A REPORT ON THE SAMARIA PAPYRI

by

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1. In the early spring of 1962, Taḵamireh Bedouin discovered a cache of ancient papyri buried together with scores of human skeletons in a cave of the Wādī ed-Dāliyeh, a desolate canyon in the rim of the Jordan Rift some 14 km. north of ancient Jericho. The finds, which included hoards of coins, jewelry including seal-rings, scores of bullae, and pottery, as well as papyri, rested on the ancient floor of the cave, underneath nearly two meters of dry, powdery bat guano, which had accumulated in the interval of twenty-four centuries since ancient refugees were massacred in the cave.1

I flew out to Jerusalem in mid-November, 1962, to negotiate the purchase of the documents in behalf of the American Schools of Oriental Research. I remember vividly my first view of the little boxes of papyrus fragments. Only a few broken rolls of papyrus were at all impressive; they looked like whitish cigars bound with string, embedded in bullae. Worms had inflicted fearful damage. One worm-eaten roll caught my eye. It was sealed with an inscribed bulla.

The seal was in Palaeo-Hebrew script and read: "[yešaʿ]yahū son of [San]ballat, governor of Samaria (fysc'jhw bn [sn'blt pht šmrn])."2 It was evident that the governor of Samaria had fixed his seal on the papyrus, and that he possessed the familiar family name of the governor of Samaria in the days of Nehemiah: Sanballat, properly Sinʿuballit, as the name is written also in the Elephantine Papyri.

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1 For earlier reports on the Samaria Papyri, see F. M. Cross, "The Discovery of the Samaria Papyri", BA 26 (1963), pp. 110-21; "Aspects of Samaritan and Jewish History in Late Persian and Hellenistic Times", HTR 59 (1966), pp. 201-11; "Papyri of the Fourth Century B.C. from Dāliyeh", in D. N. Freedman and Jonas C. Greenfield (ed.), New Directions in Biblical Archaeology (New York, 1971), pp. 45-69; P. W. and Nancy L. Lapp (ed.), Discoveries in the Wādī ed-Dāliyeh, AASOR 41 (1974), esp. "An Account of the Discovery" by P. Lapp (pp. 1-6); "The Cave Clearances", by Paul and Nancy Lapp (pp. 7-16); "The Papyri and Their Historical Significance", by F. M. Cross (pp. 17-29); "Coins", by F. M. Cross (pp. 57-9).

2 A photograph and drawing of the seal may be found in Discoveries in the Wādī ed-Dāliyeh, Pl. 61.
The late Paul Lapp who was with me at the time said that the look on my face, and the trembling of my hands as I held the piece, doubled the price of the papyri.

The prize piece was a roll with seven seals. We assumed it was a complete papyrus, the only such papyrus in the find.\(^3\) It would be numbered later Samaria Papyrus No. 1. When we slit the string of the seals, humidified the roll of papyrus to make it flexible, and began to unroll it, we were quite unprepared for what happened. The flattened roll was unwound six turns, and all we saw was blank papyrus. However, on the seventh turn there was revealed in bold black ink a line of writing in the Aramaic hand of the late Persian chancellery. When we reached the top line it read, "on 20 Adar, year 2, accession year of Darius the king in Samaria[ia...]"). The double date formula enabled us to fix the date of the papyrus precisely to March 19, 335 B.C.E.

The papyrus was not complete as we had thought. Indeed less than half was preserved, and many years were to pass before we had success in reconstructing its full text.

The papyrus proved to be a slave conveyance, that is a contract detailing the sale of a slave named Yehoḥanan son of Še’īlah (John the son of Silas). He was sold by a certain Hananiah to Yehonūr, the latter a wealthy slaveholder who appears often in the papyri, and no doubt lost his life in the cave. Yehoḥanan, who is called a slave without blemish, brought a price of thirty-five šeqels, rather above the average price for a young male slave, some thirty pieces of silver.

Today we can reconstruct virtually the full text of Papyri 1-9, all of them straightforward slave conveyances. Papyrus 10 is a so-called restricted slave conveyance; the seller has the right to pay back twice the sale price and redeem his slave. Papyrus 11 reports the details of litigation concerning a runaway slave. Several papyri contain deeds of the sale of property. Papyrus 16, on which the Sanballat seal was affixed, records the sale of a vineyard; Papyrus 17 records the payment of a large sum of money to redeem a pledge. Most of the papyri, however, are slave conveyances, deeds describing the sale of single slaves, male or female, or the sale of slave families (the term nišē, an Akkadian loanword, is used), or several families or groups of slaves.

The persons who died in the cave were patricians from Samaria. Whenever the place of execution of the papyri is preserved, it is recorded that the contract was drawn up "in Samaria the acropolis birtā? (or city

\(^3\) See the preliminary publication of this papyrus, "Samaria Papyrus 1: An Aramaic Slave Conveyance of 335 B.C.E. Found in the Wāḍi ed-Dāliyeh", Eretz-Israel 18 (1985), pp. 1*-17* [the Avigad Volume], esp. Pl. II, 1 (the papyrus) and 2 (the rolled papyrus with its seals).