved elsewhere.

It has been previously proposed by E. Ben-Eliyahu (2000) that the remains of King Uzziah were reburied on the Mount of Olives, based upon medieval Jewish sources, including the text of a guidebook of Jerusalem, dated to the 9th–10th centuries, discovered in Cairo Genizah: the text mentions a long staircase, leading to the summit of the mountain, where the castle of King Uzziah stood, known as his tomb (Braslavi 1964).

The Uzziah Tablet in the collection of Archimandrite Antonin

Our initial task was to find out when the Uzziah Tablet became a part of the Russian collection of antiquities at the Ascension Monastery. We began our search with photographs from the collection of the Russian Imperial Palestine Orthodox Society, which are kept at the State Museum of the History of Religion (GMIR) in St. Petersburg.⁴ Among other things, the collection contains three photographs showing the Russian archaeological collection assembled by Archimandrite Antonin in detail.⁵ Since a catalog of this collection was never compiled, these three photographs are the most reliable source of information about Kapustin's collection. The Uzziah Tablet is clearly visible on two photographs (inv. No. II-6155 and II-6157), taken most likely in the 1880s–1890s. It stands in a far and poorly lit corner and is turned upside down (Fig. 2). Therefore, it was acquired during the lifetime of Archimandrite Antonin, and was possibly found on one of the plots of land being developed by the Russian Church at that time or perhaps purchased from an antiquities dealer. The position of the inscription captured in the photographs is puzzling: Archimandrite Antonin knew basic Hebrew and could not have made a mistake by accidentally turning the text upside down. And most importantly, if the tablet entered the Russian collection during Kapustin's lifetime, why didn't he or any of the European scholars whom he knew well and who lived and worked in Jerusalem publish the rare find?⁶

The Uzziah Tablet in diary entries of Archimandrite Antonin

In search of information, we turned to the diary of Archimandrite Antonin. The mostly unpublished diary includes all his Palestinian years, from his appointment to the position of the head of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in the Holy Land in 1865, until his death in 1894. It is an interesting and detailed source for the history of Jerusalem in the last third of the 19th century,

presenting the most important events and personalities of the Holy City. The original notebooks are preserved today in the Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA) in St. Petersburg,⁷ printed copies are kept in the archive of RIPOS at the State Museum of the History of Religion (GMIR) in St. Petersburg.

Our examination of the diary for 1887 brought us useful information. The entry from July 1, 1887, largely dealing with author's suffering from a dental abscess, mentions, among evening events: "Tea and everything else. A stone with ancient Hebrew inscription – the words יהודה מלך can be read."⁸ There are no more details about the tablet, but the entry clearly speaks about it. The entries of the following days confirm this assumption.

The next time the tablet appeared was in the entry from July 14:

"I became seized with a desire to understand the meaning of the Hebrew Eleonskaya inscription, called Gesenius and Euting for help,⁹ but ran aground at the first word לכה. How to find out if the *lamed* belongs to the root of the word or is a preposition to some laughing person...¹⁰ Bah! And what if instead of בכה, one should read לכה here? There is no end to the perplexity. By the way, I rummaged through 20–30 packages in the closet, and suddenly found a Russian map of Palestine there."¹¹

Father Antonin attempted to decipher the inscription on his own but did not really succeed. The most important evidence of this entry is that the inscription was called "Eleonskaya," that is, "from the Mount of Olives," which means that it reached Archimandrite Antonin from the plot on the top of the Mount of Olives. Construction on this site brought a large number of archaeological discoveries. Among other things, burials of the early Roman period and a Byzantine monastery with church and burial caves, as well as stone and mosaic inscriptions in Greek and Armenian, were discovered there.¹²

On the next day, July 15, Antonin Kapustin wrote:

"I don't have any pain; I drank my carbonate, prayed, and started preparing the mail, after



Fig. 2. Archaeological collection of Archimandrite Antonin (Kapustin). The Uzziah Tablet is seen on the right. Courtesy of GMIR (photographic collection of Russian Imperial Palestine Orthodox Society, inv. no. ПI-6157)

making an imprint from the Jewish inscription on wetted paper [...]. At 4 o'clock, two Russian letters and one French letter, adressée au Ministère des Etrangers à Paris, were ready."¹³

Confronted with the fact that he could not understand the inscription on his own, Kapustin made an imprint from papier-mâché and sent the copy with a cover letter to Paris, to the address of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We can easily guess to whom the letter was addressed: Charles Clermont-Ganneau, the great French orientalist and specialist in Semitic epigraphy worked in the Foreign Ministry, and shortly before that, in 1882 returned to his homeland after many years living in Palestine. Clermont-Ganneau and Archimandrite Antonin had close, friendly relations. The name of this French scholar and diplomat often appeared on the pages of Kapustin's diary, and publications of Clermont-Ganneau on the Palestinian finds are full of references to the "Russian Archimandrite." Correspondence between them continued after Clermont-Ganneau had departed for France; one of their main topics was discussion of new Palestinian finds and scholarly news.¹⁴

For a whole month, the inscription did not appear in the diary entries. Archimandrite Antonin was busy building the church in Gethsemane, but he also often visited the Mount of Olives: there at this time the bell tower was being completed and the church was being painted. There are no archaeological notes in the diary for July and August. Finally, a month later, on August 20, Kapustin wrote:

"While I was still sitting at tea, I was handed a large package from the French consulate with a letter and brochures from Ganneau in Paris. The orientalist scholar doubts the authenticity of the inscription with the name of Uzziah, the King of Judah, and informs me that a certain Rabbi Löwy, in turn, doubts the stone of the Moabite King Mesha."¹⁵

Preliminary conclusions

The diary entries make it possible to establish the following. The inscription of Uzziah, named in the diary "from the Mount of Olives," came

into the possession of Kapustin on July 1, 1887. Apparently, it was brought from the Russian plot on the Mount of Olives and was not sold to him by a dealer of antiquities, in which case Archimandrite Antonin usually recorded in detail who sold him a particular object and the amount he paid for it. The exact location and circumstances of the discovery were not indicated, perhaps due to the poor state of health of the diary's author or some loss of interest in archeology on his part by that time.

After his toothache passed, Antonin Kapustin returned to working on the find: he tried to decipher the inscription on his own, made an imprint and wrote C. Clermont-Ganneau who was undoubtedly one of the leading Semitologists of the time and a good friend of Kapustin. A month later, a response with the final verdict came from Paris: the inscription was a fake. Fully relying on the opinion of Clermont-Ganneau, Archimandrite Antonin, without consulting anyone else, decided to keep the tablet, but did not show any further interest in it. This may explain its place in the collection as recorded in the photographs—in a dark corner and upside down. After so many years in Jerusalem, archaeological disappointments should have become familiar to him; moreover, the Antonin Kapustin collection of antiquities includes numerous forgeries (Tchekhanovets and Belyaev 2019: 243–244).

Many questions related to the origin and fate of the inscription remain unresolved. Charles Clermont-Ganneau, who made major contributions to research on Palestine's antiquities, had a rare archaeological instinct and was in many ways ahead of his time. He was the first scholar to declared war on forgers of antiquities and even collected many examples of epigraphic forgeries in his small but extremely entertaining brochure (1885). It is possible that the text of the tablet on the reburial of the remains of a biblical king seemed too implausible to the French scholar to be a real. However, if the inscription was indeed extracted from the ground during construction on the Russian site on the Mount of Olives, Clermont-Ganneau could not have had grounds for such a categorical judgment. Perhaps Kapustin

himself was not sure of the inscription's origin or did not describe the circumstances of its discovery in the letter to Paris in sufficient detail. One way or another, the inscription, subsequently ne-

glected, would have to gather dust in the Russian collection for another 40 years until, in 1931, it was accidentally rediscovered by Eliezer Lipa Sukenik.

Notes

- 1 The present article is submitted with affection and appreciation to Hillel Geva, admired scholar and Jerusalem encyclopedist. The primary results of this study were at first reported at the 42nd Archaeological Congress in Israel, held at Tel Aviv University in April 2016, and were briefly published in Russian: Tchekhanovets and Vach 2017.
- 2 For a complete bibliography on the inscription, see A. Yardeni and J. Price, no. 602, in: Cotton, Di Segni, Eck et al., *CIIP* I/1, 2010.
- 3 Archimandrite, later Archbishop Hieronimos (Chernov), the Head of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem in 1922–1925, lived in the Mission until his departure from Palestine in 1933.
- 4 On the collection, see Fedotov 2015. Our study of the collection of Holy Land photography became possible through the generous help of Ekaterina Terukova, the deputy director of GMIR, and Peter Fedotov, the collection's curator. Today, the collection is accessible online: www.palestina.indrik.ru
- 5 On the archaeological interests of Archimandrite Antonin and his collection, see Guruleva 2007; Belyaev, Butova, and Lisovoi 2009; Tchekhanovets and Belyaev 2019.
- 6 Cf. the well-known and repeatedly published "head of Herod," acquired by Kapustin and subsequently transferred to the Hermitage Museum: Clermont-Ganneau 1896:259–266.
- 7 Собрание Св. Синода. Ф. 834. оп. 4. д. 1118–1132. For detailed description of the source and its research history, see Vach 2013. Publication of the manuscript started in 2010 and will continue for many more years.
- 8 Шифр ИППО: Б.IV.853/29. С. 125.
- 9 Wilhelm Gesenius (1786–1842) and Julius Euting (1839–1913), 19th century orientalist, authors of textbooks on Semitic grammar.
- 10 The meaning of this phrase is unclear.
- 11 Шифр ИППО: Б.IV.853/29. С. 125.
- 12 See Dmitrevsky 1885 [2006]; Tchekhanovets 2018:55–76.
- 13 Шифр ИППО: Б.IV.853/29. С. 125–126.
- 14 The personal archive of Clermont-Ganneau is distributed among several French archives and is difficult to access. We are sincerely grateful to the Russian historian Irina Mironenko-Marenkova who worked in France, identified a number of letters from Archimandrite Antonin in the extensive correspondence of Clermont-Ganneau, and kindly shared the results of her unpublished research with us. Unfortunately, the letter with the information about the Uzziah inscription, possibly revealing the circumstances of its discovery, has not yet been found.
- 15 Шифр ИППО: Б.IV.853/29. С. 150.

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