A NEW HIERATIC OSTRACON
FROM ASHKELON

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Abstract

A small fragment of a Ramesside ostracon found recently at Ashkelon bears a short inscription in Egyptian hieratic writing. The article suggests that the fragment be read using the Semitic term prophet/seer (ḥzh), which is also mentioned in the Report of Wenamun. The article concludes with an updated list of hieratic inscriptions from Canaan.

THE SHERD

The small corpus of Egyptian hieratic inscriptions from Canaan is constantly growing. Recent excavations at Tell es-Ṣafi enhanced the corpus with two fragments. The first is a short qualifying label incised on a vessel (Maeir, Martin and Wimmer 2004) and the second is a faint ink inscription that probably mentions by name a "prince of Ṣafi[t]", thus providing evidence for the antiquity of the toponym (Wimmer and Maeir 2007).

Now a no less intriguing sherd has come to light in the excavations being carried out at Ashkelon.[1] It is a small fragment, 5.8 × 3.2 cm, of a locally produced storage jar.[2] The inscription is written in black ink on the inside of the sherd, perpendicular to the texture of the pottery, and is clearly broken on at least the right side. This leads me to assume that—unlike the majority of hieratic inscriptions found in Canaan—the entire vessel was not inscribed and that the sherd is either an ostracon proper, or a fragment of an ostracon. The ductus is clearly Ramesside and the archaeological context hints at a late 19th or early 20th dynasty date.[3]

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[1] The excavations of the Leon Levy Expedition to Ashkelon are sponsored by the Harvard Semitic Museum and directed by Lawrence Stager. I am most grateful to Prof. Stager for entrusting me with publication of the ostracon, to Orly Goldwasser for her support and valuable comments and to Manfred Görg for bibliographic advice.

[2] According to petrographic analysis by Daniel Master.

[3] The ostracon was found in a courtyard accumulation that separates the north and south villas in Grid 38, Square 74 (Layer 986, Basket 124, Registration Number 54,952). The courtyard dates to Phase 19, the second half of the 12th century BCE, and contains both Monochrome (Mycenaean IIIC) and Bichrome pottery as well as earlier residual pottery (Stager 2006: 12−14 and Ph. 19 plan, p. 12; Stager forthcoming). Phase 20 begins the sequence of Philistine occupation at the site, with Monochrome pottery along with 'Canaanite' (Late Bronze III)

We suggest the following reading:

𓂀𓃒𓏜𓏥𓊪𓂧

[*dd*=]*f mn ḥd*

"H[e said: The]re is/was no seer/prophet"

Of the first group, only the elongated tail of the viper is visible in the lower right corner of the sherd. The reconstruction with 𓂧 to *dd*=*f*, "he said", would fit the context, as the following could well be understood as some kind of statement.[4] The traces at the broken edge form together with the following group the *mn* particle of non-existence (Wimmer 1995: II 237 [N.25/Bb.7 c]).[5] Alternatively, a reading as 𓂧𓏛 would be graphically possible (Wimmer 1995: II 231 [N.25/X.1]), but less probable, as this Late Egyptian variant spelling for the 2nd pers. fem. singular independent pronoun *ntṯ* (*mnt*[*t*]) is rare (Černý/Groll 1993: 11). The translation would then read: "H[e said: Yo]u(fem.) are a seeress".

Both options—*mn* as well as *mntṯ*—require that the following *ḥd* be a nominal form. If it was feminine, an additional fem. determinative 𓁐 should be expected. For a masculine form, a determinative such as 𓀀 would be indicated, but not imperative. Unfortunately, no traces are preserved at all in the narrow space that is left between the last sign 𓂀 and the left edge of the sherd. It is possible that this is the end of the line and the text continued in another line that is now lost. In this case the fragment would be complete at the left edge and broken at the bottom as well as at the right edge. It is also quite possible that the ostracon continued to the left and further traces of ink at the very left edge have completely faded.

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wares being present (Stager 2006: 9–11, Ph.20 plan, p. 10). Prior to that, in Phase 21, there was an Egyptian interlude, in which an Egyptian garrison occupied this part of the mound. The construction technique of the mudbrick fortress(?) wall is similar to those from Deir el-Balaḥ and Tel Mor; its width and brick sizes conform to the Egyptian royal cubit. Phase 21 included Egyptian or Egyptian-like beer jars, storage jars and shallow bowls alongside 'Canaanite' pottery. The beer jars are "late," according to Mario Martin, dating sometime between Merenptah and the first part of Ramesses III's reign. It seems likely that the hieratic ostracon originated in Phase 21 and was residual in the Phase 19 courtyard debris (Stager 2006: 8–9).

4   This was suggested to me by Orly Goldwasser, e-mail of Oct. 2006. Deborah Sweeney added the idea that the text "might be an oracular ostracon, like the ones which were produced in Deir el-Medina", e-mail of May 2007. An anonymous referee pointed out that the reconstruction of *dd*=*f* would imply a letter or a brief communication, but that this was improbable since no traces or lines above (or below) are preserved. He/she justly added that the tail of the presumed 𓂧 might ("much less likely") also belong to a numeral 100 or a multiple thereof.

5   The word normally has 𓈖 as determinative, but it is attested without, cf. Lesko 1982: I 215.


Fig. 1. The Ashkelon hieratic ostracon (photo courtesy the Leon Levy Expedition).

Two determinatives for *ḥd* are preserved: 𓂀 is quite clear. 𓁗 has a narrow shape, not very common as such, but certainly reasonable. Both accurately corroborate our understanding of the term *ḥd*, as will be discussed below. The group 𓏜𓏥 is clear. 𓊪 has its distinct upper part faded or rubbed off,[6] as is also the case with the tip of 𓂧.

INTERPRETATION

The lemma *ḥd* is not attested as an Egyptian word with this spelling. Since it is written in group writing, a foreign word can be presumed. Egyptian *d* renders Semitic *ṣ* or *z* (Hoch 1994: 437), and the Semitic root *ḥzy* (> *ḥzh*) fits accurately with the determinatives for 'mental activity' (𓁗) and 'see' (𓂀). It is well attested in West Semitic inscriptions (Hoftijzer and Jongeling 1995: 357–361) and the Old Testament (Köhler and Baumgartner 2004: 288f.), for the semantic field of 'see' (in the physical and figurative sense), 'see in dreams', 'see an appearance, vision, revelation', 'see as a prophet, visionary, astrologer', etc. A monographic study of the word by Fuhs (1978) collected all its biblical and extra-biblical occurrences and provided a thorough analysis of its range of meaning. Fuhs established a peculiar kinship with the notion of 'prophecy': 'looking at (in the sense of "perceiving" or "receiving") divine revelation'.

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6   Rarely, 𓊪 can also have a plain tip, cf. Wimmer 1995: II 323 (V.28 d). I considered the possibility of reading this line as a simple stroke and relating it to the preceding group, but no meaningful solution could be found.

The Aramaic stela of Zakur, King of Hamat, parallels *ḥzyn* (pl.) and *ʿddn* (pl.), both meaning 'prophets, diviners, soothsayers', etc. The hapax *ʿdd* has been proposed as an etymology for the designation of the 'ecstatic' in the Egyptian Report of Wenamun (Ebach and Rüterswörden 1976).[7] At the court of Byblos, it is told, "the god took possession of a great *ʿdj* of his (=belonging to the ruler of Byblos) great *ʿdj*'s, and he made him ecstatic (*ḫ3w*), and said to him…" (1:38f.). *ʿdj* is written like the Egyptian word for 'lad', *ʿdd*, with the determinative for 'child' (🧒) in the first, and 'man' (🧍) in the second occurrence. Inviting as this suggestion may appear, it has justly been refuted on phonological grounds: Egyptian *d* may mix with *d* in Egyptian words, but it never renders Semitic *d* in group writing. Moreover, 𓂝 *dd* stands as a group for *d* (*s*/*z*) alone, and the final group 𓏭 *jw*, superfluous for *ʿdd* = 'lad', can be taken as the semi-consonantal radical *y* (Görg 1977; Hoch 1994: 86f.). Given the possibility that Egyptian *ʿ* can represent Semitic *ḥ*, it has instead been argued concurrently that the Wenamun spelling 𓏭𓂝 *ʿdj* (not: *ʿdd*) reflects Semitic *ḥzy* (Görg 1977, followed by Fuhs 1978: 32f. and Hoch 1994: 87), the same word that appears on the Ashkelon ostracon. There, of course, the transcription into Egyptian is straight, without the—perhaps intended—allusion to Egyptian *ʿdd* 'lad'.[8]

The role of the 'prophet' or 'seer' at the court of Byblos, according to Wenamun, is identical to the role of the 'prophet' or 'seer' in the Zakur Inscription: They receive a message from god[9] and convey it to their ruler. Whether the same can or should be implied for the Ashkelon ostracon must remain a matter of speculation; the text is simply too fragmented for more than that. Nor can we know what the term 'no', in the statement "There is *no* prophet…", aims at.[10] Yet, it is obviously very fortunate that this small fragment preserves such a rare and meaningful expression—among the earliest attestations of prophethood in the ancient Near East.

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[7] For the text of Wenamun, cf. Gardiner 1932, and now Schipper 2005; for a discussion of the chronology, cf. Sass 2003.

[8] Coincidentally, another short inscription that has recently been unearthed at another city of what was the Philistine Pentapolis may also be related to the thesaurus of Wenamun: Among the possible etymologies for one of the names mentioned on a 10th century Philistine inscription from Tell es-Ṣafi/Gath is the PN *Wrt* in Wenamun 1: 16, apparently of Sea Peoples' origin (the sherd was found in 2005; Maeir *et al.* forthcoming).

[9] The god's identity is not explicitly stated, but we may infer from the context that it is Amun; the passage that precedes it is meaningful: "While he (the ruler of Byblos) was offering to his gods, the god took possession …". At Hamat it is Baal-Shamayim.

[10] Cf. biblical phrases such as Psalm 74: 9, "there is no longer any prophet" (*ʾên ʿôd nābîʾ*); Lamentations 2: 9, "her prophets obtain no vision" (*gam nəbîʾêhā lōʾ maṣʾû ḥāzôn*).

HIERATIC INSCRIPTIONS FROM CANAAN: AN UPDATE

It is clear that the nature of the Ashkelon text is different from the usual harvest tax registration—the subject of the overwhelming majority of known hieratic inscriptions from Canaan. Irrespective of inscriptions that are too fragmentary or unintelligible, there are only two sherds of a religious, mythological or, in a broad sense, literary genre, and both were found at Beth Shean. One seems to point to an execration ritual;[11] the second contains an even more fragmentary and therefore conjectural reference to the Ugaritic myth of Aqhat (Wimmer 1994). Beth Shean is the only site in northern Israel where a hieratic inscription has been found; all other hieratic sherds to date come from the south. In contrast to all other hieratic texts from the south of the country, the Ashkelon ostracon is the first that is of a clearly non-administrative nature.

In view of this important new addition to the corpus, it is appropriate to conclude this presentation with an updated list of hieratic inscriptions from Canaan.[12] Note that in the accompanying map (Fig. 2) the classification of the texts is in some cases conjectural.

All the texts are written in black ink on pottery, except where otherwise stated:

Lachish: Ten inscriptions. One (No. I) is an almost complete bowl that registers harvest tax deliveries. A similar context is probable or possible for nine sherds. Inscription No. XI is not hieratic. A measure of capacity (*mgrg*) was incised, before firing, in cursive hieroglyphs on the body of a jug (label) (Černý 1958; Sweeney 2004: 1601−1617).
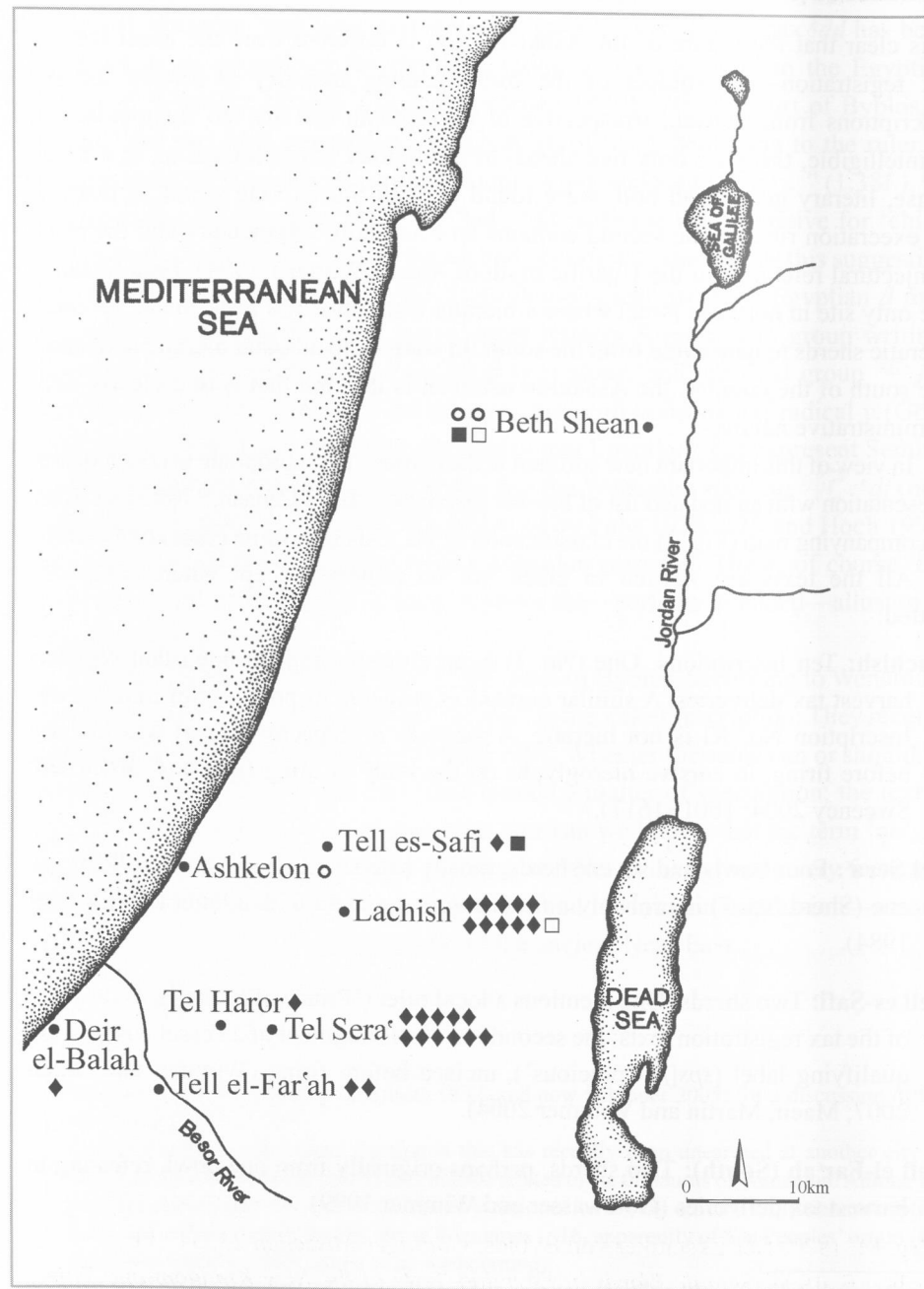
Tel Seraʿ: Four bowls and seven sherds, mostly referring to harvest tax collections; one (Sherd No. 7) is probably a fragmentary ostracon with a letter (Goldwasser 1984).

Tell es-Ṣafi: Two sherds: One mentions a local ruler ('Prince of Ṣafi[t]'), as do some of the tax registration texts; the second is a small fragment of a vessel with a short qualifying label (*šps[j]*, 'precious'), incised before firing (Wimmer and Maeir 2007; Maeir, Martin and Wimmer 2004).

Tell el-Farʿah (South): Two sherds, perhaps originally from one bowl, referring to harvest tax deliveries (Goldwasser and Wimmer 1999).

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[11] Of purely religious, not political, nature—as far as they can be separated; there is no mention of geographical, ethnic or personal names (Wimmer 1993).

[12] Not included are inscriptions with hieratic signs, mostly numerals and some abbreviations for commodities and quantities, from the Iron Age II Hebrew kingdoms. These will be the subject of a separate monograph by the author.

Deir el-Balaḥ: One small fragment with reference to harvest tax deliveries (Wimmer forthcoming).

Tel Haror: One small fragment referring to an unpreserved toponym (Gaza?), perhaps in the context of harvest tax deliveries (Goldwasser 1991).

Ashkelon: One ostracon fragment with the word 'seer/prophet' (ḥd/ḥzh) (this publication).

Beth Shean: Three sherds: one hinting at an execration ritual; a small fragment with a possible reference to the 'bow' of a goddess (Anat?); and a single check mark sign (*snhj*) on a jar (label). A storage jar bears incised cursive hieroglyphs (not hieratic), probably denoting an offering to the Ka of a goddess (Wimmer 1993; 1994; 2007).

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Fig. 2. Hieratic inscriptions, site map.

◆ administrative/non-literary text   ○ literary/religious text   ■ label
□ label (cursive hieroglyphic)

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