

AN EGYPTIAN SCRIBE FROM LACHISH AND THE HIERATIC TRADITION OF THE HEBREW KINGDOMS

Orly Goldwasser

During excavations carried out at Tel Lachish under the direction of D. Ussishkin, a number of sherds bearing short hieratic inscriptions were uncovered. The three discussed below were found out of stratigraphical context in Areas D, P and S, in occupational debris dated to the Late Bronze Age. These sherds should be added to the small corpus of hieratic inscriptions published to date from Canaan (J. Černý in *Lachish IV*:131–133; Gilula 1976; Goldwasser 1984; 1991).¹ The inscriptions from Lachish comprise inscribed votive bowls and various small ostraca.

The Inscriptions

Sherd No. 1 (Fig. 1:1; Reg. No. 70056/1; Area D; Locus 7000; length 3.7 cm., width 3.2 cm.; inscribed on outer rim of bowl).

Text

---] . .   

Translation

(The) scribe(a) 'I-s(?)-[- - (b)]

Commentary

a) The inscription begins after a gap with the word *sš* — “scribe”, probably indicating the beginning of the inscription. However, there is no way to estimate how much is lost. The undefined title (bare noun) in initial position is the typical Ramesside opening of a report or a letter, which always includes the title of the writer (undefined), name of the writer, verb of saying, title of the addressee, and the name of the addressee. As in our case, the determinative is often omitted after the title (Gardiner 1937:27,2; 4,4; 8,10; Bakir 1970: Pl. 19 and *passim*).

b) The combination  can easily be discerned after the *sš* sign (Möller 1965: Nos. 35, LXIV; Černý and Gardiner 1957: Pl. Ia, vso 2, rto 3). This combination is

1 Petrie mentioned the existence of hieratic inscriptions from Tell el-Far'ah(S), but the material has never been published. For a new sherd from Deir el-Balaḥ, see Wimmer, forthcoming. I am indebted to Ms. R. Penchas for the drawings.

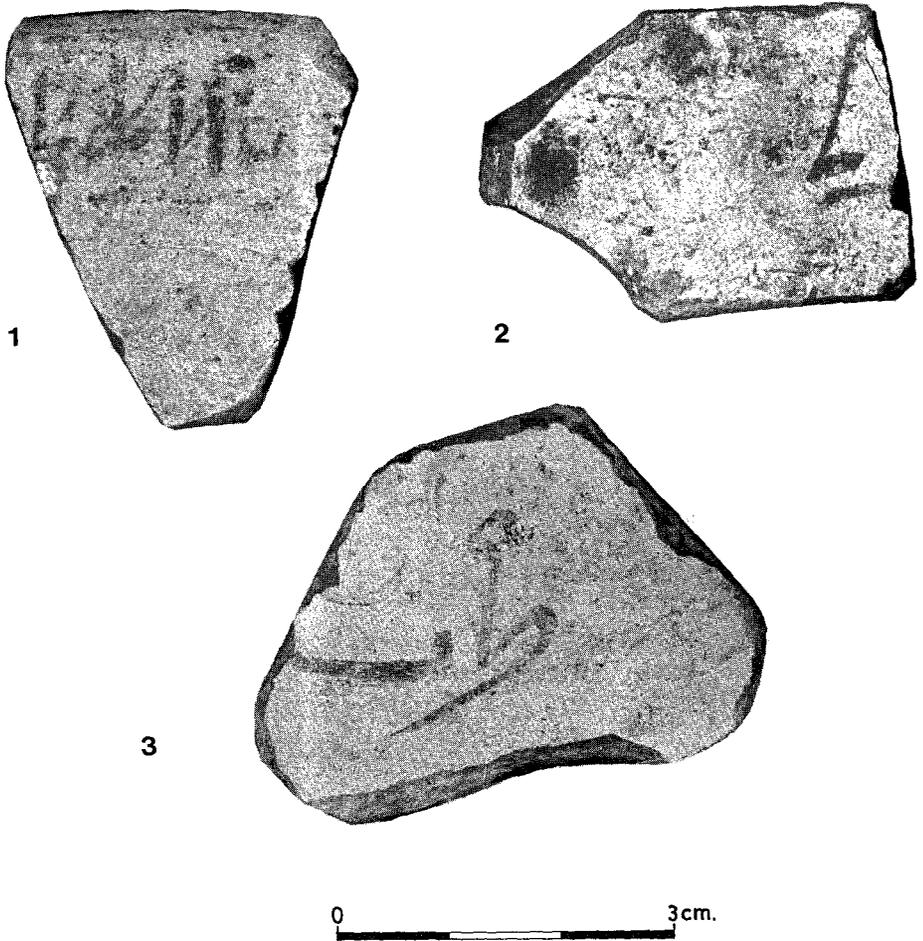


Fig. 1. Sherds with hieratic inscriptions from Lachish.

often applied in words written in the “syllabic writing”, and equals the Canaanite \aleph - (Helck 1971:541–542). The following sign is problematic, as it might be read as \ast  -*sā*, or  -*i* (Möller 1965: Nos. 47 and 284), two rather rare signs occasionally used in the framework of the syllabic writing (Albright and Lambdin 1957:119(i), 122(43), 127; Helck 1971:543, 557; 1989:141).

The word following the title “scribe” may be reconstructed as the name of the scribe –“(The) scribe *A-s* ---”, or the continuation of the title comprising the institutional attachment of the scribe, e.g. “scribe of the granary”, “scribe of the treasury” etc. (Gardiner 1937:55). In either case, the word is written in the syllabic writing. Foreign personal names are commonplace in the Egyptian administration of Canaan and Syria during the New Kingdom. If it is a reference to an institution, a

foreign word should probably be looked for, and the Canaanite **𐤊𐤍𐤏** — “granary” is a problematic assumption.

Sherd No. 2 (Fig. 1:2; Reg. No. 46873/1; Area S; Locus 3974; length 3.8 cm., width 2.5 cm.; a body sherd from a jar).

Text



Translation

The remainder (a)

Commentary

a) The inscription on this small sherd looks like a note (cf. Černý and Gardiner 1957: Pl. LV 1 vso).

Sherd No. 3 (Fig. 1:3; Reg. No. 26584/1; Area P; Locus 5222; length 4.5 cm., width 3.3 cm.; inscription on the inside of a bowl sherd).

Text



Translation

1100 (a)

Commentary

a) This small sherd is probably also a note, although it might signify the amount of a certain material mentioned on a votive bowl (cf. *Lachish IV*:133; Goldwasser 1984).

Discussion

Sherd No. 1 is the most revealing of this group as for the first time in the limited corpus of hieratic inscriptions from Canaan, the writer of an inscription has identified himself. He carried the Egyptian title *sš* — scribe, and might have had a non-Egyptian name written in the syllabic writing. It is well attested from the Amarna period on, that people bearing West Semitic names held important administrative positions in the Egyptian administration in Canaan and Syria. Like other scribes operating in Canaan during the later part of the Late Bronze Age, ours

had a trained hand, and was well acquainted with the rules of the Late Egyptian language.

The sherds are too small to allow a definitive dating, other than the fact that they belong to the Ramesside era. Significantly, all the hieratic inscriptions found to date at Tel Lachish come from the centre of the mound near the Iron Age palace-fort, where the acropolis of the Canaanite city was almost certainly located. This fact probably indicates the existence of an Egyptian administrative centre located here, as at other southern cities during this period (Oren 1985).

The Hieratic Tradition of the Iron Age

The widespread use of hieratic signs and numerals for administrative purposes in Palestine during the 8th and 7th centuries B.C.E. is a puzzling phenomenon. The Egyptian influence on other aspects of the material culture was waning, and no definite palaeographic parallels have been found in Egypt (Lemaire and Vernus 1980; 1983). Abnormal hieratic and demotic were the scripts used in Egypt in the north and south respectively during this period (Malinine 1953:I–XXVI). In Palestine the script remained an idiosyncratic variation of the “Israelite Scribe”. However, the fact that the hieratic numerals appear in both the kingdoms of Israel and Judah points to an earlier date of adoption, probably the age of David and Solomon.²

It might be suggested, as a working hypothesis, that this peculiar and isolated variation of hieratic developed locally from the Egyptian scribal tradition in Canaan itself. After the decline of the Egyptian Empire, sometime during the 20th Dynasty, many Egyptians, or Egyptian-trained Canaanite scribes lost their means of existence, and may have offered their scribal and administrative knowledge to the new powers rising in the area, first the Philistines³ and then the Israelites. It is a commonly accepted view that the Hebrew kingdom borrowed much of its administrative system from Egypt, although it is not clear where and when such a

2 There is always a theoretical possibility that the borrowing took place directly from Egypt during the 10th century B.C.E. However, the cursive script used in the Delta during this period is little known to date. During the 7th century a new cursive tradition, called Demotic, predominated in the north. In the south of Egypt the hieratic script survived as “abnormal hieratic”, finally giving way to Demotic at the beginning of the 7th century (Malinine 1953:XXI; Vleeming 1981). Thus, the Canaanite hieratic of the 7th century is one of the last remaining variations of the administrative hieratic script, retaining the use of an obsolete system already on the verge of disappearance in its own homeland.

3 However, 7th century B.C.E. Philistine numerals do not strengthen this assumption, as they appear to be of Phoenician tradition, see Naveh 1985. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that these examples are of a late date, and there is no knowledge of the system used by the Philistines in earlier periods.

massive borrowing of ideas may have taken place (Williams 1974:250–252; Redford 1977:156). We would like to suggest that these Egyptian or Egyptian-trained scribes, cut off from their homeland, well acquainted with Egyptian decorum as well as the Canaanite language, educated local scribes, who in their turn passed on their knowledge to their successors. After three or four centuries of such evolution, most of the Egyptian terms were assimilated into the local language, and the numerals remained the only definitive testimony for the Egyptian archetype.

The “scribe of Lachish” is another indication that Egyptian scribes resided in Canaan during the final stage of the Ramesside occupation, and were responsible for the application of the complex Egyptian taxation system (see recently Uehlinger 1990). Traces of their activities are slowly accumulating, very much due to the sophisticated and careful work of modern archaeologists.

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