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Archives and Libraries

Mladen Popović

When it comes to archives and libraries in ancient Judaism we have to distinguish between literary and material evidence. Literary references attest to the existence of archives and libraries, but the material evidence is meagre and not straightforward to interpret. This makes it difficult to say exactly how archives and libraries were organized and how they functioned. Superimposing contextual evidence from the ancient Near East and Mediterranean on the extant ancient Jewish evidence does not significantly change our incomplete knowledge of archives and libraries in ancient Judaism.

There is the well-known literary reference in 2 Maccabees 2:13–14 about Nehemiah founding a library or archive (βιβλιοθήκη) and collecting the books about the kings and prophets, and the writings of David, and letters of kings about votive offerings. The text then goes on to say about Judas Maccabee that he too collected all the books that had been lost on account of the war, but it is not so clear as to refer to a library or archive of some sort. It is often assumed that a library existed in the Jerusalem temple. While it is plausible to assume the presence of literary and documentary manuscripts in the Jerusalem temple there is no unequivocal evidence for a Jerusalem temple library or archive (Hezser 2001; Schorch 2007; Martone 2015). To be sure, Josephus refers to public archives in Jerusalem (War 2.427; 6.354; 7.55, 61), and also Sepphoris (Vita 38) and Tyre (Ant. 8.55). Documentary evidence from the Judaean Desert (P. Yadin 19:25–27; P. Yadin 20: 12–13, 34–36) may also contain references to public archival registration of documents (cf. Lewis 1989:87; Cotton/Yardeni 1997:207–8; Hezser 2001:155).

When we consider the material evidence for libraries or archives in Second Temple Judaism we have to start with the Elephantine and Zenon collections from Egypt. In addition to hundreds of Aramaic ostraca, the fifth-century BCE Elephantine manuscripts consist of dozens of letters, legal texts, accounts and lists, and also the
literary text of Ahiqar. The social infrastructure that produced these manuscripts was made up by members of a Jewish military colony in service of the Persian empire on the island of Elephantine, also communicating with people in Jerusalem and Samaria (Porten 1968). The Zenon papyri, from the Fayum region, are third-century BCE Greek documents kept by Zenon, who was secretary to the finance minister Apollonius in the Ptolemaic government. Among the Zenon papyri are letters from Tobias, a member of the Tobiad family that was responsible for tax-collection in Palestine in the third century BCE on behalf of the Ptolemaic rulers (Tcherikover 1959).

Regarding manuscript finds in the Judaean Desert, there are at least eighteen sites to reckon with where manuscript collections have been discovered (Popović forthcoming). The deposition context of these manuscript collections is often determined by factors of violence and refuge (e.g., First Revolt against Rome, Bar Kokhba Revolt), rather than, for example, trash disposal, such as at Oxyrhynchus. Most of the manuscripts ended up in caves, taken along by refugees or hidden there. But manuscripts that ended up in different caves did not necessarily form one collection before that happened. Regarding the scrolls from the caves near Qumran, for example, scholars now increasingly seem to stress that the manuscripts did not originate from one single collection before their deposit.

Nevertheless, the Judaean Desert manuscript finds add significantly to our knowledge of ancient Jewish archives and libraries (Popović 2012). For example, one may distinguish between private and more institutional or rather communal contexts. The thirty-five legal papyri of Babatha written in Greek, Aramaic, and Nabatean-Aramaic carefully packed together in a leather purse, or the six legal papyri in Hebrew and Aramaic, originally probably also packed in a leather bag, of Eliezer bar Shemuel from Nahal Ḫever represent private archives. These archives were found placed on top of each other. Found in the same cave (Naḥal Ḫever Cave 5/6; the Cave of the Letters), the archive of Salome Komaise is from a woman that came from the same village as Babatha and indicates that families from that village probably fled together. Together with a fourth private archive in the same cave, also
two fragmentary biblical texts were found. Literary texts were also found at Naḥal Ḥever Cave 8 (the Cave of Horrors) and other Judean Desert sites (Naḥal Ḥever/Wadi Seiyal, Naḥal Ṣe’elim and Wadi Murabba’at). Given the mixture of texts and the personal character of the collections, the small number of literary manuscripts indicates personal ownership. Similar to the documentary texts, one or more copies may have belonged to an individual or one of the families in these caves.

Another example of private collections is provided by the evidence at Masada, where the excavators interpret some of the manuscripts as belonging to individual families. It is different from the Naḥal Ḥever evidence because it concerns literary instead of documentary texts. At different spots on Masada manuscripts were discovered. Some of these were found in rooms that, from an archaeological perspective, seemed to have belonged to individual families, such as a Psalms manuscript (MasPsb) or one of Ben Sira (Mas1h Sir), although the evidence is meagre (often not more than one copy per locus, excluding locus 1039 where the accumulation of manuscripts is probably mainly secondary).

The caves near Qumran have yielded by far the largest number of manuscripts, consisting mainly of literary texts, while documentary texts predominate at other Judean Desert sites. Given the large number of literary manuscripts from Qumran, as well as numerous multiple copies of the same composition, scholars often assume that these were not part of a personal collection (despite Caves 6 and 8 perhaps being singled out as private collections, but the evidence is inconclusive), but reflect communal ownership. The movement behind the scrolls from the caves near Qumran can be characterized as a textual community, reflecting a milieu of Jewish intellectuals or scholars who were engaged at a very high level with their ancestral traditions and who collected, studied, and produced manuscripts (Popović 2015).

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