From the Seal of a Seer to an Inscribed Game Board:
A Catalogue of Eleven Early Alphabetic Inscriptions
Recently Discovered in Egypt and Palestine

By Gordon J. Hamilton   hamilt2@huron.uwo.ca
Huron University College
London, ON, Canada   February 2010

INTRODUCTION

The contours of studies of early alphabetic writing, ca. 1900-900 BCE, are changing in part due to an expanded corpus of inscriptions. Nine inscriptions have been discovered in the last twelve years by archaeologists at different locations in Egypt and Palestine. Two more inscribed artifacts found in whole or in part by professionals long ago have only been recognized as early alphabetic texts in the last three years. Let me survey these recently published inscriptions in a catalogue format that summarizes six aspects about each of them: the contexts in which they were found; their literary genres; linguistic readings of the more complete ones; estimates of when they were written; and their significance for early alphabetic and/or biblical studies. As the last item in that survey, I shall briefly review a brand new inscription that was found at Khirbet Qeiyafa, a site close to Jerusalem, whose meaning remains uncertain.[1]

I shall group these recent finds under the under the archaeological periods to which they are assigned: the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 1900-1550 BCE); the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1550-1200/1150 BCE); and early in the Iron Age (Iron I: ca. 1200/1150-1000 BCE; Iron IIA: ca. 1000-900 BCE).[2]

THREE NEW INSCRIPTIONS ASSIGNED TO THE MIDDLE BRONZE AGE

Three new early alphabetic inscriptions assigned to the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 1900-1550 BCE) come from two sites in Egypt, Wadi el-Ḥol and Deir Rifa.

---

[1] Not included in this paper is an inscription that was very recently discovered at Timna Park by "Stonewatch/Arad Academy e.V.," a German institute; the discovery of its two panels of writing enclosed in ovals was announced in August, 2009 (photo: http:www.stonewatch.de/Daten/Timna-1.jpg). I am indebted to Prof. Mark S. Smith of New York University for this reference and look forward to the initial publication of this possible early alphabetic text by Prof. S. J. Wimmer of the University of Munich.

[2] For a recent overview of these archaeological periods that employs non-technical language, see J. C. H. Laughlin, "Archaeology," *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* 1: 235-240. The absolute (calendrical) dates for the transitions between the Late Bronze and Iron Ages and from Iron I to Iron II subperiods are hotly debated among archaeologists. For a recent summary of the major issues, see A. Gilboa and I. Sharon, "Between the Carmel and the Sea: Tel Dor's Iron Age Reconsidered," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 71 (2008): 152. All dates employed in this paper are rough estimates.

Fig. 1a
Wadi el-Ḥol Text 1

Fig. 1b
Wadi el-Ḥol Text 2
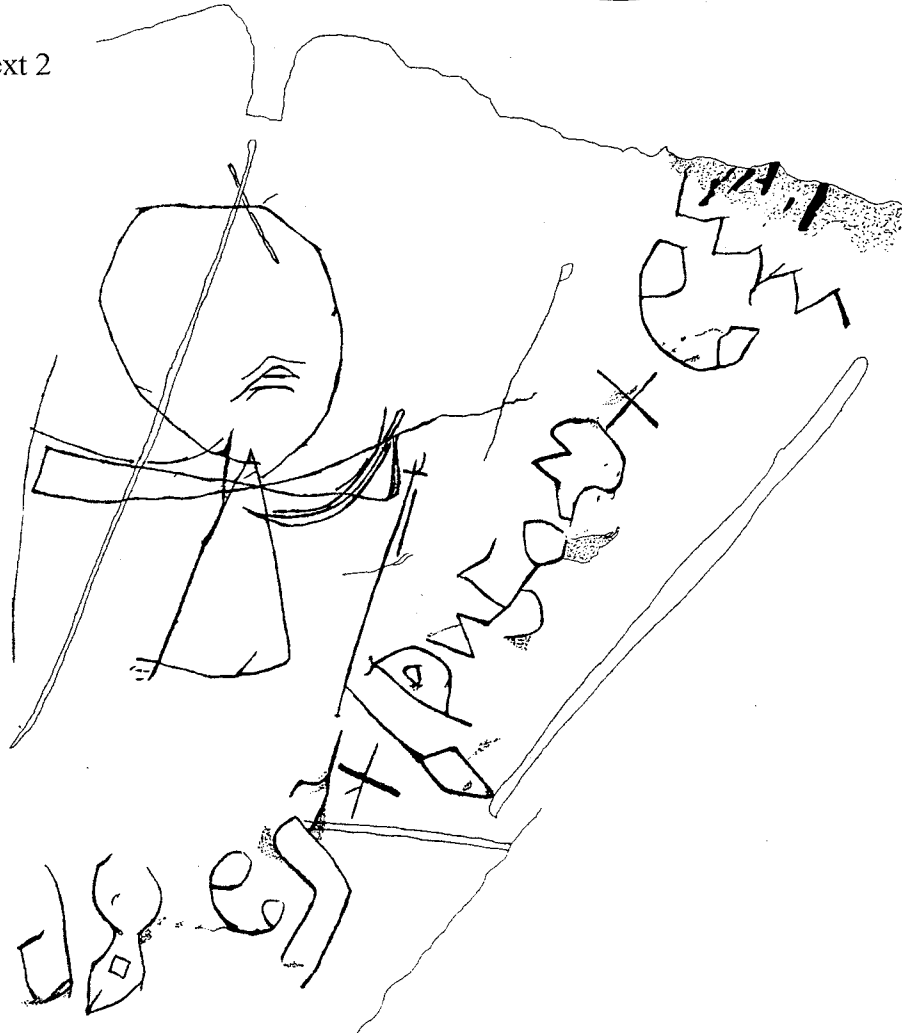
1. Publications: J. C. Darnell, "Die frühalphabetischen Inschriften im Wadi el-Ḥôl," in *Der Turmbau zu Babel, Ursprung und Vielfalt von Sprache und Schrift* Vol. 3A (W. Seipel, ed., Vienna and Milan: Kunsthistoriches Museum, 2003): 165-171; J. C. Darnell, F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp, M. J. Lundberg, P. K. McCarter and B. Zuckerman, *Two Early Alphabetic Inscriptions from the Wadi el-Hôl: New Evidence for the Origin of the Alphabet from the Western Desert of Egypt* (AASOR 59; Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2005).[3]

2. Context: The Egyptologists John C. and Deborah Darnell discovered two short but complete early alphabetic texts along with several hundred Egyptian ones inscribed on a rock wall at Wadi el-Ḥol in southern Egypt. The site comprised a stopover point on a road that ran to Thebes. Much traffic, especially of military troupes, took that road late in Egypt's Middle Kingdom and during its Second Intermediate Period, ca. 1800-1600 BCE, leaving remains of religious offerings and inscriptions recording their presence.

3. Genre: Whether written in the Egyptian or West Semitic languages, all of the inscriptions on that rock wall at Wadi el-Ḥol can be classified as graffiti, or, to use a less freighted term, "informal writings" (a common and very valuable genre of writing left by people of many different social classes in ancient Egypt).[4]

4. Linguistic Decipherment: The initial editors were hesitant in offering a translation of most of these two short texts: "Aside from *rb/ rab/* 'chief' at the beginning of the horizontal inscription and perhaps *ʾl/ ʾil(u)/* 'god, El' (either as [an] independent noun or as [a] theophoric element in a name) in the vertical inscription, no other sequence of signs is transparently decipherable; and thus our reluctance to speculate more specifically on possible decipherments at this time."[5]

5. Date: Middle Bronze Age, probably ca. 1850-1700 BCE based on three factors: (a) the locations of these two texts on some of the better surfaces of the rock wall at Wadi el-Ḥol, most of whose Egyptian inscriptions date to late in Egypt's Middle Kingdom or Second Intermediate Period; (b) the presence of West Semitic-speaking troupes of soldiers (and their families) at the site of Wadi el-Ḥol documented in two Egyptian

---

[3] For a more extensive bibliography on these texts, see G. J. Hamilton, *The Origins of the West Semitic Alphabet in Egyptian Scripts* (CBQMS 40; Washington: The Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2006): 324, 327-328, to which might add O. Goldwasser, "Canaanites Reading Hieroglyphs: Horus is Hathor? – The Invention of the Alphabet in Sinai," *Ägypten und Levante* 16 (2006): 132-133, 146-150 and *passim*.

[4] In particular, see the comprehensive survey by A. J. Peden, *The Graffiti of Pharaonic Egypt: Scope and Role of Informal Writings (c. 3100-332 B.C.)* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2001).

[5] Darnell et al., *Two Early Alphabetic Inscriptions*, 85-86. Note that they put aside two early attempts to read these texts linguistically: S. Wimmer and S. Wimmer-Dweikat, "The Alphabetic Texts from Wadi el-Ḥôl: A First Try," *Göttinger Miszellen* 180 (2001): 107-112; and E. L. Altschuler, "Gloss on One of the Wadi el-Ḥol Inscriptions," *Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 39 (2002): 201-204.

inscriptions from late in the Middle Kingdom; and (c) the relatively undeveloped state of the forms of the letters of these two early alphabetic texts compared to their Egyptian prototypes.[6]

6. Significance: These two early alphabetic texts provide strong evidence that West Semites borrowed both hieroglyphic and hieratic forms of a limited number of Egyptian signs to use as the letters of their consonantal alphabet.[7] In large part because of these discoveries, Egypt itself is now being taken seriously as the place that alphabetic writing may have begun.[8] In any case, consonantal alphabetic writing was initiated in the interchange between Egyptian and West Semitic cultures during the Middle Bronze Age.

Fig. 2
A Domed Seal-Amulet from Deir Rifa, Egypt

1. Publications: W. M. F. Petrie, *Gizeh and Rifeh* Vol. 1 (London: Egypt Exploration Fund, 1907): 13, pl. 23.1; G. J. Hamilton, "A Proposal to Read the Legend of a Seal-

---

[6] On the first two factors see especially Darnell et al., *Two Early Alphabetic Inscriptions*, 74, 86 and 87-90, 102-6. On the last, in particular see Hamilton, *Origins*, 295-296 (with references). For a rebuttal of the attempt by B. Sass to date these and all other very early alphabetic inscriptions to ca. 1300 BCE ("The Genesis of the Alphabet and Its Development in the Second Millennium B.C. Twenty Years Later," *de Kêmî à Birīt Nāri* 2 [2004/2005]: 150-152), see G. J. Hamilton, "A Proposal to Read the Legend of a Seal-Amulet from Deir Rifa, Egypt as an Early West Semitic Alphabetic Inscription," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 54 (2009): nn. 4, 5, 54, 57.

[7] That settles a long-standing debate among scholars from several different fields (for a summary of the wide spectrum of previous views, see Hamilton, *Origins*, 5-7). For a summary of which letters derive from hieroglyphic prototypes and which from hieratic models, see *Origins*, 270-271. Inscriptions with a mixture of hieroglyphic and hieratic forms are better attested in Egypt's Middle Kingdom than its New Kingdom periods (Darnell et al., *Two Early Alphabetic Inscriptions*, 91, n. 104; *Origins*, 274-275).

[8] See, among others, Sass, "The Genesis of the Alphabet," 152, n. 41 and Hamilton, *Origins*, 316-318.

Amulet from Deir Rifa, Egypt as an Early West Semitic Alphabetic Inscription," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 54 (2009): 51-79.

2. Context: Petrie found this domed seal-amulet of glazed steatite (soapstone) together with seventy-nine perforated beads in one of the several cemeteries at Deir Rifa over a century ago. During the Second Intermediate Period (ca. 1650-1550 BCE), that site was a border post between Hyksos-dominated northern Egypt and Theban-controlled southern Egypt that was probably staffed by Nubians. Petrie did not transmit the exact location of where this seal and beads were found.

3. Genre: A seal-amulet with a name and title. The object was probably used as a signet seal when the owner was alive and included among the funerary goods as an amulet after the owner's death. Seals with names and titles were common among Egyptians in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Dynasties (ca. 1985-after 1650 BCE); scarab-amulets were common in Canaanite burials starting ca. 1700 BCE. These Egyptian "name seals" were often made of glazed steatite and were differentiated from the decorative seals used by lesser officials.

4. Proposed Linguistic Decipherment: *l qn ḥz*, "*(Belonging) to Qn*, the Seer." Only the first letter is ambiguous paleographically. The personal name *Qn* probably means "Smith," a translation that might help one not to conflate this individual with cognates to his name in much later literature, biblical Cain (e.g., Gen 4:1, 17) or the Kenites (e.g., Num 24:21), Nabatean *qn* or Sabean *ʾqn*. Parallels to the title *ḥz*, "seer" are common in later Biblical Hebrew and epigraphic Aramaic sources. Especially during times of military conflict, consulting seers, diviners, and oracles was common throughout the ancient Near East.

5. Date: Based exclusively on the development of the handwriting of its legend, this seal-amulet can be assigned to the Middle Bronze Age. But because Petrie left no record of the context in which it was found, one must allow a very wide margin for error for any specific date within that period, perhaps ca. 1700 BCE (± 150 years).

6. Significance: This seal-amulet is historically significant in at least four different ways. First, it provides documentary evidence for the presence of a West Semite named *Qn*, "Cain" in Egypt late during that country's Middle Kingdom or Second Intermediate periods. Biblical scholars will likely be interested to a find an cognate to the biblical personal, place, and clan names from that early context. Secondly, the pattern of the legend on this seal-amulet would indicate that its owner, termed a seer, was likely considered among the social élite of his time. This may be of interest to those charting the social status of prophetic figures among West Semites.[9] Thirdly, the legend on this seal constitutes the fifth witness to early alphabetic writing from Egypt itself. Fourthly, this seal-amulet from Deir Rifa represents the oldest seal written with alphabetic letters

---

[9] Note that "seer" is presented as an older term for a prophet in 1 Sam 9:9 (although a different word for "seer," *rôʾeh* is used in that biblical text than in the legend on this seal, *ḥz*).

(displacing the unprovenanced Grossman Seal from ca. 1400 BCE) and may well have been employed to seal objects (e.g., wooden boxes, jars) or documents in that writing tradition made of organic material that no longer exist (e.g., papyrus). Lastly, and in a more speculative vein, this domed seal may have been buried with *Qn* and functioned as an amulet after his death (as with hundred of scarabs found in funerary contexts among West Semites in Egypt and Canaan).

ONE NEW INSCRIPTION ASSIGNED TO THE LATE BRONZE AGE

Fig. 3a
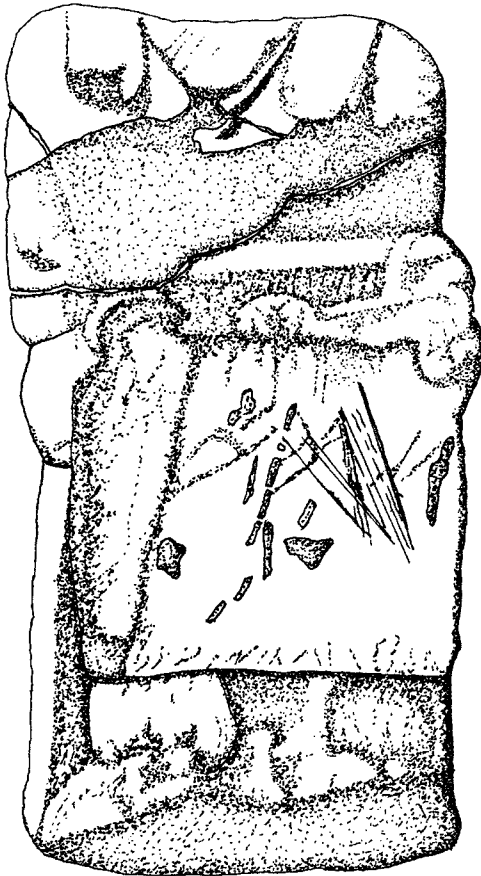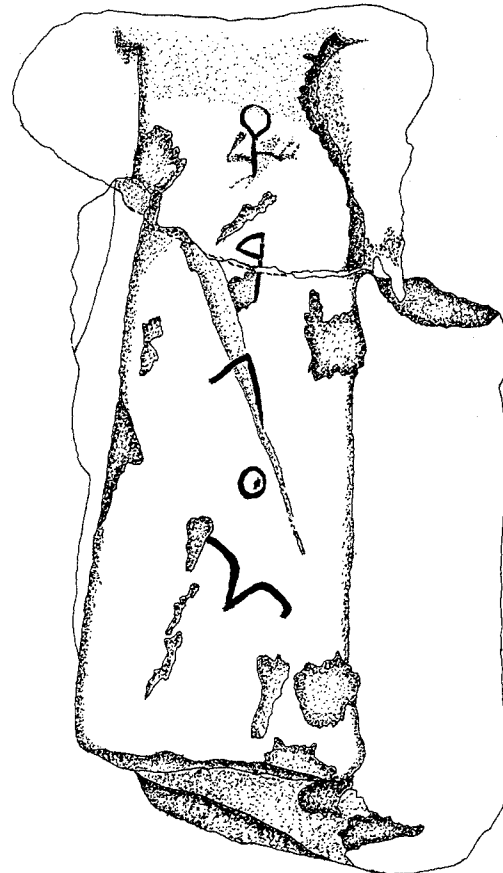Front of Gebel Tingar Statue

Fig. 3b
Back of Gebel Tingar Statue

1. Publications: M. G. Maspero, "Sur un fragment de statue portant une inscription non-égyptienne," *Annales du Service des antiquités de l'Égypte* 3 (1903): 96, pl. 6 (not numbered); H. Goedicke, "A *Bamah* of the First Cataract," in *Timelines: Studies in Honour of Manfred Bietak*, Vol. 2, ed. E. Czerny et al. (*Orientalia Lovaniensia* 109; Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2006): 119-127.

2. Context: The history of the discovery and publication of parts of this small statue of grey Nubian sandstone spans over a century. In 1889 the Egyptologist C. E. Wilbour and his party found the lower part of a statue of seated figure outside of a non-Egyptian sanctuary at Gebel Tingar, a site near Elephantine in the far south of ancient Egypt. In 1902 G. Maspero published that part of the statue, including an incomplete inscription

inscribed on its back pillar that he characterized as being non-Egyptian. In 1964, as part of an epigraphic survey of Gebel Tingar, H. Goedicke searched for and found four or five additional fragments belonging to the upper part. In 2006 Goedicke published a photographic reassembly of all those parts, including a now complete inscription of five letters (fig. 3b) that he identified as being West Semitic.[10] Because that reassembly was done with photographs and not with the three-dimensional parts of the actual statue, which is small,[11] Hamilton resized the published images to give a better alignment and checked the matches of the edges of the rock fragments proposed by Goedicke, in large part confirming that scholar's work but rejecting his placement of one fragment without writing as not having enough of a corresponding edge to be sure (see figs. 3a and 3b). Since the front face of the skirt of this seated male figure is scored with a series of mostly straight lines, some of which converge to resemble a w-shape (see fig. 3a), that surface of this statue may have been intentionally defaced at some point before its discovery.

3. Genre: A small monumental inscription with cursive, well-executed handwriting (largely following Goedicke).

4. Linguistic Decipherment: Goedicke offered no linguistic decipherment of this inscription, limiting himself to a transliteration of its letters as *wrgᶜn*. In a forthcoming publication, Hamilton will propose that the highest letter can be read either as a *w* or, with more difficulty, as a *h* and will offer two different understandings of this text depending on how one reads that consonant.

    If one reads the first letter as a *w*, then the inscription on this back pillar is most likely interpreted as a copula, "and," followed by a personal name, *Rgᶜn* (a name possibly meaning "(The god) ᶜAn stirred up").[12] But starting an inscription with "and" would seem odd unless that it was once part of a longer text that started on another part of this statue (a now effaced inscription on the front?).

    If one reads the first letter as a damaged *h*, one could read this inscription as a petition to the unnamed deity of the sacred space outside which this small statue was found: "Give me rest/peace" (cf. Jer 32:2, "I will give to him [Israel] rest" and Jer 50:34, "He will champion their cause—so as to give rest to the earth"). While that reading would render a text complete in itself, the identification of the first letter as a *h* is more difficult paleographically.

    Either of those interpretations supposes that a West Semitic leader commissioned this small statue and its inscription. That is a plausible supposition since Goedicke noted

---

[10] Goedicke ("A *Bamah*," 119-121) also provided photographs of two entirely new inscriptions at that site, one situated on the ceiling of the sanctuary and the other located on an entrance wall. The classification of those epigraphs is unknown.

[11] Maspero ("Sur un fragment de statue," 96) gave the maximum dimensions of the lower fragment known to him as 40 cm in height by 22 cm in width (approximately 15.75 inches by 8.25 inches). While Goedicke published no measurements for the fragments he placed, one can estimate from their sizes relative to the earlier measured ones that the statue originally stood approximately 55 cm tall (just under 22 inches).

[12] ᶜAn is a West Semitic deity known only from personal names from Mari, the Amarna correspondence, and several Ugaritic texts.

that a nearby Egyptian inscription documented the presence of a leading "Asiatic" named *Mni* who was in charge of the major operation of transporting a colossal statue of Amenophis III (ca. 1390-1352 BCE) from the quarries of Gebel Tingar to the Nile for shipment to Thebes.

5. Date: Late Bronze Age (ca. 1550-1200 BCE). Maspero and Goedicke noted that all of the Egyptian inscriptions at Gebel Tingar stem from the Eighteenth Dynasty (ca. 1550-1300 BCE), mostly from the reign of Amenophis III (approximately the first half of the fourteenth century BCE). Based on the dating of those Egyptian texts Goedicke would assign this early alphabetic inscription to that same period. Hamilton would favor lowering the date of this inscribed statue closer to 1200 BCE based on his analysis of the state of the handwriting of this text.

6. Significance: This statue certainly witnesses the presence of a scribe trained in alphabetic script at a location near the First Cataract in the very south of Egypt some time during the Late Bronze Age (whether that be in the fourteenth or thirteenth century BCE). It may also document the commissioning of a small monument by a West Semitic leader outside of the non-Egyptian sanctuary at Gebel Tingar (without endorsing the rather casual identification of the latter by Goedicke as a Canaanite *bamah*, "high place").

SEVEN NEW INSCRIPTIONS ASSIGNED TO THE EARLY IRON AGE

Archaeologists have discovered seven new inscriptions in early Iron Age contexts. While most of these are securely assigned to the beginning stages of Iron Age II (ca. 1000-900 BCE, using the high chronology), three of these texts could come from either near the end of the preceding Iron Age I (ca. 1200/1150-1000 BCE, again following the high chronology) or near the beginning of Iron Age II.

Fig. 4a
The inscription inside the bronze bowl from Kefar Veradim viewed from above (drawing by H. Tahan, IAA), courtesy of Y. Alexandre
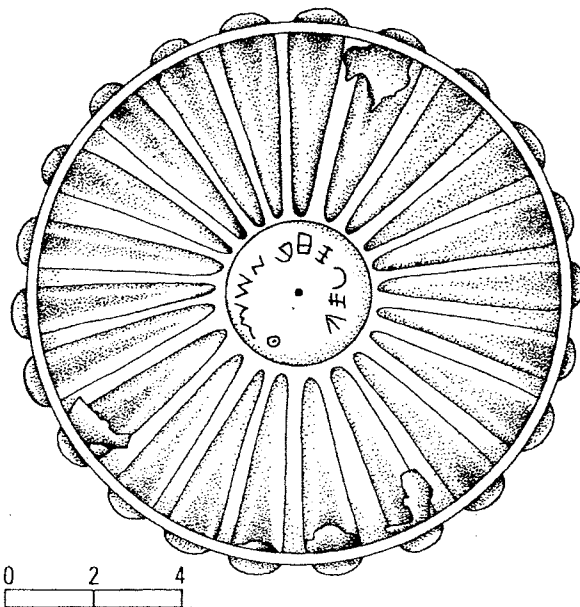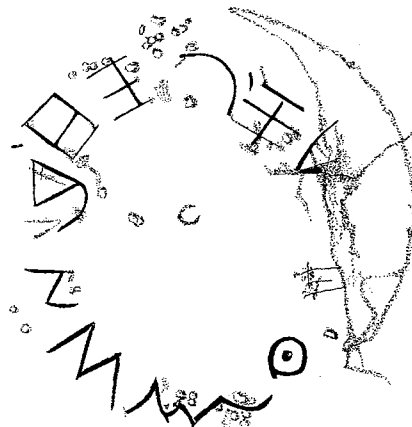
Fig. 4b
Close-up drawing of the inscription engraved around the inside base of the bowl

1. Publications: Y. Alexandre, "A Fluted Bronze Bowl with a Canaanite-Early Phoenician Inscription from Kefar Veradim," in *Eretz Zafon*, ed. Z. Gal (Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority, 2002): *64-*74 [Hebrew]; B. Sass, *The Alphabet at the Turn of the Millennium (Tel Aviv*, Journal of the Institute of Archaeology of the Tel Aviv University Occasional Publications 7; Tel Aviv: Emery and Claire Yass Publications in Archaeology, 2005): 36-39, 70, 73, 183; Y. Alexandre, "A Canaanite-Early Phoenician Inscribed Bowl in an Iron Age IIA-B Burial Cave at Kefar Veradim, Northern Israel," *Maarav* 13 (2006): 7-41; C. Rollston, "The Script of the Tel Zayit Abecedary and Putative Evidence for Israelite Literacy," *Literate Culture and Tenth-Century Canaan: The Tel Zayit Abecedary in Context*, ed. R. Tappy and P. K. McCarter (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2008): 77, fig. 6, 78, 82.

2. Context: Alexandre discovered this engraved bronze bowl upside down under the skull of one of five skeletons in one of three loci of a burial cave at Kefar Veradim in the Upper Galilee, northern Israel. Kefar Veradim is located approximately halfway between the inland site of Hazor and Akko on the coast. The analysis of the pottery assemblage by Alexandre indicated that that cave was used throughout the Iron Age IIA and B horizons.

3. Genre: Legend indicating ownership.

4. Linguistic Decipherment: "(The) *cup/bowl* of *Psḥ*, son of *Šmʿ*."[13] The first letter of *ks*, "cup/bowl" is poorly preserved (see fig. 4a). Separation marks occur between the Semitic words for "bowl of" and the name of the owner, *Psḥ*, as well as between *Psḥ* and "son of."[14] The roots of both of these personal names are well attested elsewhere, particularly in names that occur in the Bible. This legend is very similar to one inscribed

---

[13] Alexandre, "A Canaanite-Early Phoenician Inscribed Bowl," 26.

[14] The explanation of the lack of a separation mark between "son of" and *Šmʿ* by Alexandre (ibid., 29) as being due to the construct syntax is unconvincing because the same syntax occurs between "bowl of" and *Psḥ* (with a mark between those words).

on the outside of the rim of a bronze bowl found at Tekke, Crete (the reading of the end of which is no longer certain): "(The) cup/bowl of *Šmᶜ*, son of..."[15]

5. Date: While this inscribed bowl is certainly to be assigned to the Iron Age, estimates within that period have varied regarding when this bowl was engraved. Naveh[16] would assign it to late in Iron I, the first half of the eleventh century BCE, based on its archaic handwriting. Alexandre would assign it to Iron IIA, specifically the tenth century BCE, based on its clear archaeological context.[17] Hamilton (forthcoming) will argue that although the script of this legend could be taken as either archaic or archaizing, this fluted bowl is likely older than the context in which it was found because of the *probable* disjunction between the gender of the skeleton under whose skull it was buried, "probably female,"[18] and that of the name of the man whose name was engraved inside it (unequivocally masculine since it is marked with *bn*, "son of"). Given those complex and sometimes conflicting indicators, he would conclude that leaving a wide margin for error would be prudent in estimating when this bowl was engraved: ca. 1000 BCE (± 100 years).

6. Significance: This inscribed bowl attests to the work of professional artisans found at a very small settlement in the Upper Galilee by the high quality of both the bronze bowl itself and the engraving of its owner's name.[19] This fluted bowl was valued enough to have been included among the burial goods, probably of a female member of the family of *Psḥ*, son of *Šmᶜ*.

---

[15] Ibid., 28.

[16] Ibid., 30.

[17] Ibid., 31. In "A Canaanite-Early Phoenician Inscribed Bowl," 34-41, Alexandre set aside the type of this artifact as a means of dating its inscription, finding parallels to fluted bowls or related objects, fluted goblets and jugs, sporadically throughout both the second and first millennia BCE from sites in Egypt, the Levant, Iran and elsewhere. That differs significantly from her earlier assessment: "[U]ntil the discovery of the Kefar Veradim bowl there was little evidence for such bowls in the Levant prior to the late Iron Age (Assyrian period) or even the Persian period" (Alexandre, "A Fluted Bronze Bowl," 71 as translated and cited by Sass, *The Alphabet at the Turn of the Millennium*, 38, n. 36).

[18] Alexandre,"A Canaanite-Early Phoenician Inscribed Bowl," 24.

[19] The latter concurs with the high evaluation of the script of this legend by Rollston, "The Script of the Tel Zayit Abecedary," in *Literate Culture and Tenth-Century Canaan*, ed. R. Tappy and P. K. McCarter (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns): 79; cf. the much lower estimation of its handwriting as reflecting an "unrefined 'hand'" by Sass, *The Alphabet at the Turn of the Millennium*, 38.
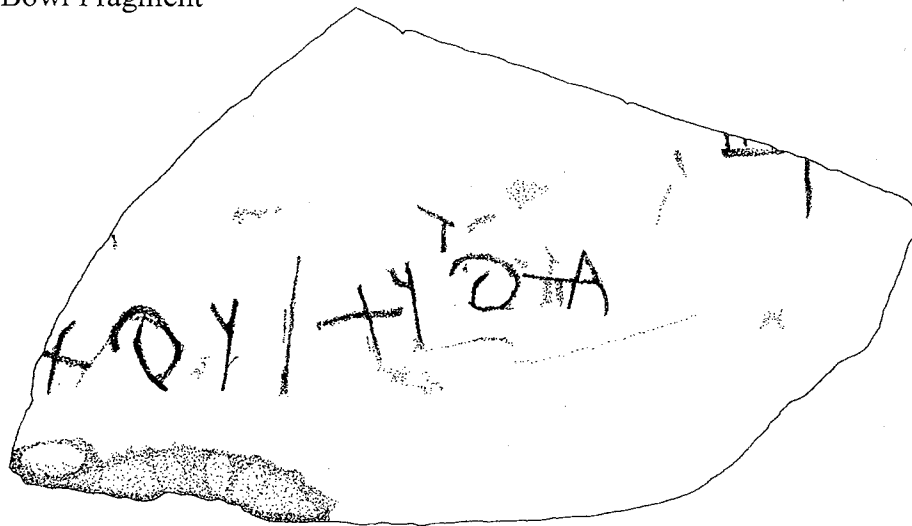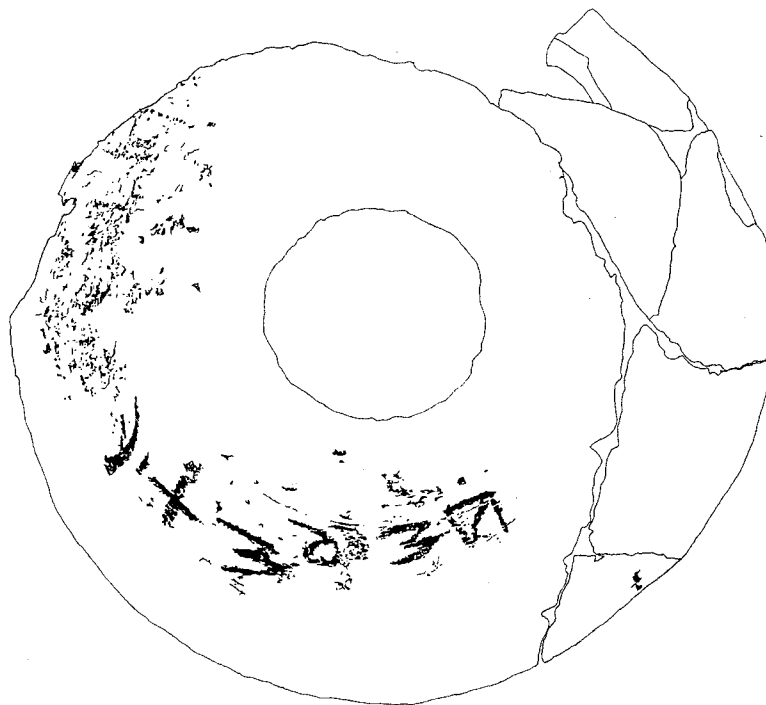
Fig. 5a
Tell eṣ-Ṣafi Bowl Fragment

Fig. 5b
Lachish Bowl

1. Publications: A. M. Maeir, "Gath Inscription Evidences Philistine Assimilation (*manu secunda*)," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 32 (2006): 16; F. M. Cross and L. E. Stager, "Cypro-Minoan Inscriptions Found at Ashkelon," *Israel Exploration Journal* 56 (2006): 129-159; A. M. Maeir, "The Spade and the Text: The Interaction between Archaeology and Israelite History Relating to the Tenth-Ninth Centuries BCE," in *Understanding the History of Ancient Israel*, ed. H. G. M. Williamson (Proceedings of the British Academy 143; Oxford: Oxford University): 143-171; A. M. Maeir, S. J. Wimmer, A. Zuckerman,

and A. Demsky, "A Late Iron Age I/Early Iron Age II Old Canaanite Inscription from Tell eṣ-Ṣâfî/Gath, Israel: Paleography, Dating, and Historical-Cultural Significance," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 351 (2008): 39-71.

2. Context: This fragment of a small, shallow bowl was found in a well-defined layer of occupational debris at Tell eṣ-Ṣafi, a site that the excavators associate with biblical Gath. That stratigraphic context, an analysis of the large pottery assemblage found with this fragment, and the dark red slip and hand burnished technique used on this bowl all point to a date in the late Iron Age I or early Iron Age II horizons.[20] The letters were executed by using a finely pointed tool to prick away the red slip to expose the lighter ceramic underneath (see fig. 5a).

3. Genre: Most of the surviving inscription comprises two personal names divided by a separation mark (following the first edition). But whereas Maeir et al. tentatively concluded that this fragment was originally part of a larger ostracon,[21] Hamilton (forthcoming) will posit that it is better interpreted as the remnant of a much longer inscription that ran above the edge of the rim of a once complete bowl (cf. the Bowl from earlier Lachish in fig. 5b). Such a reconstruction would better account for the blank space before the first two letters, the downward tilt to the letters (as on the painted inscription from Lachish), the remnants of what are almost certainly two letters placed higher on the extreme right, and the blank space left after those remnants. The tedious execution of this inscription by pricking away the red burnish also does not match the hasty scratching of coated surfaces seen on some other ostraca (cf. some of the Samaria Ostraca).

4. Linguistic Decipherment: BLANK ʾlᵍwt (son/daughter of) wlt[   ]xḥ BLANK. Hamilton (forthcoming) would agree with the classification of this short text as an early alphabetic inscription and the general decipherment proposed in the first edition, two personal names with a separation mark between them.[22]

But he will propose that a supralinear g was likely added as a correction to the first name so that it reads ʾlᵍwt (not simply ʾlwt as thought by Maeir et al.[23]), positing a West Semitic name probably meaning "ʾEl/(The) God (is) my pride" (cf. Biblical Hebrew *gēwa < gaʾăwah*, "majesty, pride," the use of that root in Ex 15:21, "Sing to Yahweh / for he is highly exalted," and the personal name *gĕʾûʾēl*, "Majesty of El," Geuel [Num 13:15]). Though a resident of a Philistine site, ʾlgwt likely bore a West Semitic name (showing assimilation to the larger linguistic environment).

---

[20] Maeir et al., "Old Canaanite Inscription," 42, 47-48.

[21] Ibid., 49-50.

[22] With Maeir et al., "Old Canaanite Inscription," 50-56 (against the claim that the signs on this sherd are not alphabetic by Cross and Stager, "Cypro-Minoan Inscriptions," 152).

[23] "Old Canaanite Inscription," 54, 57-58 (on philological grounds retracting the sensationalistic connection with the biblical name *golyat*, "Goliath" advocated recently by Maeir, "Gath Inscription," 16; "The Spade and the Text," 20).

A case has been made that the name of *ʾlgwt*'s father, *wlt*, was non-Semitic, possibly related to names from Anatolia,[24] but that remains uncertain due its occurrence at the broken left edge of this fragment.

After the long break, the meaning of the remnants of writing on the upper right edge,]*xḥ* BLANK, is unknown. They are, however, almost certainly remnants of letters, the one on the right belonging to one of the letters with a long vertical and the one on the left being distinctive enough to identify as the letter *ḥ*.[25]

5. Date: Late in Iron Age I/early in Iron Age II, ca. 1050-900 BCE (following Maeir et al.), based on the stratigraphic context, pottery assemblage, and artifact type (see §2); they consciously excluded using an analysis of the handwriting on this fragment to help to date it. In contrast, Hamilton (forthcoming) will propose that aspects of the script on this bowl fragment can be seen as imitating older forms (rather than being truly archaic). He would assign a similar date, although notated differently, ca. 975 BCE (± 75 years).

6. Significance: This is the earliest evidence of the use of the consonantal alphabet at a Philistine site. Its discovery in a well-stratified context will provide an anchor for analyses of future finds.

Fig. 6
Tel Reḥov/Tell eṣ-Ṣarem Fragment

1. Publications: A. Mazar, "Three 10th-9th Century B.C.E. Inscriptions from Tel Reḥov," in *Saxa Loquentor: Studien zur Archäologie Palästinas/Israels: Festschrift für Volkmar Fritz zum 65 Geburtstag*, ed. C. G. den Hertog, U. Hübner, and S. Münger (AOAT 302; Münster: Ugarit, 2003): 171-184.

2. Context: Found on a floor level at Tel Reḥov/Tell eṣ-Ṣarem, a major site in the northern Jordan River valley.

3. Genre: Unknown.

---

[24] Maeir et al., "Old Canaanite Inscription," 58.
[25] Cf. ibid., 53-54.

4. Linguistic Decipherment: Since this sherd is broken on both ends and one of its letters was overwritten, no linguistic decipherment should be attempted.[26]

5. Date: Iron Age II. The excavator wrote that a tenth century BCE date for the stratum in which this sherd was found is "highly probable," perhaps specifically the first half of that century given radiocarbon dates for the stratum above it.[27]

6. Significance: The primary significance of this tiny fragment is its witness to early alphabetic writing at a major site in the northern Jordan valley early in Iron Age II. It also provides evidence of one way that a writer of that period corrected a mistake, by overwriting a letter made in error with another (cf. the Tell eṣ-Ṣafi Fragment where an omitted letter is posited to have been written in miniature above the line–see fig. 5a).

Fig. 7a
Inscribed areas on the bottom of the Tel Zayit Stone

---
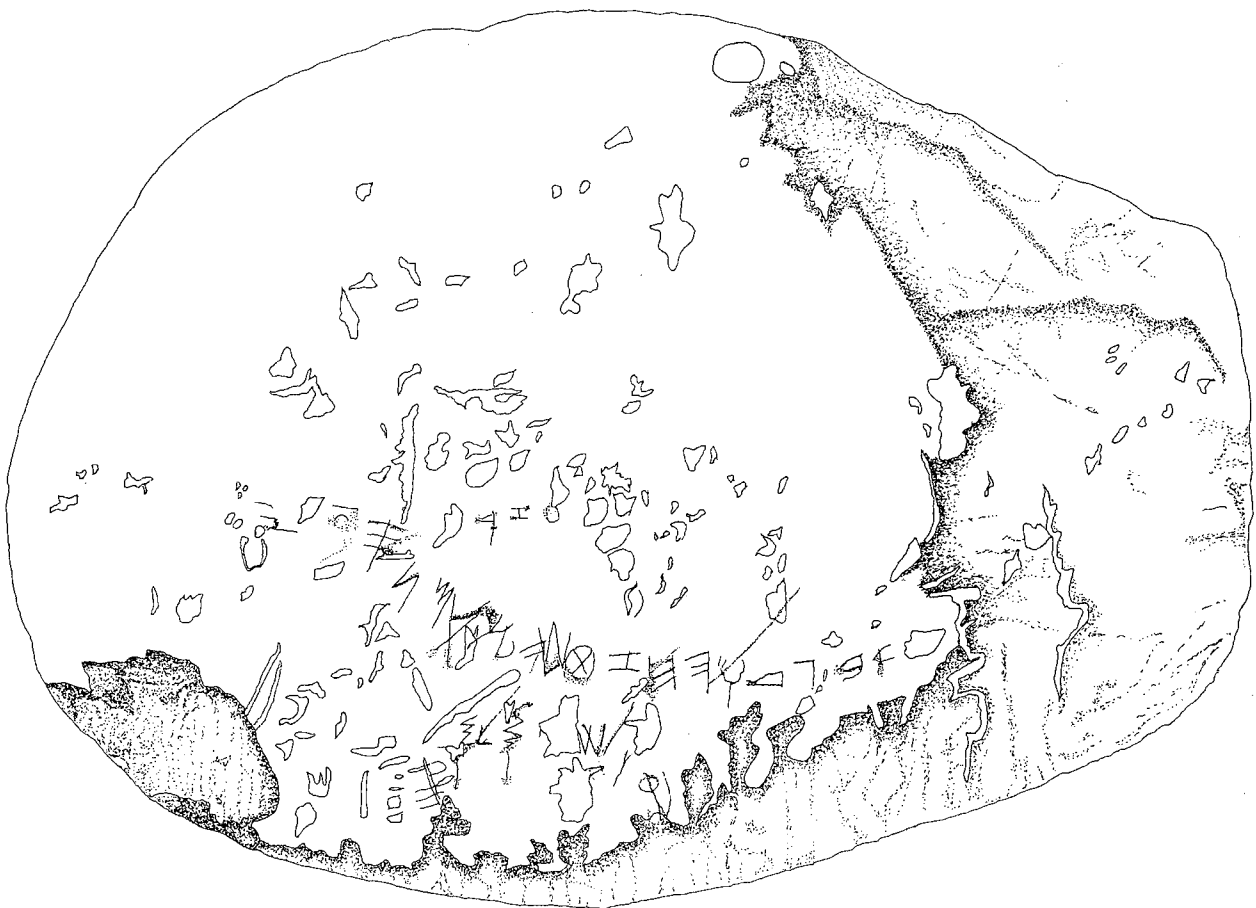
[26] Cf. Mazar, "Three 10th-9th Century B.C.E. Inscriptions," 173-174 who ventured two tentative reconstructions: lnḥ[m ?], "belonging to Nah[um ?]," or, lnb[ʾ], "belonging to the pro[phet ?]"; surprisingly, the former is endorsed by McCarter (in R. Tappy et al., "An Abecedary of the Mid-tenth Century B.C.E. from the Judean Shephelah," Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research 344 (2006): 28.
[27] Mazar, "Three 10th-9th Century B.C.E. Inscriptions," 172, n. 3.

Fig. 7b
Close-up of the inscribed areas
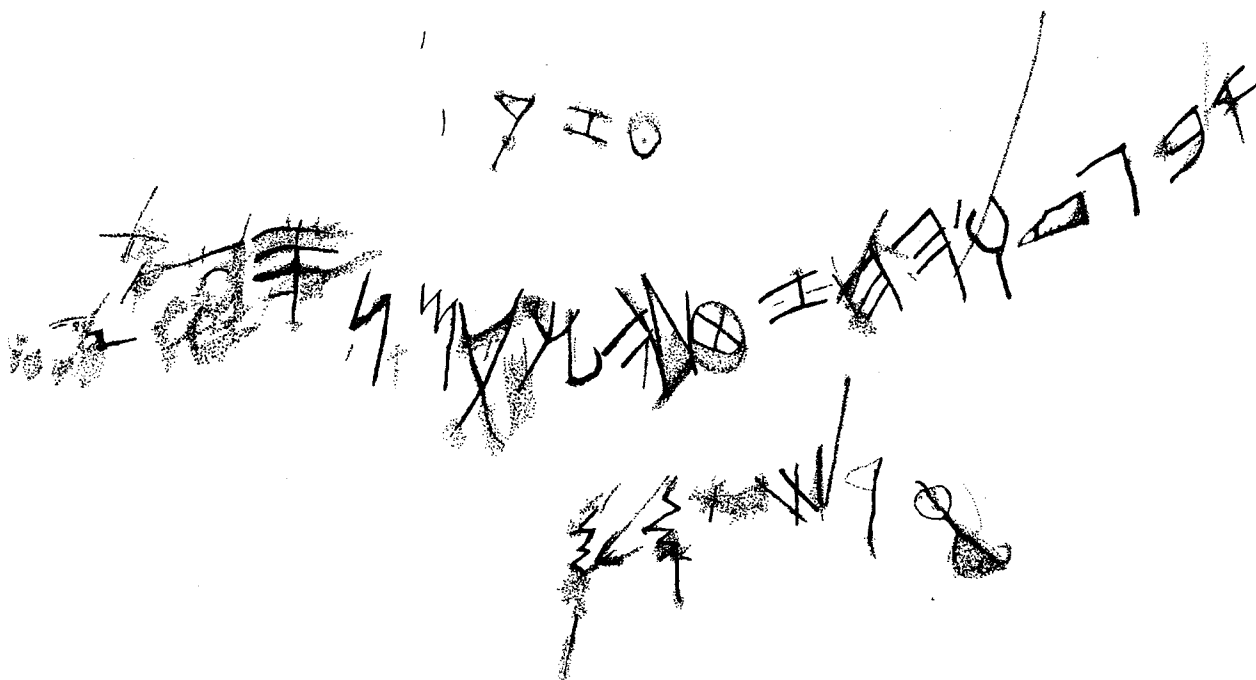
1. Publications: R. E. Tappy, P. K. McCarter, M. J. Lundberg, B. Zuckerman, "An Abecedary of the Mid-Tenth Century B.C.E. from the Judean Shephelah," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 344 (2006): 5-46; essays by R. Tappy, P. K. McCarter, C. Rollston, D. Carr, and S. Sanders plus a CD-ROM "picture book" in: *Literate Culture and Tenth-Century Canaan: The Tel Zayit Abecedary in Context*, ed. R. Tappy and P. K. McCarter (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2008).

2. Context: In 2005 the excavators found a heavy limestone boulder (17.33 kg/38 pounds) embedded in a wall at Tel Zayit, a site located in the western foothills of Judah and a borderland town during Iron Age IIA. This boulder likely went through three different uses: first as a mortar, door socket, or stone basin (cf. other ground stones similar in design and weight found at Tel Zayit); secondly, its partially prepared bottom was inscribed with letters; and thirdly, it was appropriated as a building block in a wall that was built early in the inhabitation of the site and subsequently suffered heavy destruction by fire in the latter part of the tenth century BCE.[28]

---

[28] Tappy et al., "An Abecedary," 22-25. Preliminary analyses of the extensive ceramic assemblages as well as radiocarbon testing of some organic materials from local Level II, the stratum above which that conflagration occurred, support that dating of local Level III in which this boulder was found (Ibid., 14-16).

3. Genre: A graffito or informal writing, the longest line of which can be securely identified as an abecedary (following the first edition). Whereas it was originally published as a complete abecedary,[29] Hamilton (forthcoming) will argue that the letters after *samek* are too poorly preserved to support that claim.[30] Letters that cannot be traced by others cannot be counted as readings.

In contrast with the first edition, the present writer would also recognize three signs lightly incised but visible above the longest line as letters and identify two clear signs below it as alternate forms of the letter *m*.[31]

In short he will propose that there are three lines of early alphabetic writing on the bottom of this hollowed-out boulder: an upper inscription of three letters (genre unknown); a middle line consisting of an incomplete abecedary ('-*s*, with some deviations from the standard orders); and a lower line in which only three letters can now be identified (genre unknown).

4. Linguistic Decipherment: The consonants '*zr* in the upper line may, in a nominal or verbal form, may relate to the West Semitic root * '*zr*, "to help."

The abecedary in the middle line consists of fifteen to seventeen letters: ' *b g d w h ḥ z ṭ š/x y l k X m n s* [. The letters *w* and *k* were clearly written out of order, as was probably *ḥ*. The w-shaped configuration after *ṭ* may be the letter *š* (also written out of sequence) or pre-existent scratches in the surface of the stone that the writer worked around. A partially formed letter after *k* appears to have been crossed out with a large X. While those are a lot of mistakes to make in a short space, I would be very reluctant to judge the intelligence of that writer based upon them. The bottom side of this heavy stone provides concrete evidence of the willingness of that person to begin to learn to write and read by practicing the letters of the alphabet. It can no longer be established with certainty whether that neophyte writer, whether conceived of as a child or an adolescent or an adult, left off that exercise in learning after incising the letter *samek*.

From published photographs only three letters can be identified in the lower line:[32] [room for two or three letters] *š* [one letter] *m* [one letter] *m* [. While the *š* can be worked into a reconstructed abecedary (continuing the middle line), the two writings of *m* cannot.

---

[29] Ibid., 25-40. See the photographs subsequently published in CD-ROM format (Tappy and McCarter, *Literate Culture*, figs. 43-57). There is nothing wrong with finding an incomplete abecedary. Everyone agrees that the abecedary line of the 'Izbet Ṣarṭah Ostracon is missing at least the letter *w* (others would say that *m* and *r* are also absent).

[30] McCarter recognized the weakness of those writings, differentiating them from the better preserved ones in his transliteration and drawing (Tappy et al., "An Abecedary," 26-27, fig. 17).

[31] Both of those options were raised and rejected in the first edition (ibid., 26, n. 42, 40). Hamilton (forthcoming) will argue that the typological analyses of these letters warrant their inclusion.

[32] Tappy and McCarter, *Literate Culture*, figs. 47-57.

5. Date: Certainly Iron Age IIA, arguably from the mid-tenth century BCE,[33] perhaps giving a slightly wider margin for error: 950 BCE (± 25 years).

6. Significance: Because the writing surface for this informal exercise in learning was the bottom of a heavy boulder that was subsequently reutilized as part of a wall built early in Iron Age IIA and later sealed by a destruction layer, we have evidence of someone learning many of the letters of the alphabet – mistakes and all! – at a site on the western borderlands of Judah.

Fig. 8
Beth-Shemesh Game Board (viewed as a horizontal inscription)[34]

1. Publications: S. Bunimovitz and Z. Lederman, "Six Seasons of Excavations at Tel Beth-Shemesh – A Border Town in Judah," *Qadmoniot* 30 (1997): 29*-30* (Hebrew); S. Bunimovitz and Z. Lederman, "Beth-Shemesh: Cutural Conflict on Judah's Frontier," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 23 (1997): 48, 75-76.

2. Context: This fragment of a double-sided game board inscribed along one edge was discovered in the renewed excavations at Beth-Shemesh in an Iron Age II context.[35]

3. Genre: A personal name, probably that of the owner of this game board (following Bunimovitz and Lederman).

---

[33] Tappy et al., "An Abecedary," 22. Note three contrary positions: Rollston ("The Script of the Tel Zayit Abecedary," in *Literate Culture*, 82) would date this abecedary to the late tenth or early ninth centuries BCE on paleographic grounds; Finkelstein, Sass, and Singer-Avitz (in press) would suggest reassigning this inscription to the ninth century BCE; and Maeir et al. ("Old Canaanite Inscription," 52, n. 19) consider the chronology of this inscribed stone problematic, "precluding a dating more precise than Iron Age IIA in general."

[34] Cf. the positioning of this inscription as a vertical column in the photographs in Bunimovitz and Lederman, "Six Seasons of Excavations," 29* and "Beth-Shemesh," 48. While either positioning of this short text is theoretically possible, a horizontal line is to be preferred since vertical arrangements of letters appear only rarely after the mid-eleventh century BCE (cf. one way of viewing the Khirbet Qeiyafa Ostracon).

[35] Bunimovitz and Lederman, "Six Seasons of Excavations," 29*.

4. Linguistic Decipherment: *Ḥnn* BLANK. It is uncertain how this person's name would have been pronounced in antiquity because its writing with only consonants would allow one to add various possible combinations of vowels that are documented in other names traced to this root (e.g., *ḥanan* [the vocalization selected by the excavators], or *ḥanūn*, or *ḥananī*, to give possibilities attested just in Biblical Hebrew). While the consonants of this name are the same as are found on an earlier ostracon from the same site, Beth-Shemesh, and plausibly reconstructed for the incomplete inscription on a contemporary jar rim from nearby Tel Baṭash, [b]n ḥnn[, "[so]n of Ḥnn[," these writings do not necessarily represent the same name.[36] Moreover, the root to which the name on this board can be traced, *ḥnn*, "to be gracious, show favor," is common in West Semitic personal names of almost all periods and many places.[37] It would thus seem unwise to connect the personal name on this game board with the place name Elon Beth-Hanan, a location listed after Beth-Shemesh in one biblical text (1 Kings 4:9), or to take this personal name as suggesting evidence for an influential "family of Hanan" living in this area as do Bunimovitz and Lederman.[38]

5. Date: Iron Age IIA (ca. 1000-900 BCE). Possibly written late in the tenth century BCE as suggested by Cross.[39]

6. Significance: The primary significance of this inscribed game board is as evidence of the valuation of play by an individual at a site in ancient Judah. *Ḥnn* valued this game board enough to write his name along one edge (with well executed letters). Secondarily, this one-word inscription indirectly suggests at least a limited degree of literacy among game board players at Beth-Shemesh early in the Iron Age II horizon since the point of that signature would seem to have been to differentiate that board from others should anyone ever have had occasion to question its ownership.

---

[36] *Contra* Bunimovitz and Lederman, Ibid., 29* and "Beth-Shemesh," 48, 75.

[37] Most recently, see the short list of comparative evidence and relevant bibliography in F. M. Cross, "Personal Names in the Samaria Papyri," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 344 (2006): 78.

[38] "Beth-Shemesh," 75-76, following G. L. Kelm and A. Mazar, *Timnah: A Biblical City in the Sorek Valley* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995): 111.

[39] Bunimovitz and Lederman, "Six Seasons of Excavations," 29*; "Beth-Shemesh," 48, 75.

Fig. 9
Tell el-Fara'ah (South) Ostracon
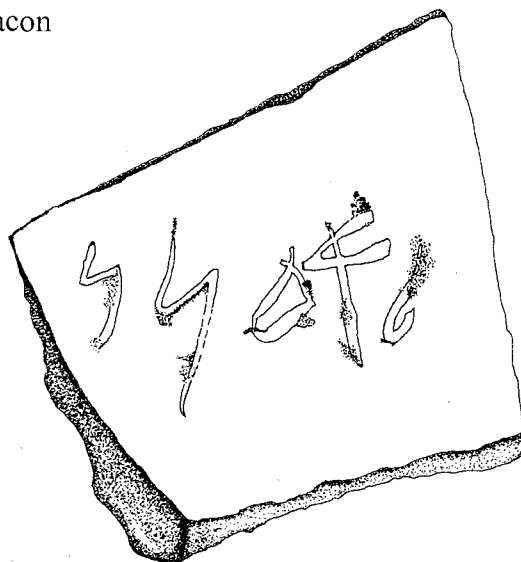
1. Publications: G. Lehmann and T. J. Schneider, "Tell el-Farah (South) 1999
Ostracon," *Ugarit-Forschungen* 31 (1999): 251-254; E. A. Knauf and H. M. Niemann,
"Zum Ostrakon 1027 vom Tell Fara Süd (Tell el-Fâriʿ/Tel Šaruḥen)," *Ugarit-
Forschungen* 31 (1999): 247-250; G. Lehmann and T. J. Schneider, "A New Ostracon
from Tell el-Fara'ah (South)," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 63 (2000): 113.

2. Context: This ostracon was found in 1999 in the renewed excavations at Tell el-
Fara'ah (South), a site some fourteen miles/22 km south of Gaza and 16 miles/26 km
west of Beer-Sheba, among debris that had fallen into a trench from Petrie's excavations
of a mud-brick wall in1928 and 1929. The mixed debris that fell into that trench in the
seventy years between those excavations "consists primarily of Iron Age II pottery and
includes a great deal of brick material, probably fallen from the wall."[40]

3. Genre: Likely a marker with non-professional handwriting for goods to be delivered
to a human lord; the ancient social hierarchy to which the writer and that lord belonged,
whether local, as part or all of the ancient community at Tell el-Fara'ah, or larger, as part
or all of a state configuration, can no longer be determined.[41]

4. Linguistic Decipherment: *l'dnn*, BLANK "For our lord" BLANK.

5. Date: Iron Age II, probably the tenth century BCE.[42]

---

[40] Lehmann and Schneider, "Tell el-Farah (South) 1999," 253. The early Internet reports
that this sherd comes from a transitional late Iron Age I-early Iron Age II context (Knauf
and Niemann, "Zum Ostrakon 1027," 248) should be abandoned (an inaccuracy still
present in Tappy et al., "An Abecedary," 28, n. 47).
[41] Ibid., 249-250.
[42] Cf. ibid., 247-248.

6. Significance: This badly faded ostracon testifies to the use of early alphabetic writing at a site on the southern edge of the Levant probably early in Iron Age II. The reading, "For our lord," also witnesses the use of that script by a non-professional writer, likely to mark goods for that leader in a community or society that was organized hierarchically.

A NEW EARLY ALPHABETIC INSCRIPTION FROM KHIRBET QEIYAFA

1. Publications: Y. Garfinkel and S. Ganor, "Horvat Qeiyafa – A Fortified City on the Philistia-Judah Border in the Early Iron II," in *New Studies in the Archaeology of Jerusalem and its Region, Collected Papers* Vol. 2 (D. Amit and G. D. Stiebel eds.; Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority and The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2008): 122-131 [Hebrew]; Y. Garfinkel and S. Ganor, "Khirbet Qeiyafa: Sha'arayim," *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures* 8 (2008): 1-10 (http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/JHS/Articles/article_99.pdf); G. Bearman and W. A. Christens-Barry, "Spectral Imaging of Ostraca," *Pal-Arch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Eyptology* 6(7) (2009): 1-20 (http://www.palarch.nl/2009/12/gregory-bearman-william-a-christens-barry-2009-spectral-imaging-of-ostraca); the first edition with three responses (all in Hebrew) in: *New Studies in the Archaeology of Jerusalem and its Region, Collected Papers* Vol. 3 (D. Amit, G. D. Stiebel, and O. Peleg-Barkat eds.; Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authority and The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2009): H. Misgav, Y. Garfinkel, and S. Ganor, "The Khirbet Qeiyafa Ostracon," (pp. 111-123); A. Yardeni, "The Khirbet Qeiyafa Inscription – Response A" (pp. 124-125); A. Demsky, "The Enigmatic Inscription from Khirbet Qeiyafa – Response B" (pp. 126-129); S. Ahituv, "The Khirbet Qeiyafa Inscription – Response C" (pp. 130-132); three chapters in *Khirbet Qeiyafa Vol. 1 Excavation Report 2007-2008* (Y. Garfinkel and S. Ganor eds.; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 2009): H. Misgav, Y. Garfinkel, and S. Ganor, "The Ostracon" (pp. 243-257); A. Yardeni, "Further Observations of the Ostracon" (pp. 259-260); G. Bearman and W. A. Christens-Barry, Imaging the Ostracon" (pp. 261-270); G. Galil, "Most Ancient Hebrew Biblical Inscription Deciphered" (press release; http://www.eurekalert.org/pub-releases/2010-01/uoh-mah010710.php); C. Rollston, "Reflections on the Qeiyafa Ostracon" (http://www.rollestonepigraphy.com/?p=56).[43]

2. Context: Khirbet Qeiyafa is located about 12 miles/20 km southwest of Jerusalem and some 7 miles/11 km away from Tell es-Ṣafi (a Philistine site identified by its excavators as biblical Gath). After a preliminary dig, in the summer of 2008 Prof. Y. Garfinkel of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem began excavations of the ruins of this large fortified town with a ten-meter-wide double gate, a central fortress, and a wall running some 700 meters around it. Garfinkel and Ganor have tentatively identified Khirbet Qeiyafa as biblical Shaaraim (Josh 15:36; 1 Sam 17:17:52; 1 Chron 4:31-32), largely on the basis of the two gates found only at this site and the meaning of *ša'aráyim* as "two gates" in Biblical Hebrew.[44]

---

[43] I am grateful both to the Rev. Dr. J. P. Kang for alerting me to the entries by Rollston and Galil and to Prof. Galil for directing me to the first edition and the responses to it.
[44] That identification needs to be taken very tentatively given the common *-áyim* ending on many places names in Biblical Hebrew (e.g., *'ephráyim*, "Ephraim," *mahănáyim*,

An ostracon with five registers of inked writing was found in July 2008 in Area B at Khirbet Qeiyafa. It has ignited a firestorm of interest by both scholars and the reading public about alphabetic writing in early Israel,[45] in part because the inhabitation of this one-period site can be securely dated on the basis of both radiometric testing of seeds and the large assemblage of pottery found there (see §5 below). After this ostracon was examined and photographed by experts in both Israel and the United States and a conference on it was held at The Hebrew University, a first edition of it appeared rapidly first in Hebrew and then in English late in 2009 (an extremely rapid speed from discovery to first complete publication for any new early alphabetic text).[46] In January 2010, Prof. G. Galil of the University of Haifa proposed reading the writing on this ostracon, with major restorations, as a prophetic text. Echoing the evaluation of Prof. C. Rollston,[47] I would underline that while the Khirbet Qeiyafa Ostracon is a very important new discovery, caution is mandated in interpreting this very new text since some central aspects about it remain unresolved.

Five lines of letters separated by four wobbly parallel lines were written in ink on the concave side of a ceramic sherd, measuring approximately 15 by 16.5 centimeters (almost 6 by 6.5 inches). A blank area at the bottom or on the left side of this ostracon, depending on how one holds it, suggests that the letters before that comprise the end of the text. The top or right side of this sherd is broken, cutting some letters in half, and allowing for the possibility that this inscription was once longer.

Two basic issues about the early alphabetic writing on this sherd need to be signaled immediately: Whether its letters were arranged in five registers of horizontal lines or as five vertical columns; and the uneven state of preservation of the letters. First, even though most scholars have treated it as a horizontal inscription whose lines read from left to right, Demsky has presented it as a text whose letters were arranged in vertical columns.[48] While both ways of arranging letters have good parallels in other early alphabetic inscriptions, vertically arranged texts become rarer as one approaches the year 1000 BCE. Usually the stances of the letters dictate which arrangement a writer employed. But on the Khirbet Qeiyafah Ostracon one has to posit rare or unparalleled stances no matter whether one conceives of its lines as having been written horizontally or vertically. The issue of how to hold this inscription will continue to be debated because

---

"Mahanaim," ḥôrônáyim, "Horonaim"), which contemporary linguistic specialists seldom take as referring to elements of two.

[45] Among online sources, see, for example: E. Bronner, "Find of Ancient City Could Alter Notions of Biblical David," The New York Times, 29 Oct. 2008 (http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/30/world/middleeast/30david.html); no author, "'Oldest Hebrew writing found near J'lem,'" Online Edition Jerusalem Post, 31 Oct. 2008 (http://www.jpost.com); and, no author, "'Oldest Hebrew script' is found," BBC News, 30 October 2008 (http://news.bbc.co.uk.2/hi/middle_east/7700037.stm).

[46] For a popular overview of the modern history of this ostracon from its discovery to its current status on display at the Israel Museum, see The Hebrew University's web site: "Khirbet Qeiyafa – Ostracon Chronicle" (http://qeiyafa.huji.ac/ostracon.asp), which includes interpretations of it that have appeared since 15 October 2009.

[47] "Reflections on the Qeiyafa Ostracon."

[48] "Response B," 126.

it will have an impact on how one identifies some of its less-well-preserved letters. Secondly, the preservation of the ink of some of the lines of this sherd is uneven, making the identification of some of its letters very difficult. Numbering the lines horizontally from top to bottom (or columns from right to left), parts of lines 2, 4, and 5 as well as most of line 3 are very hard to read (despite superb quality imaging by the Israel Antiquities Authority and Dr. G. Bearman). Although one should not exaggerate the state of preservation of this whole inscription – other parts are quite legible – the parts with faint ink or only traces of letters have at times been rendered differently in the drawings by Profs. H. Misgav, A. Yardeni, and G. Galil,[49] all of whom have examined the original. There are enough ambiguities that the present writer would not present a drawing of this very important text until he too has had an opportunity to study the actual inscription.

3. Genre: The genre of the five lines of this very recently published ostracon remains uncertain. Two different interpretations of the type of literature that this sherd might represent have appeared to date.

In October 2009, the first edition by Prof. H. Misgav of The Hebrew University concluded with only very general and cautious remarks about its classification: "The inscription begins with several words of command which may be judicial or ethical in content....The end of the inscription contains words which may relate to the area of politics or government. It is difficult to extract more meaning from this text at the present stage."[50]

In January 2010, Prof. G. Galil of the University of Haifa proposed reconstructing these lines of writing as a prophetic text. A press release from that university summarized parts of Galil's reading: "This text is a social statement, relating to slaves, widows and orphans. It uses verbs that are characteristic of Hebrew such as *'asah* ('did') and *'avad* ('worked') which were rarely used in other regional languages....The present inscription provides social elements similar to those found in the biblical prophecies and very different from prophecies written by other cultures postulating glorification of the gods and taking care of their physical needs."[51]

4. Linguistic Decipherment: While the roots of certain West Semitic words on this ostracon have been identified (e.g., * *'bd*, "to work" in line 1; * *špṭ*, "to judge" in line 2; * *mlk*, "to reign" in line 4), one cannot be sure if they comprise verbs, nouns, or personal names due to the lack of a continuous text with minimal reconstructions. Specialists will need more time to study the heavily reconstructed reading proposed by Prof. Galil to see if there may be simpler and more banal ways of restoring the text of this inscription. Rollston also cautioned about being too specific about which Semitic language was employed on this sherd: "Those stating that the Qeiyafa Ostracon is written in the Hebrew language are probably stating more than the data allow."[52]

---

[49] For reproductions of the drawings by those three scholars, most conveniently see "Khirbet Qeiyafa – Ostracon Chronicle," 3, 5, 7.

[50] Ibid., 4.

[51] Ibid., 6.

[52] "Reflections on the Qeiyafa Ostracon" (with an analysis of five key terms).

5. Date: Either very late in Iron I or, more likely, very early in Iron II, based on the results of the radiocarbon dating of four burnt olive pits, which after calibration give dates between 1026-975 BCE (59.6% probability) or 1051-969 BCE (77.8% probability)[53] and an analysis of the extensive Iron II pottery assemblage already collected from that site. The assignment of this inked ostracon to the tenth century BCE in the first edition remains unconvincing to Rollston, who thinks that it may have been written earlier.[54]

6. Significance: Two things about this site and its remarkable inscription can be said with a fair degree of certainty. First, the massive ruined fortress at Khirbet Qeiyafa (about 24,000 square meters/257,900 square feet) will take a prominent place in any future reconstructions of the period of the early monarchy in Judah and Israel.[55] Secondly, the five lines of writing inked on the ceramic sherd found at Khirbet Qeiyafa will be used as a concrete witness to a culture in Canaan that already combined both oral and written, specifically early alphabetic forms of communication in the Iron Age.

CONCLUSION

To see eleven inscriptions appear within a dozen years has created a lot of excitement, at least among archaeologists and epigraphists. While that excitement has the positive consequence of motivating researchers to dig deeper and reconsider previous views, the "rush" created by the publication of these new finds might also cause one to overstate the evidence for how commonly alphabetic writing was used during the first millennium of its existence. Including the new finds, there are just over eighty early alphabetic inscriptions with provenances, those found by archaeologists and other professionals that can be assigned to ca. 1900-900 BCE.[56] While these finds are not evenly distributed over that first millennium of early alphabetic writing (most being clustered in the Middle Bronze Age, near the end of the Late Bronze Age, and in Iron Age II), an average of eight inscriptions per century does not provide strong evidence for

---

[53] Most conveniently, see Garfinkel and Sanor, "Khirbet Qeiyafa: Shaʻarayim," 3. Note the doubling of the number of pits and the more exact Carbon-14 results compared to those reported in the media.

[54] "Reflections on the Qeiyafa Ostracon."

[55] It is important to note that Garfinkel's excavation of Khirbet Qeiyafa has only just begun: "They have excavated only 4 per cent of the 24-dunam settlement so far" (online edition of the *Jerusalem Post* [31 Oct. 2008]). I couch my language above so as to leave room for a dating of this site and its important inscription to the late eleventh, tenth, or ninth centuries BCE after all the evidence is in and analyzed.

[56] This sets aside the over fifty inscribed artifacts that have no archaeological provenances, ones bought in antiquities markets (mostly arrowheads), whose authenticity needs to be established on a case-by-case basis (see Hamilton, forthcoming).

common alphabetic literacy in Egypt, Canaan, Phoenicia, or the eastern islands of the Mediterranean during those periods.[57]

These recent discoveries better illustrate the use of alphabetic scripts along a spectrum from formal to informal levels of writing (granted almost always on non-organic writing surfaces). One end of that spectrum could be taken as exemplifying formal handwriting by professionals: the legend on the domed seal-amulet from Middle Bronze Age Deir Rifa, Egypt (a seal likely cut by a professional seal-cutter and owned by a man entitled a "seer"); the inscribed back pillar on the small monumental statue found at Gebel Tingar, near Elephantine, Egypt assigned to the Late Bronze Age (likely executed by a scribe, possibly for a West Semitic leader); and the inscription engraved inside of the base of the bronze bowl from Kefar Veradim, assigned either to late in Iron I or early in Iron II (likely engraved by someone akin to a modern jeweler). The other end of the spectrum illustrates informal writing done by non-professionals: two graffiti from Middle Bronze Age Wadi el-Hol (perhaps left by West Semitic-speaking soldiers in Egypt); the incomplete abecedary executed by a novice writer on the bottom of a hollowed out boulder at Tel Zayit early in Iron Age II; a name inscribed by the owner of a game board at Beth-Shemesh (early Iron II); and a marker likely for goods designated for their lord at Tell el-Fara'ah (South), again probably written in Iron II. The inscribed bowls from Iron Age Tell eṣ-Safi and Tel Reḥov/Tell eṣ-Ṣarem probably fall between those two extremities, the first probably being closer to the formal end of the spectrum and the latter being too incomplete to tell. The five lines of writing of the new Khirbet Qeiyafa Ostracon look like they were hastily executed (perhaps as a quick "back-up copy" of a more formal document). The range of uses of early alphabetic scripts in both formal and informal contexts, by both professional and non-professional writers probably reflects a basic knowledge of that script among people of various social classes in the Middle Bronze Age, Late Bronze Age, and early Iron Age better than the actual number of inscriptions that by chance and hard digging have happened to be unearthed recently.

---

[57] For a nuanced approach to defining levels of literacy, using modern standards, see Rollston, "The Phoenician Script," in *Literate Culture*, 61-62 (with earlier literature).