

# The Origin of the Tet-Symbol

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THREE recently published articles deal with a long-debated West Semitic epigraphical problem, the interpretation of the *tet*-sign which occurs in jar inscriptions and stamps from the Persian and Hellenistic periods.

N. Avigad, discussing a new variant of the paleo-Hebrew stamps found in his excavations in the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem, states that the sign on these stamps is a Hebrew *tet*, just as in the Phoenician texts the *tet* is Phoenician and in Aramaic legends there is an Aramaic *tet*.<sup>1</sup> He sees this as decisive proof that the letter *tet* was indeed intended, and believes that it is a royal mark and official emblem. Though its exact meaning is obscure, he feels with Cross that the issue will be decided by further information on the early kingdoms of Phoenicia.<sup>2</sup>

P. Colella suggests the interpretation of the *tet* as an abbreviation of the word *ṭpy'n*,<sup>3</sup> which occurs on an Aramaic ostrakon from Tell el-Kheleifeh; its meaning, according to Albright, is 'closed, sealed'.<sup>4</sup>

B. Delavault and A. Lemaire believe that the *tet* should be understood as an abbreviation of the word *ṭb*, 'good', meaning 'wine of good quality'.<sup>5</sup>

Our opinion is also that the sign stands for a royal emblem. Although it is written like a *tet*, it is not an abbreviation of *ṭpy'n* or *ṭb* or any other Semitic word beginning with *tet*. Moreover, we believe that the solution of its interpretation is to be found not in the Phoenician but in the Egyptian usage of the sign.

The earliest occurrence of the *tet* symbol is in the fifth-century B.C. Elephantine jar inscriptions,<sup>6</sup> where the vast majority consists of the Phoenician legend *lmlk-ṭ*<sup>7</sup> but there is also one Aramaic text *[lṃ]lk'-ṭ*.<sup>8</sup> Lidzbarski counted 35–37 Egyptian divine

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<sup>1</sup> N. Avigad: More Evidence on the Judean Post-Exilic Stamps, *IEJ* 24 (1974), pp. 52–54.

<sup>2</sup> F.M. Cross: Jar Inscriptions from Shiqmona, *IEJ* 18 (1968), p. 231.

<sup>3</sup> P. Colella: Les abréviations *ṭ* et *XP*, *RB* 80 (1973), pp. 547–553.

<sup>4</sup> In N. Glueck: Ostraca from Elath, *BASOR* 80 (1940), p. 8, n. 11.

<sup>5</sup> La tablette ougaritique, RS 16.127 et l'abréviation "Ṭ" en nord-ouest sémitique, *Semitica* 25 (1975), pp. 31–41.

<sup>6</sup> This date is based on the fact that the Aramaic documents of Elephantine bear dates from 495 to 399. The Phoenician jar inscriptions from Shiqmona and the Aramaic *yhwḏ-ṭ* stamps are dated to the fourth century and mainly to its second half, whereas the paleo-Hebrew *yhd-ṭ* stamps are of the Hellenistic period.

<sup>7</sup> M. Lidzbarski: *Phönizische und aramäische Krugaufschriften aus Elephantine*, Berlin, 1912, Pl. VI, Nos. 56–59, 61–64.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, No. 65.

elements, as against 12 Phoenician ones, in the names on the Elephantine jar inscriptions. His conclusion 'Ägyptische Götter werden bei den Phöniziern auch ausserhalb Ägyptens gefunden, aber ein solches Verhältnis ist nur in Ägypten denkbar'<sup>9</sup> seems quite convincing. This means that the jars were inscribed in Egypt, and thus it would be reasonable to look for the origin of the *tet*-symbol in the Egyptian cultural environment.

If the *tet*-symbol is a royal mark, why should it follow the word *lmlk*, which also means '(belonging) to the king, royal'? This kind of repetition is unfamiliar in the Semitic alphabetic writing, but it is the normal system of the Egyptian script, where in most words phonograms are followed by ideograms (determinatives).<sup>10</sup> The main question, however, is how the *tet* came to determine 'royal'.

We must first touch briefly on the development of the letter *tet* in the Phoenician, Hebrew and Aramaic scripts (see Fig. 1). The original West Semitic *tet*, as it appears in the early first millennium B.C., is a circle; within it are two bars crossing each other. This develops in the three scribal traditions as follows:

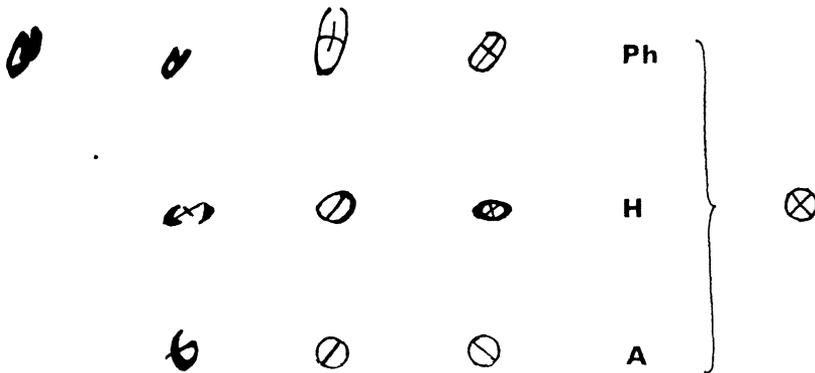


Fig. 1. Outline of the development of the letter *tet* in the Phoenician, Hebrew and Aramaic scripts.

In the Phoenician script the circle is high and elongated; then its top opens and the inner cross becomes small. This is simplified in the sixth-century B.C. cursive, so that instead of the cross an inward hook from the left top of the open circle is drawn; on the Elephantine jars (fifth-century cursive) the right vertical is drawn separately.<sup>11</sup>

In the Hebrew script the *tet* is round and generally preserves both bars, though sometimes there is only one;<sup>12</sup> the cursive Hebrew *tet* consists of two crescents enclosing an x.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. A. Gardiner: *Egyptian Grammar*, 3rd revised edition, Oxford, 1957, pp. 30–31.

<sup>11</sup> J.B. Peckham: *The Development of the Late Phoenician Scripts*, Cambridge, Mass., 1968, especially p. 148.

<sup>12</sup> Avigad, *loc. cit.* (above, n. 1).

<sup>13</sup> Cf. the Lachish ostraca in H. Torczyner (Tur-Sinai): *Lachish, I*, London, 1938.

In the Aramaic script the *tet* very soon drops one of the bars; the remaining bar is then drawn, without lifting the pen, from the top right-hand side of the open circle down to the left.<sup>14</sup>

Turning to the Elephantine jar inscriptions (Pl. 3), it can clearly be seen that the sign following the Phoenician legend *lmlk* has a different form from the *tet* in the Phoenician texts; for example in No. 57 the symbol is not a Phoenician *tet* as it occurs in the name *pt'sy* on the same jar, or on jars Nos. 48–49. According to Cross, 'the legend *lmlk* in cursive script [is] followed by a formal *tet*'.<sup>15</sup> However, in No. 57 the symbol does not resemble the Phoenician formal *tet*, but rather the Hebrew cursive one, and in No. 59 it is drawn as an Aramaic *tet*. Moreover, in No. 64 it has a peculiar form (see Pl. 3 and Fig. 2): at the top there is a small circle which is drawn, without lifting the pen, together with the symbol below it.



Fig. 2. The inscription on Elephantine jar No. 64 (after M. Lidzbarski: *Phönizische und aramäische Krugaufschriften aus Elephantine*).

These observations lead us to the assumption that on the Elephantine jars the symbol was not meant to be the letter *tet*. We shall, therefore, try to trace this sign in the Egyptian writing.

Several Egyptian hieroglyphic circular signs — for example  $\ominus$  *h*,  $\otimes$  *niwt* 'town',  $\odot$  *sp* 'time', 'occasion' — underwent cursive evolutions in hieratic and demotic scripts which are very similar to the evolution of the Semitic *tet*. Our interest will be concentrated on  $\odot$ , *sp*, whose form in hieroglyphic writing may also be  $\odot$  or  $\circ$ . Nearly every Egyptian administrative document, even the simplest, begins with a dating formula consisting of the three signs  $\odot$  followed by numerals.<sup>16</sup> Although Egyptologists do not agree on the exact reading of  $\odot$ ,<sup>17</sup> there is a consensus that

<sup>14</sup> J. Naveh: *The Development of the Aramaic Script*, Jerusalem, 1970.

<sup>15</sup> Cross, *op. cit.* (above, n. 2), p. 231. See also idem, *Judean Stamps*, *EI* 9 (1969), Non-Hebrew Section, pp. 21–22.

<sup>16</sup> This formula was well known even outside Egypt. It occurs also in two hieratic ostraca of the thirteenth-twelfth centuries B.C. found at Lachish (Olga Tufnell *et al.*: *Lachish, IV: The Bronze Age*, London, 1958, pp. 133–134, Pls. 44, 47, Nos. 3, 4) and in one recently found at Tel Sera', which will be published later.

<sup>17</sup> Gardiner, *op. cit.* (above, n. 10), pp. 203–204, reads *hst-sp*; E. Edel: Zur Lesung von  $\odot$  'Regierungsjahr', *JNES* 8 (1949), pp. 35–39: *rnpt-sp*; J. von Beckerath: Die Lesung von  $\odot$  'Regierungsjahr': Ein neuer Vorschlag, *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 95 (1969), pp. 81–91: *hsbt-sp*.

it means 'regnal year' (*Regierungsjahr*), whereas  $\text{𐤀}$ ,<sup>18</sup> without the  $\text{⊙}$ , is *rnpt* — 'year'.

In demotic writing (Fig. 3)<sup>19</sup> some examples of the group  $\text{⊙}$  are still close to the hieroglyphic source. In Fig. 3:1–3 the first sign (in Fig. 3:2 two signs) stands for the hieroglyphic  $\text{𐤀}$ , while the sign  $\Delta$  (= *t*) opens on its right side, then turns into a horizontal bar and finally becomes a dot. Fig. 3:4–6 are more cursive: the  $\text{𐤀}$  retains its principal form, but the signs  $\text{⊙}$  turn into a ligature.



Fig. 3. Examples of the group  $\text{⊙}$  in demotic script.

The hieratic examples (Fig. 4)<sup>20</sup> display the same characteristics.<sup>21</sup> The forms reproduced in Fig. 4:1–3 belong to the same category as the demotic ones in Fig. 3:1–3. In the examples shown in Fig. 4:4–10 the *t* is ligatured with the *sp* sign, but sometimes the only reminder of the *t* is the relatively long vertical line; thus they are parallel to the demotic ligatured forms 3:4–6.

The strong link between the symbols which follow the *Imk* legends on the Elephantine jars and the *sp* signs in the hieratic and demotic documents is quite obvious. We found only one *sp* sign with an inner cross (Fig. 4:1, hieratic), whereas on the Elephantine jars there are more symbols with crosses than with single bars. However, it is well known that in cursive scripts a cross tends to turn into a single bar. Assuming that the *tet*-symbol developed from the *sp* sign, it may be suggested that the prototype

<sup>18</sup> The stroke under the  $\text{𐤀}$  (= *t*) is a space-filler.

<sup>19</sup> Fig. 3:1, 3, 6 were copied from F. Ll. Griffith: *Catalogue of Demotic Ostraca in the John Rylands Library, Manchester*, Hildesheim, 1909 (reprint 1972), III, p. 374; Fig. 3:2, 4, 5 — from W. Erichsen: *Demotisches Glossar*, Copenhagen, 1954, p. 288.

<sup>20</sup> Fig. 4:1 is taken from J. Černý: *Ostraca hiératiques*, Cairo, 1935, Pl. LVII, 25629; Fig. 4:2, 10 — from Tufnell, *op. cit.* (above, n. 16); Fig. 4:3–9 — from J. Černý and A. Gardiner: *Hieratic Ostraca*, Oxford, 1957, Pls. XLII A, 2; XXXIV A, 1 r(ecto); LXII A, 3 r; LXIV A, 2 r; LXXVII A, lines 1, 9; XXVII A, 3 r.

<sup>21</sup> The relationship between hieratic from the end of the second millennium B.C. and the demotic scripts was described by Griffith (*op. cit.* [above, n. 19], p. 11) as early as 1909 as follows: 'Demotic writing . . . is the natural growth from cursive hieratic (itself a free rendering of hieroglyphs with a reed pen on papyrus), becoming gradually more and more independent of the hieroglyphic originals, and eventually stereotyping itself in a new set of symbols. In certain legal documents from Thebes dating as early as the Twentieth Dynasty passages can be found very cursively written which show some of the characteristics of demotic . . . Freely written papyri of the Twenty-first Dynasty are very rare and by some accident the succeeding period is scarcely represented in our collections. Ordinary writings on papyrus begin again at the end of the eighth century with the legal documents of the Twenty-fifth or Ethiopian Dynasty, and henceforth all such for convenience have been called demotic in modern classification.'

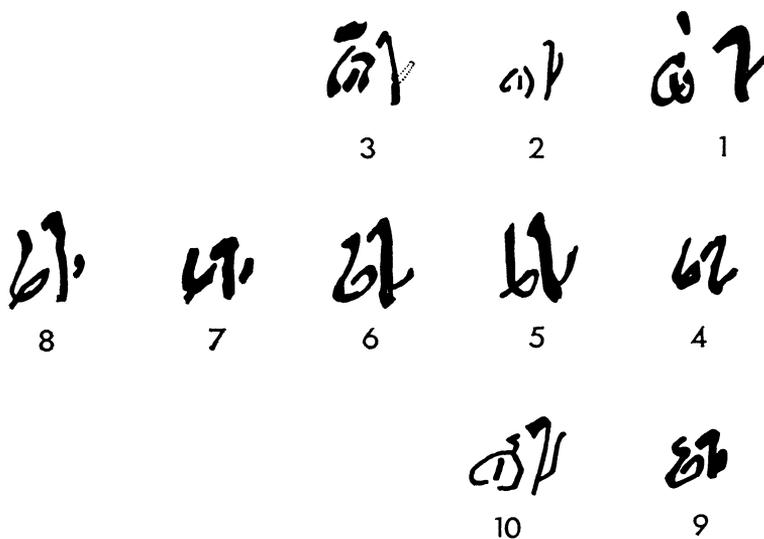
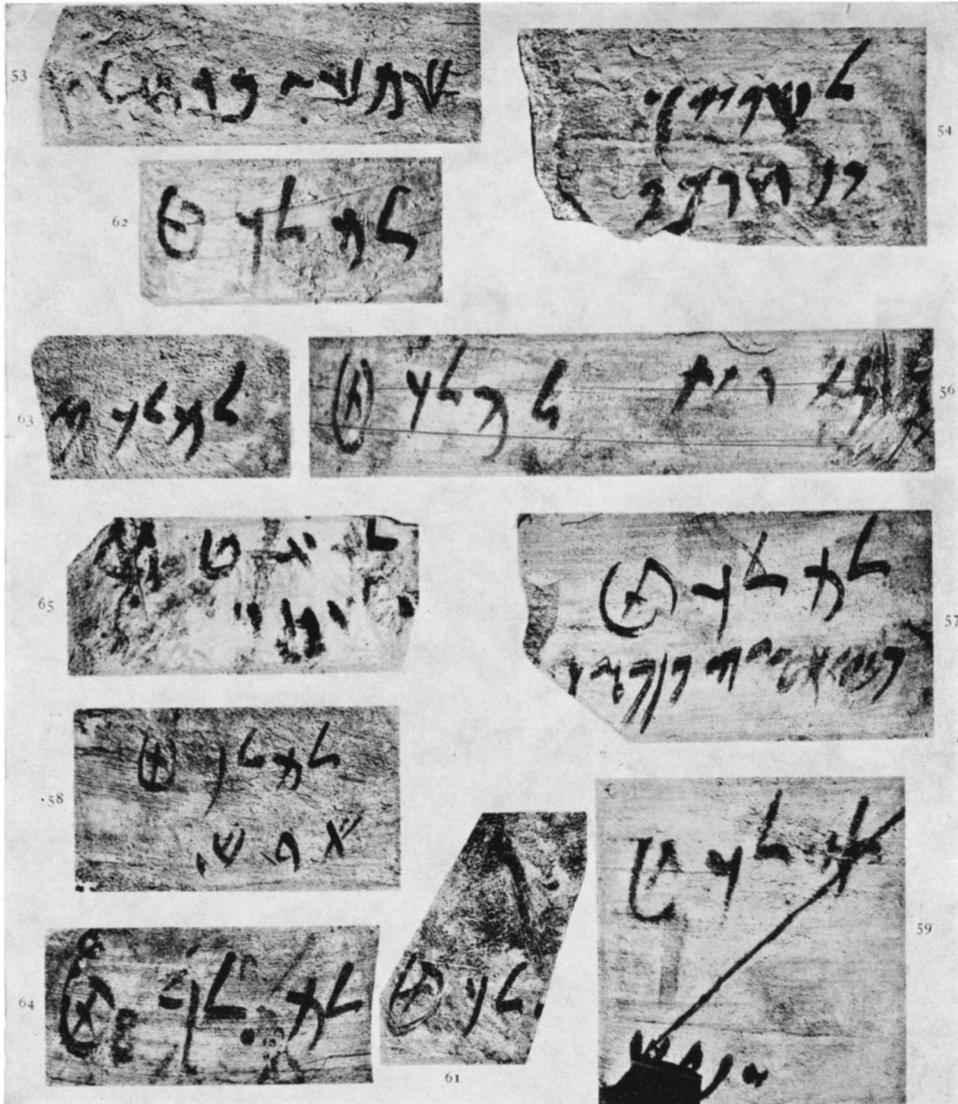


Fig. 4. Examples of the group 𐤀 in hieratic script.

of the latter was more formal than most of the demotic (and hieratic) examples that we could find. The most striking corroboration for the theory that the *tet*-symbol evolved from the demotic *sp* appears on Elephantine jar No. 64 (Pl. 3 and Fig. 2), where the Phoenician writer copied the Egyptian ligature *t-sp* in a very similar way to the hieratic examples shown in Fig. 4:9-10.

It seems likely that traders of Phoenician and other foreign origin in Egypt, who wrote in Phoenician and Aramaic, might have known to a certain extent how to read and understand simple deeds written in demotic. Therefore, it would be reasonable to assume that such traders could easily arrive at the conclusion that if 𐤁 means 'year' and 𐤀 stands for 'regnal year', the circular sign 𐤀 alone should be 'regnal, royal'. They therefore added it to the legend *lmlk* or *lmlk'* in imitation of the Egyptian usage.

We have attempted to demonstrate that the symbol on the Elephantine jars still represents the demotic *sp*, which was understood by the Phoenicians as a determinative meaning 'royal'. The adoption of this symbol could have taken place in the early Persian period, when many Phoenicians, Jews and other Semites settled in Egypt and were influenced by the Egyptian cultural values, including their writing. However, towards the end of the Persian period, when the symbol was accepted outside Egypt and its original meaning forgotten, it was understood as *tet*, and the symbol was written like a *tet* on the Judean stamps in the later Persian and Hellenistic periods.



A: Elephantine jar inscriptions, from M. Lidzbarski: *Phönizische und aramäische Krugaufschriften aus Elephantine.*

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