A Second Look at the “Alexander Son of Simon” Ossuary: Did It Hold Father and Son?

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We all know that things don’t always turn out to be “as advertised.” Once in a while, though, they can turn out to be even better! This may prove to be the case with an intriguing ossuary (a stone bone box) highlighted in the article I wrote for Biblical Archaeology Review called “Treasures in the Storeroom: The Family Tomb of Simon of Cyrene” (July/August 2003). This late Second Temple period burial chest bears the inscription “Alexander (son) of Simon,” an exact parallel to the individuals named in the New Testament, in Mark 15:21: Simon of Cyrene, the man who carried Jesus’ cross, and his son Alexander. In the BAR article, I suggested that the person whose remains were in the ossuary was very likely the son of the Biblical Simon. From further study of the ossuary, I now believe that it may well have held not only the remains of Alexander, but also those of the Biblical figure himself—Simon of Cyrene.

Besides suggesting some new perspectives on this object, there is a particularly timely reason for a follow-up article right now. Beginning in September 2006, millions of North Americans will have the opportunity to view the ossuary firsthand as it makes the rounds in a major traveling exhibition, “From Abraham to Jesus,” featuring artifacts from the collections of Hebrew University’s Institute of Archaeology in Jerusalem. From its unveiling in Atlanta, the exhibition is slated to run for more than two years, until December 2008 (complete information, including a list of venues and dates, can be found at: http://www.fromabrahamtojesus.com/).

We are taking a new look at the ossuary for another, very practical reason: Regrettably, the 2003 BAR article included a number of mix-ups in the graphics and related captions, particularly regarding the “front” vs. “back” of the ossuary, and the location and media of the various inscriptions.

There is a third good reason for revisiting this artifact. A critical look at the original 1962 publication of the ossuary reveals a somewhat misleading rendering, perhaps inadvertent, of one of the inscriptions. Its proper understanding, however, holds the possibility for new insights into how this object evolved—and what it means.

Finally, over the past months I have had two opportunities to view the ossuary in person, in the company of experts (I myself am no more than an educated layman) in the workrooms of Hebrew University’s Institute of Archaeology. In view of its potential importance, it is an object that has received relatively little exposure over the years. Though I had seen photographs, of course, encountering this mute stone box up close allowed certain subtleties to come into focus for the first time, details such as the relative depth of incised lines and the positioning of the words on the box.

We should begin by recapping the main points of my BAR article.
The ossuary was discovered in 1941 by archaeologists Eliezer L. Sukenik and Nahman Avigad of Jerusalem’s Hebrew University and came to light through a systematic survey of tombs in the Kidron Valley, south of Jerusalem’s Old City and the Arab village of Silwan. This ossuary and ten others were found as an intact assemblage in a tomb chamber that had survived the centuries untouched by tomb robbers, with its blocking stone still in place. In short, there is absolutely no question about this object’s provenance and authenticity.

From the time of this discovery, which of course included all the normal scientific documentation of the chamber and its contents, 21 years passed before the tomb was professionally published by Avigad in the *Israel Exploration Journal (IEJ)* in 1962. 1 It is from this publication that the basic data for my articles have been taken, including the plan of the tomb and the drawings of the inscriptions.

The burial cave was a single, rock-hewn chamber without niches of any sort, only benches along three walls, a tomb style characteristic of the First Temple period (tenth to early sixth century B.C.E.). However, all the pottery finds inside, including a distinctive type of Herodian oil lamp, pointed conclusively to the time of the tomb’s last use: the first century C.E., before the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in the year 70.

Arranged together on one side of the tomb were 10 of the 11 ossuaries,, carved stone chests used for secondary burials, that is, the re-interment of bones that had been gathered after the bodies had decomposed. Though none of the boxes was decorated, nine of them bore an inscription of some kind (and some more than one) identifying the remains inside.

On the ossuaries (and lids) were 15 inscriptions containing 12 different personal names. The inscriptions were all written in Greek letters except for one in Hebrew and one bi-lingual (the Greek–Hebrew “Alexander” lid inscription of the chest under consideration here). Four of the names were Jewish-style names: Sara, Sabatis, Jacob and Simon, and, except for Simon, they were names little used in Palestine but common in the Diaspora. The eight Greek–style names 2 were likewise mostly unknown among Greco–Jewish inscriptions in Palestine but were quite common in the Diaspora—and some were especially common in Cyrenaica. This analysis of the names, from Avigad’s 1962 report 3 has been corroborated by more recent scholarship. 4

Taken together, the names themselves and certain other stylistic features of the inscriptions (for example, an L-shaped symbol to indicate the age of the deceased) all point to a Jewish family with Diaspora origins, most likely Cyrenaica, the eastern part of modern-day Libya.

Cyrenaica, whose chief city was Cyrene, was a Roman province that had a thriving Jewish community going back to about 300 B.C.E. Besides the Simon of Cyrene of the Gospel accounts, there is other New Testament evidence for the presence of Jews of Cyrenian origin in the eastern Levant in first century C.E. They are mentioned in connection with the Pentecost event (Acts 2:5,10), the story of the proto-martyr Stephen (Acts 6:9), and the composition of the early Christian communities of both Jerusalem (Acts 11:19–20) and Antioch (Acts 13:1).

The highly probable Cyrenian connection for the tomb leads us irresistibly to two ossuaries bearing the name Simon, since three of the Gospels tell us of a Simon of Cyrene who was forced by the Romans to carry the cross of Jesus to Golgotha (Matthew 27:32; Mark 15:21; Luke 23:26).

One of the Simon ossuaries reads “Sara (daughter) of Simon, of Ptolemais.” We know of three ancient cities with the name Ptolemais: one in Palestine (modern Akko), one in Egypt (where
there is no evidence of a Jewish community at that time and one in the region of Cyrenaica, west of the city of Cyrene. Based on the other evidence from the tomb, the latter is the best guess for this Sara’s origins. The name Sara, as noted, was seldom used in Palestine at the time but was especially common in Cyrenaica.

The other Simon ossuary is inscribed on each of the long sides and also on the lid. Of these inscriptions, one is straightforward and requires no interpretation. It reads: “Alexander (son) of Simon.” Returning to the account in the Gospel of Mark of Jesus’ crucifixion at the hands of the Romans, we read: “They compelled a passerby, who was coming in from the country, to carry his cross; it was Simon of Cyrene, the father of Alexander and Rufus.” Thus, Mark 15:21 provides an exact, contemporary parallel to the two names from the ossuary, in the same father–son relationship.

Finally, my BAR article explored the significance of these two linked names, Simon and Alexander, within the broader context of Jewish names in antiquity. Avigad noted in 1962 that Simon was the most popular name among Jews in the Hellenistic period (332–37 B.C.E.) and by far the most common of all names appearing on Jewish ossuaries. This has been echoed more recently by another Israeli scholar, Dr. Tal Ilan of Jerusalem’s Hebrew University, an expert on ancient Jewish names. In a directory Dr. Ilan compiled of Jewish names used in Palestine in classical antiquity, Simon appears 257 times in inscriptions and textual sources.

In the same directory, however, Alexander, documented only 31 times, is shown to be not a very common name at the time. Given this relative scarcity of Alexander as a Jewish name, how does Dr. Ilan assess the possibility that this ossuary might refer to the very individuals known to us from the New Testament? Based on the context of the find, the inscriptions on the chests, and her own statistical analysis of the names, she says it is “very likely.”

To explore this ossuary in more detail, we should first establish the front and back of the chest, as designated by its discoverers. Then we will look at the inscriptions found in each place.

The designation of one side of an ossuary as the “front” and the other as the “back” is sometimes purely arbitrary, depending on its appearance and the circumstances of its acquisition. In this particular case, however, with the object found in situ, the side of the chest called by the archaeologists the “front” is in fact the side that was found facing outward—away from the wall of the tomb. This is clear from a simple comparison of the chest itself, with its inscriptions, to the published plan of the tomb, since the plan shows not only the exact position in which each ossuary was found but also from which end the lids slide on and off the boxes. (In this sliding–type closure, the lid rests on “rails,” L-shaped grooves cut into the inside top edges of the long sides, and slides on/off the box from only one end.) On our ossuary, designated as number 9 in the plan below, the lid slides out to the right as you face the “front” of the box. The nature of the “front” inscription is a point of potential significance to which we will return later.
note configuration of lid closure on ossuary #9, plan: Israel
Exploration Journal

note matching closure, tell-tale chip in bottom edge, and lack of incised letters on the "front", photo: Tom Powers

This "front" of the chest has the names Alexander and Simon
written in green chalk, or some similar medium, on two lines. None of this inscription is incised. Though some parts are just discernible—it was undoubtedly much clearer in 1941—today it is nearly invisible to the naked eye or to standard photography.

The “back” of the ossuary—the long side found turned toward the wall of the tomb—bears three lines of crudely incised characters: The first line reads SIMONALE. Significantly, the SIMON part is centered horizontally at the top of the chest and is carved in deeper lines than the rest of the inscription, evident even in photographs, clues that the single name Simon, standing alone, was likely the original inscription on this side. Avigad’s report reveals only that the three-line inscription is “partly in very thin lines” 9 (without specifying which part), nor does it mention or illustrate the position of SIMON in the very center of the chest.

After the deeply-incipised SIMON, the following three characters, ALE, are usually regarded, and rightly so, as a false start of Alexander. Here, the amateur engraver, besides embarking on an ungrammatical construction, found himself running out of room and so started over below. The following two lines continue in the same very shallow incisions (mostly invisible in photographs) and form a unit, a proper inscription whose meaning is perfectly clear: “Alexander (son) of Simon” (see photo and drawing below).

![Photo: Hebrew University Institute of Archaeology](image)

Before proceeding further, a brief foray into Greek grammatical forms will bring the inscriptions, both “front” and “back,” into sharper focus. In particular, it is important for us to identify—and understand the meaning of—the Greek nominative and genitive forms of Simon and Alexander, because both forms of the two names appear on the ossuary.

The nominative form of a name means, in essence, that it is just a name. The nominative forms we are dealing with here (in English transliteration) are Simon and Alexandros.

The genitive form of a name, however, indicates possession (“of”) or, when another name is present, a line of descent, that is, a parent–child relationship. In the latter case, the specific relationship—“son” or “daughter”—is implied by the ending and thus in English translation often appears in parentheses.
The genitive forms of the two names are Simonos and Alexandrou. The lid inscription, for example (see drawing below), dealt with in the BAR article and not directly relevant here, is devoted entirely to Alexander, with no mention of Simon. It features the genitive Alexandrou, meaning that it is the ossuary and the remains "of Alexander."

The one unequivocal father–son linkage between the two names on the ossuary, as mentioned above, is the shallowly incised ALEXANDROS/ SIMONOS on the back, where Simon is in the genitive, hence: "Alexander (son) of Simon."

With that background, a problem becomes evident in the presentation of one inscription in Avigad’s 1962 IEJ publication, a rendering that, as published, is at least potentially misleading. The two–line chalk inscription on the front of the chest, ALEXANDROS/ SIMON, is translated in that report as "Alexander (son of) Simon." In all fairness, "of" is included within the parentheses—showing that the word is supplied and not actually indicated by the inscription—and the accompanying text does explain: "The patronymic ["Simon"] is in the nominative." A patronymic would function as a surname attached to "Alexander" in order to indicate his ancestry.

There is a problem, though. Apart from the wider context of the ossuary, specifically the inscription on the other side, there is no real justification for treating "Simon" as a patronymic here at all. Indeed, calling it a patronymic assumes that the ancient writer—probably belonging to a family with origins in the Greek–speaking Diaspora—had almost no knowledge of basic Greek grammar! Taking this particular inscription at face value, Simon and Alexander—both in the nominative form—are in fact just names.

If all this seems like splitting hairs, it’s not. If Simon is not a patronymic here—and there’s no good reason for treating it as such—then what does the construction Alexander/Simon mean?

Could Simon be a second name for Alexander? Probably not, since there is nothing else on the chest suggesting this and, as Dr. Ilan notes, "second names were not very common among Palestinian Jews at the time." 11

A much more compelling explanation is the simplest and obvious one: that the two names, each written on a separate line, represent two individuals. That is, it is a list of the interred, in which case the ossuary contained the remains of both men! Indeed, such multiple interments in a single ossuary are well–documented from this period.

This very suggestion, in fact, was raised by the Catholic scholar J.T. Milik in his brief treatment of this ossuary in the 1950s. 12 Avigad, however, in his publication several years later, dismissed the idea. Without elaborating, he wrote: "Milik's statement that the ossuary contains the bones of both Alexander and his father Simon cannot be inferred from the inscriptions, which testify to only one buried person—Alexander." 13

However, I believe that such a double interment can be inferred, from two significant pieces of evidence we have just laid out. We have already noted how, on the "back" of the ossuary, the five characters of the name SIMON are incised at the top and center of
the chest, cut in deeper lines than all the rest of the inscription, followed by a false start in a different hand. Now we see, on the "front" of the chest, that the two names are listed together, just as names.

In speculating about exactly whose remains once lay inside this ossuary, one might reasonably wonder: What, after all, happened to the bones? Reading between the lines of Avigad’s 1962 IEJ article—an intact tomb, bones from a final burial found on the benches and ossuaries neatly arranged with lids in place—the clear implication is that the bones were there and were recovered. Then again, if Avigad had found and analyzed the bones, it seems he would have countered Milik’s suggestion of a dual interment more directly by stating: “The chest contained the remains of only one individual” (or some such), instead of “[it] cannot be inferred from the inscriptions.”

In any event, Avigad’s report is absolutely silent regarding any bones found in the ossuaries. Maybe it simply reflects the extreme sensitivities surrounding human remains that emerge from archaeological work in Israel (despite the fact that they are always respectfully re-interred in accordance with Jewish law). But, assuming they were found, might these bones have been subjected to some analysis, at least as to how many individuals were represented? We don’t know. Unless the archaeologists’ original notes or other unpublished materials surface someday, which is highly unlikely, anything the bones might have told us lies forever in the realm of mystery.

A final piece of the puzzle, one not explored in the BAR article, is the issue of how the ossuary was situated in the tomb, as it was found, apparently undisturbed. This ossuary, number 9, was found in a back corner, with other similar chests arranged in front and even stacked on top of each other (see plan). Significantly, it was the two-line chalk inscription, Alexander/ Simon, that was found on the “front” of the chest, facing outward—away from the wall.

Knowing this—the context, position and orientation of the ossuary, as found in the tomb—helps us construct a scenario for the various successive inscriptions. Indeed, I believe they reflect three separate stages in the life of the ossuary, as it was reused, repositioned and re-inscribed over time.

First, the bones of man named Simon were interred, and his single name—SIMON—was deeply incised at the center and top of the “back” of the chest. This was stage one.

In stage two, the remains of Alexander, Simon’s son, were added to the ossuary. Now, to the existing name SIMON the false start ALE was appended, in shallower and less distinct letters. Starting over on a new line, the same amateur engraver, using the same shallow lines, added the proper “Alexander (son) of Simon.” (At the same time, the existing, previously blank lid would have received its bi-lingual inscription, seemingly by a more trained hand.)

Finally, the way the ossuaries were found—neatly arranged and stacked up at one end of the chamber—suggests that this family tomb was carefully reorganized from time to time. One such juncture, perhaps shortly before the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 C.E., represents stage three in the accumulation of the chest’s multiple inscriptions: Ossuary 9, situated in the back corner with its already-inscribed side turned toward the wall, now received the final inscription, written in green chalk on the exposed, blank, “front” side. I think it served as a simple, re-cap identification of the two men whose remains lay inside: “Alexander/Simon.”

The BAR article raised—but did not answer—an intriguing question: In this first-century Jerusalem tomb with Cyrenian connections, where two children of a man named Simon were
buried and memorialized with inscriptions, why did we not find the ossuary of Simon himself? Now, within the reasonable bounds of the available evidence, we may have solved that mystery: The remains of Simon and his son Alexander shared a single ossuary.

And does the ossuary bear the names of the Simon of Cyrene and his son Alexander, the ones mentioned in the New Testament in the context of Jesus’ death—march to Golgotha? We cannot say for sure, of course, but one expert—an Israeli scholar with no discernible motive for promoting such a connection—says it is “very likely.”

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Notes:

To return to where you were in the text after reading a note, press the “back” button in your browser.


2 The eight Greek–style names found on the ossuaries: Arristobola, Philiskos, Damon, Thaliarchos, Dositheus, Mnasos, Horea, and Alexander.

3 Avigad, p. 12.

4 Dr. Tal Ilan, private communication: “[T]he name Sarah is almost non–existent in Jewish material from Palestine at the time of the ossuaries … and was very popular in Cyrene … I also believe the name Thaliarchus is much attested in Cyrene … The name Jacob is indeed much more often attested in the Diaspora than in Palestine.” See also Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity, Part 1: Palestine 330 B.C.E.–200 C.E.* (Mohr Siebeck, 2002).

5 L. Rahmani, *A Catalogue of Jewish Ossuaries in the Collections of the State of Israel*, (IAA/Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1994), p. 102. The Alexander-Simon ossuary itself does not appear in this compendium since it belongs to the collections of Hebrew University; all the other ossuaries from the tomb are in the hands of the IAA.

6 Avigad, p. 9.

7 Ilan, *Lexicon*.

8 Ilan, private communication.

9 Avigad, p. 9.

10 Avigad, p. 9.

11 Ilan, *Lexicon*, p. 47.

13 Avigad, p. 12.