Spring 1995

The Aramaic Ostracon from Lachish: A New Reading and Interpretation

Gerald Klingbeil, *Andrews University*

Andrews University Seminary Studies, Spring 1995, Vol. 33, No. 1, 77-84.

THE ARAMAIC OSTRACON FROM LACHISH: A NEW READING AND INTERPRETATION[1]

GERALD A. KLINGBEIL
Somerset West 7130
South Africa

1. *Introduction*

In the course of my research of Aramaic epigraphical material of Syria-Palestine during the Persian period, I noted the Aramaic ostracon unearthed during the 1932-1938 Wellcome-Marston excavations at the site of Tell ed-Duweir,[2] under the leadership of the late J. L. Starkey. The ostracon was published in 1953 by O. Tufnell, who described it as "illegible."[3] Thus, the temptation was strong to pass over the inscription and concentrate on other material with published readings. But after studying the Arad Aramaic material from the Persian period, I noticed several similarities and undertook a reading of some words and phrases. Because of the fragmentary nature of the ostracon only some words could be read, but these proved worthy of consideration. The following study consists of the general information and drawing of the ostracon, a paleographical analysis, and a word-by-word discussion of the evidence, followed by a conclusion which seeks to link epigraphical and historical evidence.

[1]The article is based on my M.A. thesis, "The Aramaic Epigraphical Material of Syria-Palestine during the Persian Period with Reference to the History of the Jews." I would like to express my gratitude for financial support from both the Centre for Science Development of the Human Science Research Council and the Research Unit for Computer Applications to the Language and Text of the Old Testament at the Department of Semitic Languages and Cultures of the University of Stellenbosch. The scope of the study included the collection, organization, translation, and analysis of all relevant inscriptions on hard surfaces.

[2]According to K. Kenyon, *Archaeology in the Holy Land*, 4th ed. (New York: Ernest Benn, 1979), 323, the "identification [of Tell Ed-Duweir] as the site of Lachish is generally accepted."

[3]O. Tufnell, *Lachish III (Tell ed-Duweir: The Iron Age. Text and Plates* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1953); pl. 49:2; 68. Other sources were: O. Tufnell, "Lachish," and E. Stern, *Material Culture of the Land of the Bible in the Persian Period* (Warminster, England: Aris and Phillip, 1982), 42.

2. *General Information and Drawing*

Name: Lachish ostracon, Locus G. 12/13:7
Place: Tell ed-Duweir
Country: Israel
Region: The hills of Cis-Jordan-
The hill country of Judah
Language: Aramaic
Appr. Date: Fifth century B.C.

Type: Ostracon
Method: Ink on pottery fragment
Find: Stratified find; level I, locus G. 12/13:7[4]
Measures/mm: 62 x 80[5]
Purpose: Ration order or receipt
Genre: Administrative or business transaction

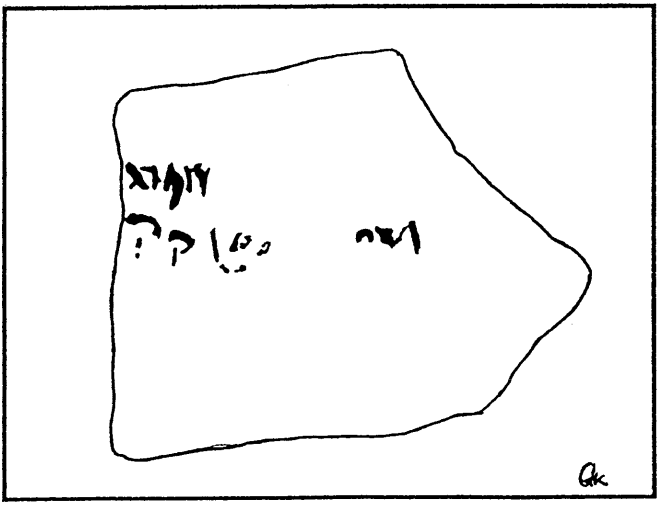

Fig. 1: Drawing of Aramaic ostracon from Lachish

3. *Paleographical Information*

The approach taken here to analyze the paleography of the ostracon could be described as an "inner-typological approach,"[6] namely

[4]On the stratification of Tell ed-Duweir, see Tufnell 71-76. The ostracon was found in a house in grid square G. 12/13, some 40 m due west of the residence (ibid., 145-146).

[5]Measurements were taken from the photograph published by Tufnell.

[6]As recently proposed by J. F. Drinkard, "Epigraphy as a Dating Method," in *Benchmarks in Time and Culture: An Introduction to Palestine Archaeology,* ed. J. F. Drinkard, G. L. Mattingly, and J. M. Miller (Atlanta: Scholars, 1988), 417-439. He suggested that "consonants in an inscription would be analyzed by epigraphic forms into types. These type forms could then be put into a relative chronology. By a comparison with inscriptions of known date (or approximate date) a more exact dating could be proposed" (417-418).

that every single letter is to be examined on its own merits.[7] This is especially helpful when analyzing larger bodies of texts, though it is also beneficial for smaller texts, since it provides for certain typological developments (or variations) within a single inscription.

The following comparative inscriptions corresponded in specific letter shapes to the Aramaic ostracon from Lachish:

Cowley, no. 1 — 495 B.C.
Source: A. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1923), no. 1. See J. Naveh, "The Development of the Aramaic Script," in *Proceedings of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities* (Jerusalem: Ahva Press, 1970), fig. 4:1.

Cowley, no. 5 — 471 B.C.
Source: Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri*, no. 5. See Naveh, "Development," fig. 4:3.

Cowley, no. 6 — 465 B.C.
Source: Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri*, no. 6. See Naveh, "Development," fig. 4:4.

Meissner papyrus — 515 B.C.
Source: H. Bauer and B. Meissner, "Ein aramäischer Pachtvertrag aus dem 7. Jahr Darius I," *Sitzungsberichte der Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Berlin: Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1936), 414-424. See Naveh, "Development," fig. 2:3.

Papyrus Luparensis — 375-350 B.C.
Source: *CIS*, 1:1, table 17. See also F. M. Cross, "The Development of the Jewish Scripts," in *The Bible and the Ancient Near East. Essays in Honor of William Foxwell Albright*, ed. G. E. Wright, 1979 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1961), fig. 1:1.

[7]This should be understood in the light of the suggestions put forward by Drinkard as described in the previous footnote. While both Cross and Naveh have implemented a typological approach in their respective paleographical studies, they appear to concentrate upon specific features of the inscription or specific shapes that could be used as markers. Especially regarding large inscriptions, this method could lead to distortions in the final analysis. Therefore it is suggested to evaluate *every individual letter shape* in order to discover the overall pattern of the inscription and provide a statistical evaluation of the evidence thus gained. This would be expressed in tabular form as demonstrated below in the paleographical discussion of the Aramaic Lachish ostracon.

Letter	Comparable to	Letter	Comparable to	Letter	Comparable to
א no:		ב no:		ג no:	
ד no:		ה no:		ו no:1	Meissner papyrus
ז no:		ח no: 1	Cowley, no.1	ט no:	
י no: 1	Cowley, no. 1	כ no:		ל no:	
מ no: 1	Papyrus Luparensis	נ no:		ס no:	
ע no:		פ no:		צ no:	
ק no: 1	Cowley, no. 6	ר no: 1	Cowley, no.6	ש no:2	Cowley, no. 5
ת no:					

Total Number of letters: 8

Predominant option	Letters	Percentage	Date
Cowley, no. 1	2	25	495 B.C.
Cowley, no. 5	2	25	471 B.C.
Cowley, no. 6	2	25	465 B.C.
Meissner papyrus	1	12.5	515 B.C.
Papyrus Luparensis	1	12.5	375-350 B.C.

It is interesting to note that 75 percent of the letters can be ascribed to the first half of the fifth century B.C., i.e., ca. 495-465 B.C. Since the מ is the only letter that falls outside of this pattern (the ו could also be ascribed to Cowley, no. 1 besides the little leftwards slant), it seems obvious that the deviation has to be attributed to the faded nature of the script.

4. *Text and Translation*

Text:	**Translation:**
20 חמר . . . . .[8]	. . . . . 20 donkeys[9]
10 שק . . . ושי	ושי . . . . barley: 10 qabs[10]

5. *Word-by-Word Analysis*

20 חמר The first two entities comprise the noun sing. m. abs. חמר plus the numeral "twenty." חמר can mean either donkey or wine,[11] but in the present context and also in the light of the similarities to the Arad ostraca it seems more appropriate to translate it as "donkey."[12] The word is also used in Palmyrene inscriptions.

ושי The following word most probably comprises a proper name. The letters are badly faded; the word may be incomplete and some of its letters erased during the course

[8]The sign used here to denote the numeral "twenty" can also be found on some fifth-century B.C. papyri from Saqqâra in Egypt. See J. B. Segal, *Aramaic Texts from North Saqqâra with Some Fragments in Phoenician* (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1983), nos. 42a, 106 and VXI.

[9]One problematic aspect of reading 20 חמר is the fact that the plural should read חמרן when combined with the numeral "twenty." Since the same idiosyncrasy can also be found among the Aramaic ostraca from Arad (e.g., Arad nos. 12:3; 23; 24; 31; 37), it might possibly be explained in terms of either a scribal abbreviation to save space or—as suggested by Naveh—an "internal plural form" (J. Naveh, "The Aramaic Ostraca from Tel Arad," *Arad Inscriptions,* ed. Y. Aharoni (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1981), 162, n.42.

[10]The numeral 10 seems to be problematic, since the author of the ostracon could have well written "1 seah 4 qabs" (1 *seah* being 6 *qabs*). It could be possible that the sign/letter following the ק has a different meaning or is the beginning of a new word.

[11]C. F. Jean and J. Hoftijzer, *Dictionaire des Inscriptions Sémitiques de l'Ouest* (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 91.

[12]Because the noun is followed immediately by a numeral, I would opt to understand the term as "donkey," since a measure—normally connected with חמר "wine"—cannot be found.

of time. The origin of the onomasticon could be Arabic, from the root *wšyt* "to cure, become rich." [13]

10 שק The abbreviation שק represents שערן קב "barley: 10 qabs." This structure can be found among the Aramaic ostraca from Arad and Beer-Sheba.[14] See also three fifth-century B.C. Aramaic tablets from Assur which contain credit documents.[15] The abbreviation ש can also be found at Elephantine,[16] as well as in the Tell el-Far'ah (Beth-Pelet) ostracon.[17] ק representing the measure *qab* occurs also at Elephantine.[18] It is interesting to note that in none of the Arad ostraca does the number succeeding the ק exceed four; in most of the cases it is three, which is half a *seah.*[19]

6. *Evaluation*

Because of the lacunae and faded letters of the inscription, it is not possible to determine the exact content of the ostracon. As already suggested by Tufnell's team in their original publication, the script of the ostracon favors a fifth century B.C. dating of the sherd. However, one must note the similarity of the מ to the early fourth-century

[13]In the OT the forms ושני and ושתי are known (1 Chr 6:13 and Esth 1:9ff.). The name *wšyt* is known from Safaitic inscriptions. Compare G. L. Harding, *An Index and Concordance of Pre-Islamic Arabian Names and Inscriptions*, Near and Middle East Series 8 (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1971), 643.

[14]Naveh, "Aramaic Ostraca," *Arad*, 153.

[15]H. Donner and W. Röllig, eds., *Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften*, 3 vols. (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1964), nos. 234:1; 235:1: 236:3.

[16]Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri,* no. 24 passim; 63:2. See also E. G. Kraeling, *The Brooklyn Museum Aramaic Papyri: New Documents of the Fifth Century B.C. from the Jewish Colony at Elephantine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953), no. 17:3-5.

[17]J. Naveh, "The Aramaic Inscriptions," *Beer-Sheba I: Excavations at Tel-Beer-Sheba 1969-1971 Seasons,* ed. Y. Aharoni (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1973), 79, especially n. 5.

[18]Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri*, no. 45:8.

[19]According to Josephus one *seah* contained ca. 13 liters (taking the *bath* containing 39 liters as point of departure). This is also supported by an intact jar from Qumran which was marked to contain "two seah and seven log". The *bath* volume inferred from this jar would be ca. 43-45 liters. On the other hand a *bath* of approximately 22 liters has been suggested, based upon the estimated capacities of jar sherds marked with בת or בת למלך in the Lachish (Tufnell, *Lachish III*, 356) and Tell Beit Mirsim excavations, which would suggest a 7.3 liters *seah*. For a detailed discussion of weights and measures see E. M. Cook, "Weights and Measures," *ISBE,* 4:1046-1055.

Papyrus Luparensis, possibly suggesting a development of the letter to its fourth-century shape already during the fifth century B.C.

If one accepts the structural similarities between the Aramaic ostraca from Arad and the Lachish ostracon it might even be possible to gain a better understanding of the content of the sherd, since the syntactic structure of the Arad ostraca contains an ellipsed imperative סהב "give to," plus the preposition ל followed by a personal name.[20] This could be translated as "give to XY" and was succeeded by specifications regarding either ש, abbreviation of שערן "barley," דקיר "crushed [barley]" (Arad ostraca nos. 7-11), or ח, abbreviation of חנטין "wheat." The ostraca also contained regularly exact numbers of חמר, סוסה or גמל, which often seemed to account for the amount of food supplies handed out.

Taking all these considerations into perspective, it is important to notice the possible connection between the two sites, Arad and Lachish, during the Persian period. This would corroborate the archaeological data which suggest that Lachish was an important center in the administration of Judah during the Persian period.[21] Both sites seem to have functioned as garrison posts with a mixed population, possibly including foreign mercenaries.[22] While this might be explained in terms of the geographical location and the political realities of Arad, the evidence at Lachish could possibly suggest more activity in the Judean heartland than commonly accepted. In this context it might be appropriate to mention Arad ostracon no. 12, which alludes to "ten donkeys ... מדנית ש מן, "from the state/province of ש" (after which the ostracon is broken off), presumably referring to the province Samaria. In the light of this ostracon, one could even argue for understanding 20 חמר as "twenty donkey-drivers."

[20]This syntactic structure can be found on Arad ostraca nos. 5:1 and possibly on 9:1 as well, where the structure is written out in full. Most of the other ostraca from Arad contain only the shortened form.

[21]For a concise discussion of the archaeological data of Lachish during the Persian period see Stern, 41-44. He summarizes the evidence as follows: "In the first phase, i.e. from the end of the sixth and beginning of the fifth century B.C., the gatehouse and building G. 12/13 were erected and some of the pits were dug. Later the Residency was built (450-350 B.C.), more pits cut, and the fortification near the gate was constructed" (ibid, 44).

[22]See my thesis regarding the onomastic evidence of the Aramaic epigraphical material during the Persian period. The data for Arad is as follows: Ammonite names: 11.9%; Arabic names: 11.9%; Aramaic names: 2.3%; Babylonian names: 2.3%; Edomite names: 14.2%; Egyptian names: 2.3%; Hebrew names: 50%; Phoenician names: 4.7% (Klingbeil, 85).

7. *Conclusion*

On the basis of the evidence presented, the following remarks regarding the Judean heartland during the fifth century B.C. can be made. First, both economic and official activity can be ascribed to the area around Lachish. Since the paleographic evidence of the script points to a date during the first half of the fifth century, the time of the ostracon might correspond to that of Ezra and Nehemiah, providing a historical backdrop for the events described in these Biblical books.[23] Second, the parallelism to the Arad ostraca from the fourth century B.C. suggests that Lachish was an important garrison or way-station in the province of Judah during the Persian period. This is congruent with the archaeological evidence. Third, in the light of these observations one has at least to question the historical picture that is often drawn of Judah during the Persian period as an insignificant, poorly inhabited, and badly organized (and administered) province. Maybe it is time to shed some new light on a period that Albright long ago called "the most obscure in the history of the Hebrew people."[24]

[23]I am aware of the discussion regarding the historicity and sequence of the missions of Ezra and Nehemiah, but do not question the authenticity of either. For an overview of the relevant studies and an evaluation, see L. L. Grabbe, *Judaism from Cyrus to Hadrian*, 2 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 1:88-98. Compare also C. E. Areding, "Ezra, Book of," *ISBE* 2:264-266. In this context one should mention O. Margalith, "The Political Role of Ezra as Persian Governor," *ZAW* 98 (1986: 110-112). Margalith favors Ezra's mission in 458 B.C. (the seventh year of Artaxerxes I) in the light of the attack of the confederation of the Attic-Delic League, which sent a fleet of 200 war galleys against Persia in 460 B.C., capturing Memphis in autumn 459 and possibly controlling the Phoenician coast (ibid., 459). Writes Margalith: "It was in 458, immediately after the fall of Memphis to the Greeks, that Ezra the Judean courtier was sent to Judea . . . to reorganize and strengthen this traditional enemy of the Philistines. From the point of view of the Persian king a strong pro-Persian Judea was a major threat to the Greek coastal lifeline" (ibid.). This would underline the strategic position of Judah for the Persian king and help to explain the apparently "illogical" mission of Ezra and Nehemiah.

[24]W. F. Albright, "Light on the Jewish State in Persian Times," *BASOR* 53 (1934): 20.