In six Greek papyri recovered from Nahal Hever on the western shore of the Dead Sea the word “blacks” appears as an otherwise unknown term of coinage. Various monetary sums are expressed as so many “blacks,” e.g., “one black and thirty lepta” or “710 blacks of silver.” The term for this black money is variously given in masculine, feminine, and neuter (μέλανες, μελαίνας, μέλαν έν). The documents, four of which make up part of the Babatha archives, are dated between 110 and 130 CE.¹

Naphtali Lewis, who edited the Babatha documents, suggested that the Greek term represented a variant or corruption of “mina” (μινᾶ). Glen Bowersock, however, argued that Lewis’s interpretation was based on a misunderstanding of the associated term λεπτά, which means coins of very low value, presumably from the low degree of fineness (λεπτός “thin”).² Bowersock conjectured that the small amount of silver in these coins would have allowed for a process of oxidation to have turned the coins black. He noted that in the last years of the

¹ The documents were published by: Naphtali Lewis in Judean Desert Studies: The Documents from the Bar Kokhba Period in the Cave of Letters, Greek Papyri (eds Yigael Yadin and Jonas C. Greenfield; Aramaic and Nabataean Signatures and Subscriptions; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, Hebrew University of Jerusalem 1989), 37, 38, 66, 95, 98 (P. Yadin 5, 16, 21 and 22); idem, “A Jewish Landowner from the Province of Arabia,” Scripta Classica Israelica 8–9 (1985/88) 134–37 (P. XHev/Se Gr. 7); and Hannah M. Cotton, “Rent or Tax Receipt from Mahoza,” ZPE 100 (1994) 547–57 (P. XHev/Se Gr. 5). For the location of the finds, see Hannah Cotton in Wolfram Weiser and Hannah M. Cotton, “Gebt dem Kaiser, was des Kaisers ist...”: Die Geldwährungen der Griechen, Juden, Nabatäer und Römer im syrisch-nabatäischen Raum unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Kurses von Sela/Melaina und Lepton nach der Annexion des Königreiches der Nabatäer durch Rom,” ZPE 114 (1996) 237, n. 2.

Nabataean kingdom, where the documents were written, the silver content of the coins was of a sufficiently low amount. These would have been the “blacks” spoken of in the documents. Ya’akov Meshorer took issue with Bowersock’s explanation, arguing that the papyrus documents indicate that the “blacks” were not of low value, and anyway low quality silver would not turn. His conclusion is precisely opposite to Bowersock: the “blacks” are Roman denarii of high quality silver.³ Meshorer’s arguments, in turn, were examined by N. Lewis, who concluded that “any attempt to identify the blacks of P. Yadin as any kind of Roman denarii, old or new, full-weight or devalued, is doomed to be an exercise in futility,” and he maintained a Semitic origin for the term.⁴ Similarly, Martin Goodman thinks that “blacks” refer to a pre-Roman coinage system.⁵ Finally, in a joint article by Hannah Cotton and Wolfram Weiser, Cotton proved that the term as used in the documents must refer to pre-Roman Nabataean currency, and Weiser showed that Nabataean silver sel‘īm (the “blacks”) are silver as indicated in P. Yadin 5a, lines 7, 13–14; 5b, lines 4, 7) from 17/18 to 106 CE were made of a silver alloy with a high mixture (at least 50%) of base metals, especially copper, which would have quickly turned the coins black.⁶ Thus, their conclusion that the “blacks” was a Roman term of disparagement for Nabataean sel‘īm, which were nonetheless officially accepted by the Roman government after Nabataea became a Roman province, Provincia Arabia, in 106 CE.

This conclusion, recalling Bowersock’s original assertion, has much in its favor. Firstly, “black” is commonly found, although from a considerably later period, as an adjective for coins of low silver alloy. Weiser refers to Schwarze Pfennige mentioned from the 14th to the 17th centuries in various parts of Germany, and Denier Noir is found as early as the 12th century.⁷ Secondly, it is possible that, in a reverse


