



# The Latin Inscription of Rabbi Iacob from Mérida (MAN, n° inv. 71.243): Dating and Contextualization

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Abstract

In this poster I study the Latin inscription of Rabbi Iacob from Mérida (*Lusitania*, Spain), establishing with historical and philological arguments its dating in the 8<sup>th</sup> century, after the Arab invasion. This would confirm the survival of rabbis who kept a leading role in the religious life of Jewish or the existence of former converted Jewish communities that were able to clandestinely maintain their ancestral beliefs and still preserved them. In fact, in that inscription there was mention of such a *rebbe Iacob*, who was in turn the son of the *rebbe Senior*. It is possible that both were «Doctors of the Law». It is most likely that they preferentially chose to practice their teachings orally due to the ban on the production and reading of all kinds of Jewish written works in the Visigothic kingdom.

The Latin inscription

The inscription of a Jew named Jacob, which was found in Mérida, Spain (MAN 71.243) has survived to this day in two fragments. The first one (the left part) was already known to E. Hübner, who had the chance to see it for the first time in the late 19th century, in the house of Juan Fernández, a scholar and antiques dealer from Mérida, although he was unable to determine the exact origins of the piece or the circumstances in which it was discovered. The second one (the right part of the inscription) was discovered in 1956 during the systematic digs carried out by A. Marcos Pous in the Medieval necropolis located on the Cerro de San Albín, along with a skeleton without any grave goods, surrounded by fragments of gemstones with Visigothic-style decorations. The molded marble capital in the shape of an inverted truncated pyramid (47 cm. wide, 10 cm. high) on which the inscription was engraved still retains original late-Visigothic decorations (nearly tangent wheels or rosettes with curved radii engraved on two planes). Here is the reading and translation published by David Noy in *JWE*:

*sit nomeñ [D(omi)ni ben]edectum qui bñvivi{}cat et moř[tiv]i{}cat. Beniat pax et | pauset in sepulçro tuo. ego Jacob filiüs de rebbi Señiori pauso animo | suporans in sorte iustorum abligalltus in ligatorium vite. angeli palcis, aperiti porta[s], dicitu illi: || ingrede cum pace. yixi annos LXIII repletus sapientiam | preducens artem qrtivicum. || [e]go Simeon filius de rebbi Ia[co]b edivicabi do(mum). | [...] ñi[s]{}şam (?) pař*



“May the name of the Lord be blessed, who makes life and makes death. May peace come and stay in your tomb. I, Jacob, son of Rabbi Senior, am at an end in my soul, sleeping in the lot of the just, bound in the bond of life. Angels of peace, open the gates, say to him: ‘enter with peace’. I lived 63 years, full of wisdom, foremost in the craft of craftsmen [medicine?]. I, Simon son of Rabbi Jacob, built the house .... sent (?) peace”.

According to the paleographic study carried out by J. M.<sup>a</sup> de Navascués, the letters A, B, D, Q and U display similar features to those in Visigothic inscriptions (many of which are from Mérida itself), although some of them survived into the Mozarabic period (as in B, Q or U); the strokes of the letter E are related to Classical-period epigraphic forms, and the letters C and T seem to correspond to a “Mozarabic” style. In what concerns lexicography, Dr. J. M.<sup>a</sup> de Navascués pointed out that the term *suporans* (that is to say, *soporans*), equivalent to *dormitans*, implied an obvious reference to the eternal rest of Jacob's soul according to a series of words and phrases that were used in the like manner in a number of epitaphs ranging from the 10th to 14th centuries, although he also pointed out that the Hebrew text of the trilingual Jewish inscription from Tortosa, which is “undoubtedly Visigothic”, contained similar phrases that confirmed that they were commonly used in epigraphs from earlier periods. Moreover, as D. Noy pointed out, it would seem that the first two lines in the epigraph from Mérida contain a reference to *I Sam.* 2:6 (“The Lord kills and makes alive; he brings down to the grave and brings up”) and *Deut.* 32: 39 (“I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal”). In fact, the phrase *vivificante deo* also appears in other Latin inscriptions from Late Antiquity. The expression *abligatus in ligatorium vite* would therefore be equivalent to the clichéd Jewish phrase drawn from *I Sam.* 25:29 (“The soul of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of life with the Lord thy God”). In *Hispania*, it appears implicitly in the abovementioned 6th-century Jewish inscription from Tortosa (*JWE*, 1, n° 183 = *CII*, n° 661). On the other hand, the phrase used to express the wish for rest alongside the righteous (*in sorte iustorum*), and which is related to *Prov.* 10:7, was very common in Jewish inscriptions, as was the valediction “peace upon Israel”, as J. M.<sup>a</sup> de Navascués himself acknowledged when he accepted the evidence put forward to this end by C. Roth, according to whom “there can be no doubt that the word *Pax*, in this position, corresponds to the valediction פלפ (Peace: an abbreviation of ‘Peace upon [the people of] Israel’

rather than an apostrophe to the deceased) almost invariable in contemporary Hebrew epitaphs of the early centuries [...]”. The same could be said about the common presence of the expression *domus aeterna* in the ancient Jewish epigraphic tradition, which appears in an abbreviated form in the second-to-last line in the inscription and which is undoubtedly drawn from *Eccl.* 12:5. C. Roth drew special attention to the similarities between the funerary expressions used in the Latin inscription from Mérida and the ones in Hebrew featured on the tombstone of Leah, daughter of Iefeh-Mazzal (*Eutychos?*), which was found in Brindisi and which has been reliably dated to the year 832. Indeed, the latter inscription displays expressions such as “May peace come and rest on her tomb” and “Guardians of the treasures of the Garden of Eden, open for her the gates of the Garden of Eden”. David Noy pointed out that similar expressions are not only found on other Hebrew epigraphs from southern Italy, but also in a number of Spanish Hebrew epitaphs from the 10th century onwards. Contrary to the intentions that drove C. Roth to draw this epigraphic parallel, J. M.<sup>a</sup> de Navascués and a few other later scholars deemed that this was irrefutable evidence of the fact that the inscription from Mérida belonged to the same period as Leah's tombstone. Nevertheless, the fact that both inscriptions belonged to a common tradition, as revealed by a number of highly significant features, was precisely what had led the British scholar to state that the epigraph from Mérida belonged to the Visigothic era and not to a later time period. These features were based on the use of Latin, on the presence of unambiguously Palestinian traits in the funerary hymn reflected on Jacob's tombstone that do not appear in the Sephardic rite and on the origin of the word “rabbi”. In what concerns this last aspect, C. Roth argued that the term *rabbi*, which meant “master of the Jews”, appeared profusely in Jewish epigraphy, both in Palestine and southern Italy. In fact, he states that the form *rebbe* (quoted twice in the inscription from Mérida) clearly dates from a period earlier than the establishment of the Sephardic tradition in the Iberian Peninsula, which is generally deemed to have begun from the 8th century onwards. According to the study carried out by S. J. D. Cohen, the term *rabbi* is usually attested in the late-Roman West under the form *rebbe* (genitive *rebbitis*; plural nominative *rebbites*). This title was applied within the scope of synagogues and it did not exactly correspond to the Talmudic concept of rabbi but, rather, to an abstract and purely honorific designation intended to extol certain outstanding figures in the community for their wisdom and knowledge of Scripture. In this regard, we should also keep in mind that the epitaph from Mérida precisely insists on the wisdom of Jacob (*repletus sapientiam*). That said, insufficient consideration has been given to the argument built around the Latin used in the inscription. It is true that C. Roth considered this fact as proof that the epigraph from Mérida could not be later than the Arab conquest, but he failed to provide the necessary reasons for which it was extremely unlikely to find a Jewish inscription in the Iberian Peninsula that was allegedly written in Latin in the 9th or 10th centuries. There can be no doubt that Spanish Jewish communities flourished in al-Andalus. In fact, by the 10th century, Hebrew literature underwent a veritable renaissance. In this context, if Jacob's inscription, from Mérida,

belonged to the Mozarabic (or, better still, Andalusi) period, it would hardly have been surprising for it to have been written in Hebrew. Neither would it have been surprising for it to have been written in Judeo-Arabic, that is, in the Arabic spoken or written by Jews at the time since, as far as we know, the Hebrews living in al-Andalus had already undergone an extensive process of “arabization” by the 9th-10th centuries. On the other hand, we know that the language commonly used by Visigothic Jews was Latin and that, in spite of the gradual eradication of their literary legacy, Rabbinic teachings continued to be carried out orally in this language in the Visigothic kingdom. We also know that, throughout the 8th century, Jews still maintained a significant presence around a number of relevant cities in Spain, such as Saragossa.

Conclusion

The use of Latin and many of the *formulae*, the lexicon and the paleography in the inscription of Jacob, from Mérida, seem to point to the latter Visigothic period. Nevertheless, a number of other traits, especially paleographic ones, suggest a date later than the Arab invasion. Despite the fact that the epitaph was not written in Hebrew, it was engraved by someone who, according to D. Noy, was not only perfectly aware of the funerary formulas of the Hebrew tradition, but was also clearly fluent in Latin. We should keep in mind that the medium of the inscription is a recycled architectural element from a Visigothic building that was presumably demolished during the fateful sack of Mérida, on June 30, 713. I deem that both rabbi *Iacob* and, of course, his father, the rabbi *Senior*, were rabbis, or Visigothic “masters of the Law” who preferentially chose to practice their teachings orally, faced with the ban on the production and reading of all kinds of Jewish written works in the Visigothic kingdom. Thanks to this inscription, we are aware of the names of two rabbis who, having survived the last and fiercest anti-Jewish repression of the Visigothic kingdom, continued to direct the religious lives of Jews or of those formerly converted Spanish Jews who had been able to maintain their ancestral beliefs clandestinely, and who still preserved them by the first quarter of the 8th century.

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