

Inscribed Ossuaries: Personal names, statistics, and laboratory tests

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The term “prosopography” derives from two Greek words, *prosōpon* “face” and *grafē* “writing.” After being coined, this word could be used (e.g., during the Renaissance) of an attempt to pen a physical description of someone. More recently, prosopography became a technical term for attempts to reconstruct and describe data revolving around the subjects of genealogy, names (onomastics), and demographics. Within the field of ancient prosopography, there is often a focus on the status, vocations, and kinship of elites. The reason for this focus is simply because most of the data available are written texts derived from elite circles. When one looks at prosopography in a field such as biblical studies, analyses will also include attempts to argue for (or against) the identification of a person attested in a literary corpus with someone attested in the epigraphic corpus (e.g., Avigad 1987). Before we turn to the Talpiot tomb in particular, some discussion of the standard methods would be instructive.

The Study of Names: Methods and Models

The most reliable prosopographies are those based on a convergence of epigraphic, archaeological, and (when available) literary data. However, certain minimal controls are mandatory for such analyses to be convincing or even tenable. Patronymics and matronymics are a most fundamental component for prosopographic analyses. For the ancients, this was a means of differentiating (to some degree) people with the same name; thus, patronymics are very common in the epigraphic corpus. For example, the Samaria Papyri refer to a slave named “Yehohanan bar She’ilah” (Gropp 2001: 35, no. 1). Within the corpus of Aramaic and Hebrew inscriptions from Masada, there is reference to “Shimeon bar Yehosep” and “Shimeon ben Yo’ezer (Yadin and Naveh 1989: 40, nos. 463, 466). Matronymics also occur. For example, a Jerusalem ossuary is inscribed in Greek “Alexas Mara, mother of Judas Simon, her son” (Rahmani 1994: 258, no. 868). However, because complementary data are not present, nothing more substantive can be said about any of these people and they cannot be identified with anyone in the literary corpus.

Nevertheless, *sometimes* there are sufficient data to posit that a figure attested in the epigraphic corpus and a figure attested in a literary corpus are *probably* the same. This can be very useful for prosopographic analysis. For example, during Shiloh's excavations at the City of David, a number of bullae were discovered in stratum X, a stratum that was destroyed by the Babylonians in about 587 BCE. Bulla 2 reads: "Belonging to Gemaryahu ben Shaphan." Shiloh posited that the Gemaryahu of this bulla is to be identified with "the scribe Gemaryahu son of Shaphan" who is mentioned in Jer 36:10 (Shiloh 1986). However, within the *editio princeps* of this corpus, Shoham reiterated Shiloh's declaration, but noted a caveat: "It should be borne in mind, however, that the names found on the bullae were popular in ancient times and it is equally possible that there is no connection between the names found on the bulla and the person mentioned in the Bible" (Shoham 2000: 33).¹ Similarly, the Babatha Archive (from the chronological horizon preceding the Second Jewish Revolt of 132–135 CE) refers to a certain elite woman named "Julia Crispina" (Lewis 1989: nos. 20, 24). An Egyptian document refers to a propertied woman of the same horizon and Levantine activities (Yadin 1971: 247–48). Ilan has marshaled a substantial amount of evidence and argued that they can probably be identified, but she remains cautious (Ilan 1992: 361–81). During the early history of the field, such methodological caution was not the norm. However, it soon became evident that there had been some misidentifications. For example, Albright had argued that the stamped jar handles he found at Tell Beit Mirsim inscribed "Belonging to Eliakim, the steward of Yokan" were to be associated with King Jehoiachin (Albright 1932: 77–106). After all, the title "steward" was one that could be associated with the throne and "Yokan" was arguably a variant of the throne name Jehoiachin. Ultimately, however, it became apparent that the Eliakim jar handles were not to be associated with the same chronological horizon as the Judean monarch. Albright's identification seemed rational, but it had been wrong.

Although quite rare, there are occasions when someone attested in the epigraphic record can be identified, with enormous certitude, with someone known from literature. This requires substantial corroborating evidence. For example, the Moabite Stone was commissioned by "Mesha King of Moab." In this inscription, there is also reference to the Moabite site of Dhibon and to the fact that Moab was under the hegemony of Israel during the reign of Omri of Israel. Then, Mesha states that he was able to secure Moab's independence during the reign of Omri's "son." Because of the correspondences of the personal names, the title king of Moab, and the basic harmony of the historical data, it is convincing to argue that the Mesha of the Moabite Stone is the Mesha named in the Hebrew Bible (2 Kgs 3:4–5). Similarly, there are a number of literary sources that refer to the leader of the Second Jewish Revolt (132–135

CE) as a certain Simon "Bar Kokhba" (Dio Cassius; Eusebius). Within the Mishnah and Talmud, he is sometimes referred to as "Bar Koziba" (Yadin 1971: 255–59). For some time, scholars have stated that Simon's patronymic "Bar Kokhba" ("son of the star") was a messianic appellation rather than an actual patronymic. Of course, the Mishnah and Talmud's "Bar Koziba" ("son of the lie") was understood to be a pejorative. With the publication of the Bar Kokhba Letters, the actual patronymic of Simon became known: "Bar Kosiba" (Yadin, *et al.* 2002). Ultimately, because of the convergence of the name, the chronological horizon, and historical context, it can be stated confidently that the figure of literature and the epigraphic figure can be identified.

Sometimes ancient inscriptions will contain a personal name and a title. Data such as these would have been useful in antiquity for a number of reasons. A bulla from the City of David contains reference to "[Tobšillem] son of Zakar, the physician" (Shoham 2000: 35, no. 6). From the Aramaic Persepolis corpus, there is reference to "Data-Mithra the treasurer" (Bowman 1970: 71–74, no. 1). Within the corpus of Ammonite inscriptions, a magnificent seal refers to "Palatya ben Ma'aš, the recorder" (Taleb 1985: 21–29).² A beautiful ossuary from Mount Scopus is inscribed with the words "Yehosep, son of Hananya, the scribe" (Rahmani 1994: 262, no. 893). Of course, these sorts of data can be very useful for a modern scholar attempting to do prosopography and sometimes such data can be the basis for a probable identification. For example, literary sources referred to "Gallio" who was a "Proconsul of Achaia" (e.g., Tacitus, *Annals* 16.17.3; Pliny, *HN* 31.62; Acts 18:12). During the twentieth century, some nine fragments of a Greek inscription from Delphi referring to "Proconsul Gallio" were published. Based on a convergence of data (including the personal name and title), it is likely that the Gallio of the literary sources and the Gallio of the Delphic Inscription are one and the same person (Hemer 1980: 3–18). Similarly, the Mishnah refers to a Temple gate that was known as the "Gate of Nicanor," with Nicanor as someone hailing from Alexandria. During the early-twentieth century, an ossuary was discovered in Jerusalem, inscribed in Greek "the Ossuary of Nicanor the Alexandrian, who made the doors" and then in Semitic script: "Nikanor Alexa" (Finegan 1992: 357–59; cf. Kane 1978: 279–82). It is cogent to argue that this ossuary is the ossuary of the maker of the "Gate of Nicanor" mentioned in the Mishnah (cf. Ilan 1992: 367).

Significantly, Avigad argued for rigorous methodologies for attempts to affirm that a personal name attested in the epigraphic corpus and a figure attested in the Hebrew Bible can be identified. Namely, he states that the name and the patronymic must be the same in the epigraphic corpus and the Hebrew Bible. Furthermore, he affirms that both must hail from the same chronological horizon (i.e., the archaeological

context for the inscription and the putative historical context for the biblical personage must be the same). Finally, he affirms that the presence of a distinctive title in the epigraphic and biblical corpus fortify the identification. Nevertheless, Avigad was not satisfied even with this, for he also stated that because of the preponderance of certain names the presence of the same personal name and patronymic cannot be understood as demonstrative of the certainty of an identification (Avigad 1987: 235–37).

The Talpiot Tomb

The tomb that has been identified as the “Jesus tomb” was discovered in 1980 by Yosef Gath during a salvage excavation at a site in the neighborhood of East Talpiot, Jerusalem. Within the tomb complex, ten ossuaries (six of them inscribed) were found (Rahmani 1994: 222–24, nos. 701–709). One of the ossuaries, plain and without an inscription, was quite damaged (Rahmani 1994: 222, comment 1; cf. 94, no. 70). Based on the totality of finds in the tomb, Kloner states that the tomb can be dated to the late Second Temple period, with about thirty-five total burials (Kloner 1996: 21–22). Rahmani read the personal names on the ossuaries as follows: (1) Mariamênou {ê} Mara (Mariamne who is also called Mara).³ (2) Yhw dh br Yšw’ (Yehudah bar Yeshua’). (3) Mtyh (Mattiyah). (4) Yšw’ br Yhwsp (Yeshua’ bar Yehosep). (5) Ywsh (Yoseh). (6) Mryh (Maryah). Pfann (see article in this issue) has now argued that the reading Mariamênou {ê} Mara is erroneous and has proposed Mariam and Mara (i.e., Miriam and Mara).

The names Yehosep, Yoseh, Yeshua’, Yehudah, Mattiyah, Maryah, Mariam(n)e, Miryam, and Martha (or the variants thereof) all have multiple attestations in the multilingual corpus

of ossuaries and some are very common. For example, Sukenik published an ossuary inscribed “Yeshua’ son of Yehosep” more than seventy-five years ago (Sukenik 1931). Moreover, the names Yeshua’ and Yehosep are predominant in the family of Babatha’s first husband and her first husband’s grandfather was named “Yeshua’ bar Yehosep” (Lewis 1989: 35–40). That is, even with the small corpus of epigraphic attestations of personal names, even the Talpiot tomb occurrence of “Yeshua’ bar Yehosep” is not unique.

Striking, however, is the fact that Pellegrino, Jacobovici, and Tabor have argued that the ossuaries of the Talpiot tomb can indeed be identified with Jesus of Nazareth and his family (Jacobovici and Pellegrino 2007; cf. Tabor 2006). To be precise, it has been argued that it is convincing to affirm that the ossuary of Yeshua’ bar Yehosep is that of Jesus of Nazareth, the ossuary inscribed “Maryah” is that of the mother of Jesus of Nazareth, the ossuary inscribed “Mariam(n)e” is that of Mary Magdalene of the gospels, the ossuary inscribed “Yoseh” is that of Jesus’ brother Joseph, that of “Yehudah bar Yeshua” is that of a son born to Jesus and Mary Magdalene, and the ossuary inscribed “Mattiyah” is also that of a relative of Jesus of Nazareth. It is also affirmed that the persons buried in the ossuary inscribed “Yeshua’ bar Yehosep” and that inscribed “Mariam(n)e {ê} Mara” were married. Finally, it has even been argued that the unprovenanced ossuary with the inscription “Ya’akov bar Yehosep ’ahui Yeshua” (i.e., the “James Ossuary”) was stolen from the Talpiot tomb decades ago (and it is assumed that the entire inscription is ancient).

However, the problems with this proposal are legion. First of all, one should note that of the six inscribed ossuaries, there are just two personal names with patronymics: (1) “Yehudah bar Yeshua” and (2) “Yeshua’ bar Yehosep.” Moreover, there are no matronymics. There are no references to marital status. There are no references to fraternal or sororal relationships. These are pivotal issues, because without such data it is impossible to ascertain the precise kinship relationships of antiquity. Such tombs were “family tombs,” but to assume that a tomb represents some sort of nuclear family *and* to assume that one can discern without empirical evidence the nature of the relationships within that family is problematic.

With this in mind, it is helpful to look more closely at the Maryah Ossuary. There is no empirical reason to assume that she is the mother of Yeshua’ bar Yehosep. She might have been the wife of Yehudah, or the wife of Yoseh, or the wife of Mattiyah, or the wife of Yeshua’. Sometimes we have complementary information that makes an affirmation about marital status. One such instance is an ossuary from the Kidron valley, which is inscribed with the words “Shalom, wife of Yehudah” (Rahmani 1994: 81, no. 24). Also, an ossuary from Jerusalem’s French Hill reads in both Semitic and Greek, “Miryam, wife of Mattiyah” (Rahmani, 1994: 197, no. 559). However, on the Maryah Ossuary there is no such reference to marital status.



The ossuary bearing the inscription “Jesus son of Joseph.” Photo courtesy of Associated Producers.

Maryah might even have been the daughter of one of the men in the tomb. Sometimes such data are present. For example, an ossuary from Jerusalem's Mount Scopus is inscribed "Judith, daughter of Nadav" (Rahmani 1994: 201, no. 572). Likewise, an ossuary from Ramat Eshkol, Jerusalem reads: "Ossuary of Shalom, daughter of Sha'ul, who failed to give birth. Peace, daughter!" (Rahmani 1994: 132, no. 226).⁴ However, no such data are present for the Maryah Ossuary; therefore, to assume that a modern scholar can discern and affirm the nature of some relationship is risible.

Similarly, the assumption that the Yoseh of the Yoseh Ossuary was brother of Yeshua' is problematic: the Yoseh Ossuary has no fratronymic (designation that identifies the brother). While it is rare, sometimes ossuaries do mention the name of a brother. An ossuary from Mount Scopus is inscribed "Shimi, son of 'Asiya, brother of Hanin" (Rahmani 1994: 200, no. 570). Yet, when we look at the Talpiot Tomb, we notice that there is neither fratronymic nor patronymic on this ossuary. Thus, it is not possible to make affirmations about paternity or fraternity. Ultimately, Yoseh could be the son of Mattiyah, or the son of Yehudah, or the son of Yeshua'. Perhaps he was the father of Maryah, or the father of Miriam(n)e, or Mattiyah. Maybe he is the uncle of one of these or perhaps Yoseh was the son or father or brother or uncle of someone who was buried in one of the uninscribed ossuaries. It is even possible to suggest that he was a cousin of someone in the tomb. Furthermore, the Yehosep of the patronymic and the Yoseh of the ossuary could be the same person. After all, this is actually the same name and these ossuaries were inscribed at two different times and in neither case is there a patronymic for "Yehosep" or "Yoseh." The possibilities detailed here are not all mutually exclusive, but ultimately, because there is no patronymic, or statement of fraternity, or title, any suggestion about the relationship of Yoseh to those interred there remains conjecture and speculation.

Of course, it has also been suggested that the Mariam(n)e ossuary inscription is to be identified with the Mary Magdalene of the gospels. The problem is that Mariam(n)e is hardly a unique name and, moreover, the ossuary inscription does *not* contain the word "Magdalene." Sometimes we do have data about the region from which the deceased hailed. For example, an ossuary from the Kidron Valley contains a Greek inscription with the words "Sara (daughter of) Simon of Ptolemais" (Rahmani 1994: 102, no. 99). However, the Mariam(n)e ossuary does not contain such a reference (i.e., no "Magdala"). Therefore, for someone to assume that the Mariam(n)e of the ossuary must be the Mary Magdalene of the gospels is without justification (cf. Fitzmyer 2007). She could be the wife of Mattiyah, Yoseh, Yehudah, or Yeshua', or she could be the sister of any person in the tomb (even of someone interred in an uninscribed ossuary). Again, not all of these are mutually exclusive, but the point is that it is naïve to assume that one can state confidently the

nature of the relationship of the Mariam(n)e of this ossuary to the Yeshua' of the Yeshua' Ossuary.

DNA Evidence, Patinas, and Statistics

There have been some attempts to appeal to DNA evidence, and such evidence is popular among journalists and the public because it appears to be objective and scientific. However, the fact of the matter is that the DNA evidence simply cannot carry the weight that has been placed on it. That is, Jacobovici and Pellegrino have stated that the laboratory was able to recover sufficient bone material from the Yeshua' Ossuary and the Mariam(n)e Ossuary for mitochondrial DNA analysis (but not enough for nuclear DNA analysis). Because the mitochondrial DNA did not "match," they have *assumed* that Yeshua' and Mariam(n)e were married. Once again, the astute observer notes that too many assumptions are being made and that the results should be called into question. That is, a number of potential relationships can be posited that would account for the DNA evidence. For example, perhaps they were father-in-law and daughter-in-law, or brother-in-law and sister-in-law. In fact, they could have been brother and sister (with different mothers, but the same father). It could even be that Mariam(n)e and Yeshua' were paternal aunt and nephew. In summary, numerous options present themselves. Jacobovici and Pellegrino state that the DNA do not "negate" [their] conclusion" (Jacobovici and Pellegrino 2007: 173), but this is much different from *proving* their conclusion. Of course, there is also no means of determining with certainty that the bones analyzed are those of the person whose name is inscribed on the ossuary! In short, it is important not to make too many assumptions that cannot be proven. Furthermore, with regard to the analyses of the patinas on the Talpiot ossuaries and those of the James Ossuary, certain things should be stated.

- 1) The origin and chain of custody for the James Ossuary are not known and it is not possible to reconstruct them with any certitude (nor is it even possible to establish the authenticity of the entire inscription).
- 2) Several laboratories (including the GSI) have actually *authenticated modern forgeries* during recent years; therefore, the field of epigraphy should be very cautious about credulously accepting a laboratory analysis. There is, after all, a human component to laboratory tests as well.
- 3) There has been no indication that the laboratory tests were double-blind (a standard practice within the hard sciences).
- 4) Furthermore, I would suggest that (a) ossuaries made from the same basic Jerusalem limestone and stored in rock hewn tombs of the same city can have similar patinas and that (b) the control group must be very large for decisive statements to be made about the differences between the patinas on ossuaries in Jerusalem tombs of

the same chronological horizon. Therefore, any attempt to use these patina analyses as corroborating evidence is most precarious indeed.⁵

Ultimately, it is readily apparent that the DNA tests performed are not sufficient to permit the positing of a complete nexus of relationships in the face of a dearth of the necessary prosopographic data, nor are the patina tests sufficient for demonstrating that the Ya'akov Ossuary hailed from the Talpiot tomb.

Regarding the statistics, Andrey Feuerverger has posted an open letter describing his basic premises and assumptions. He says, "we assume that 'Mariamênou e Mara' is a singularly highly appropriate appellation for Mary Magdalene." However, he concedes that "this assumption is contentious and furthermore that this assumption drives the outcome of the computations substantially." Feuerverger also states that "it is assumed that Yose/Yosa is not the same person as the father Yosef who is referred to on the ossuary of Yeshua." However, I have noted that this assumption may be erroneous. In addition, he assumes

that "the presence of Matya does not invalidate the find" and that "we also assume that the Yehuda son of Yeshua ossuary does not invalidate the find, but we ignore it in the computations." He then goes on to concede that "this last assumption is contentious." I would argue that Feuerverger's decision *not* to factor in (as negative evidence) the *presence* of names such as Yehudah bar Yeshua' and Mattiyah is problematic. After all, there is no ancient evidence that Jesus of Nazareth fathered a child named Yehudah and the closest known relative of Jesus of Nazareth with the name Matthew was a great grandfather! It seems reasonable to suggest that Feuerverger's decision to avoid including data that militated against his hypothesis is a critical flaw, as is his decision to weigh heavily several very subjective assumptions.

Thomas Lambdin's famous dictum is that within the field we often "work with no data." This is a hyperbole, but the fact remains that we do work with partial data, and sometimes the data we have are just plain opaque. With the Talpiot tomb, there is a dearth of prosopographic data and this is a fact. There are no titles inscribed on the ossuaries and this is a fact. Also, there are no associated epigraphic materials in the tomb (e.g., a preserved epistle with some historical data). Based on the dearth of epigraphic evidence, it is simply precarious to make assumptions about the relationships of those buried therein, and it is certainly not tenable to suggest that the data are sufficient to posit that this is the family tomb of Jesus of Nazareth. Moreover, there is nothing in the statistical or laboratory data that can sufficiently clarify the situation.⁶

Notes

1. I am grateful to Hava Katz of the Israel Antiquities Authority and to Michal Dayagi-Mendels of the Israel Museum for allowing me to collate this corpus of bullae.
2. Note that some consider this seal to be Moabite. For the purposes of this paper, this is not a relevant point. I am grateful to the Department of Antiquities of Jordan and Director Fawwaz al-Khrayshah for permission to collate this seal.
3. Rahmani states that he believes the name Mara is a short form of the name Martha and that this is the case of a double name (Rahmani 1994: 222 [no. 701]; cf. 181–82 [no. 468] for Mara and Martha on the same ossuary, arguably referring to the same woman).
4. It is striking that an ossuary inscribed "Sha'ul" was found in the same place. It seems that this daughter had been married, but had no children, and was interred in a tomb with her father, rather than in a tomb with her husband.
5. For a discussion of some of the problems with the laboratory tests on the Ya'akov Ossuary, reference to protocols for laboratory tests, and discussion of erroneous results from labs, see Rollston (2003: 182–91).
6. I am grateful to Lindsay Hunter and Ryan Jackson for discussing the DNA evidence with me. An earlier version of this article was published online in *The SBL Forum* (March 2007). Also, I am indebted to Jim West for posting my preliminary analyses on his blog on February 26 and March 13, 2007.



A view of the Mariamne ossuary from the front. Photo courtesy of Associated Producers.



The Greek inscription on the Mariamne ossuary. Photo courtesy of Associated Producers.