

ANNI E. DOMITIANVS
NTIFEX MAXIMVS
IMP XXI CENSOR
V P P
ITES ET PEDITES INVALIS
PTEM QVAE APPELLAN
KNA ET VETERANA GAE
VSITANO RVM ET I DA
ET MILLIARIA SACIT
ACVM ET II CANTABRO
BRACA RAVGVSTANO
SVB T. TOM PON IO BASSO

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Contents

- Shmuel Ahituv 3 **A New Moabite Inscription**
- Yizhar Hirschfeld 11 **A Lion's Head from
the Herodian Palace
at Ramat Hanadiv**
- Hannah M. Cotton, Werner Eck,
Benjamin Isaac 17 **A Newly Discovered Governor
of Judaea in a Military Diploma
from 90 CE**
- L. Y. Rahmani 33 **On Some Roman to Early Medieval
Lead Miniature Amphorae**
- 63 Information for Contributors
- 64 Abbreviations

A New Moabite Inscription

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Fig. 1
Facets II-IV (from
right to left)

I recently had the opportunity to examine an ancient Moabite inscription,¹ incised on a broken piece of an octagonal basalt column (maximum height: ca. 19.5 cm; original diameter: ca. 35 cm; width of each facet: ca. 14.5 cm; weight: ca. 22 kg). The extant piece has only five facets, three of which are of full width. Of the extreme facets, the right one is broken on its right end and a piece of only ca. 11 cm remains. The left facet is broken on its left end, and the remaining part is ca. 8.5 cm wide. The inscription was incised on only three facets (on the fourth facet there is only a single letter). It is impossible to determine how many lines the full inscription contained, as the column's upper and lower parts were broken off, perhaps already in antiquity. The piece of basalt was reused as building material, and there are signs of mortar on its bottom, which is broken diagonally. The upper surface of the stone was redressed to fit the face of a wall in a building. The condition of the basalt does not permit us to determine whether this occurred in ancient times or more recently. The dressed upper

surface stands in contrast to the smooth facets. Clearly, the stonecutter did not pay attention to the inscription, as the dressing does not run parallel to the lines of the inscription, and it cuts the first existing line, leaving only the legs of three letters.

Of the original inscription only seven partially preserved lines still exist. Although, as mentioned above, only the legs of three letters of the first line survive, they can be reconstructed. Of the sixth line we have traces of a ζ and a partially preserved h , as well as the last word of the line. Before the

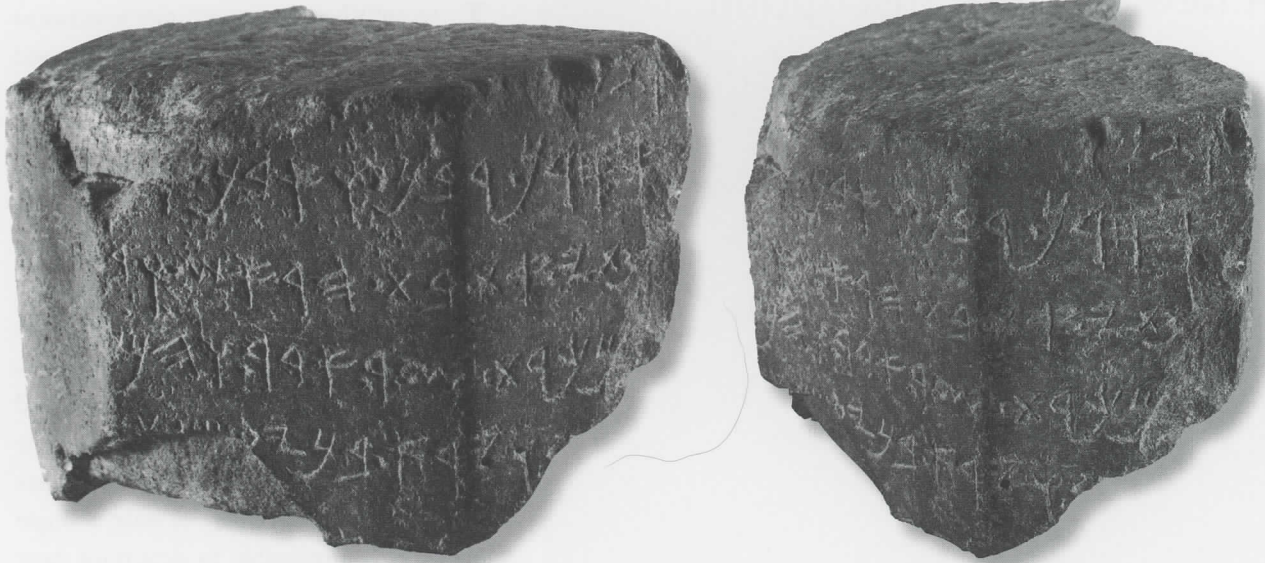


Fig. 2
Facets I-II
(from right to left)

Fig. 3
Facets I-II, showing
redressed upper surface

last word there is a deep (1 cm) round hole, of unknown purpose, which was probably made intentionally in antiquity, as it does not harm any letter. Only a few traces have survived of line 7. The average height of the elegantly executed letters is 1.5 cm, and their depth is approximately 0.1 cm. Judging from lines 2–5 on the second and third facets, each line consisted of about 25 letters.

The fact that the inscription is incised on only three facets, with only a single letter (*n*) incised on the fourth facet, suggests that it was meant to be read, in its entirety, by a person standing in front of the column. The *n* on the fourth facet represents the last letter of the word *bny'mn* (line 3). Contrary to custom, the engraver did not continue this word at the beginning of the following line when he ran out of space. Indeed, not one word of the entire inscription is broken, running over to the following line. Instead, all lines end with a complete word.

I presume that the original height of the column was ca. 1.50 m, not unlike the Mesha Stele, and that it stood on a podium; thus the inscription would have been at eye level.

As the inscription is unprovenanced, our attribution to Moab is based on its content, which alludes to a victory over the Ammonites, and its palaeography – the typical Moabite *m* and *n*. It should be dated to the eighth century BCE, probably to the middle or later half (see below). The *m* should be compared to the *m* of the short Moabite inscription []*tmlk* on the rim of a broken basalt mortar, found in an eighth-century BCE context in al-Bālū'.² In both inscriptions the *m* has not yet developed its huge head, typical of the Moabite seals of the seventh century BCE. The al-Bālū' *m* has a short leg, owing to the narrow rim of the mortar.

The engraver was an experienced craftsman. His letters were executed in a skilled hand: the long legs of the *k*, *m*, and *n* are elegantly curved; the lower hand of the ' is curved slightly upward.

Royal inscriptions generally open with the names of the king, his father, and his title, as in the Mesha monuments from Dibon and al-Karak. Both of these also mention Meshā's capital, as he is called "the Dibonite." Unfortunately, we cannot restore any of these

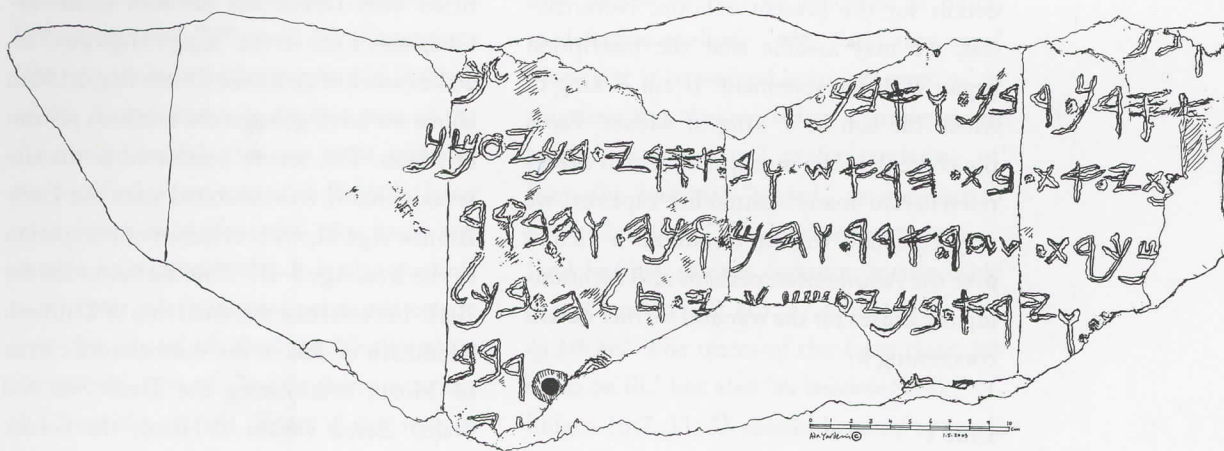


Fig. 4
Drawing of the
inscription

Transcription³

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. [**w]bñ[.t.*****] | 1. [*****.את.אבן[ו.**] |
| 2. [w'sb.]srn.rbn.w'bn.[t.'rnm.bt.m]k | 2. [ואשב.[אסרן.רבן.ואבן.את.ארמן.בת.מ.]לך |
| 3. [w'nk.b]nty.'t.bt.hr's.wb'sry.bny'mn | 3. [ואנך.ב.]תי.את.בת.הראש.ובאסרי.בניעמן |
| 4. [bnty.]mkrt.s'r.dr.whmqnh.whbqr | 4. [בנתי.ל.]מכרת.שער.אדר.והמקנה.והבקר |
| 5. [ns'ty.]sm.wyr'.bny'mn[.]ky.hlh.bkl | 5. [נשאתי.]שם.וירא.בניעמן[.].כי.חלה.בכל |
| 6. [*****]s[.]h[*****]qorb | 6. [*****]ק[*****]ח[.]ח[*****]קרב |
| 7. [*****]y[| 7. [*****]אי[|

Translation

1. [and] I built
2. [and I took] many captives. And I built [the citadel of the royal-house]
3. [And I bui]lt Beth-haro'sh. And with the captives of the Ammonites
4. [I built for the] reservoir a mighty/strong gate, and the small cattle and the cattle
5. [I carried] there. And the Ammonites saw that they were weakened in every
(The few surviving, or only partially surviving, letters on lines 6 and 7 are discussed below.)

details for the present column. Nevertheless, we may assume that the inscription began with the statement: “I am X king of Moab the son of Y king of Moab.” From the content of the inscription, which makes reference to many Ammonite captives, we may conclude that it recounted a victory over the Ammonites, perhaps also mentioning the causes for the war and further details concerning it.

Line 1

$w]’bn [’]$ Only the lower tip of the leg of the ’(?) and the legs of the *b* and *n* are visible. There are traces of the lower tips of two long-legged letters, but nothing can be made of them. However, one of the above-mentioned lower tips might belong to a *n*, in which case it would be possible to reconstruct: $w]bn[y’mn]$, “and the Ammonites” – perhaps representing the end of a narrative concerning some deeds of the Ammonites.

Line 2

$’srn rbn$ Compare to the boasting of King Mesha of Moab in his stele (lines 25–26): “And I dug the reservoirs for the Qirḥoh with the captives of Israel.”⁴

$[’rnn bt m]lk$ Only the *l* and *k* are traceable. The place of the word in the sentence suggests that it indicated some royal structure: a king’s house or the like. There are tips of some long-legged letters, of which the first might be ’. The suggested restoration, following I Kings 16:18 and II Kings 15:25, fits the space in the lacuna. One might also translate: “And I built [a citadel for the royal-house].”

Line 3

$[w’nk b]nty ’t bt hr’s$ I have completed this according to the context.

$bt hr’s$ Literally, “the house/temple of the head/peak.” Beth-har’osh should be iden-

tified with Dhāth Rās (modern name: al-Ghuweir), a site on the “King’s Highway,” ca. 20 km south of al-Karak. Dhāth Rās, 1,150 m above sea level, governs the southern plateau of Moab. The survey conducted at the site reveals that it was inhabited since the Early Bronze Age II, with evidence of occupation in the Iron Age I–II.⁵ This is a better site for Beth-har’osh than the small ruin of Khirbeth Madinath ar-Rās in the southeastern corner of Moab, overlooking the Dead Sea and Naḥal Zered (Wādi al-Ḥasa), the border between Moab and Edom.⁶ As to the place name Beth-har’osh, compare to the city of Capitoliās in the Golan, the Aramaic name of which was Bet Resha’, nowadays Beit ar-Rās, ca. 5 km north of Irbid. The inscription refers to the building of structures, such as a citadel and a gate, and to the building of a town, as in the Mesha Stele.

The word *bt* is contracted from בית, “house” in the construct state בית > בית. The contraction of the diphthong is in accordance with Israelite Hebrew and Moabite. However, in the Mesha Stele, it is sometimes written *byt*, either preserving the diphthong or a historical spelling.

$bny’mn$ The name *bny’mn* is written as one word as in Ammonite inscriptions, but unlike them, it is written with a *y*, representing the diphthong *ay*, either preserving the diphthong or a historical spelling.

Lines 3–4

$wb’sry bny’mn [bnty l]mkrt š’r ’dr$ Compare to the Mesha Stele, lines 25–26: $w’nky krty hmkrtt lkrḥh b’sry ysr’l$, “And I dug the reservoirs for the acropolis(?) with the captives of Israel.”⁷ As for the building of a gate for the reservoir, compare to the building of walls for the water installation ($kl’y h’swḥ$) by King Mesha (line 23). Water supply was always a critical problem in this region, especially in time of war, when a city came under siege.

Water installations could not therefore be left unprotected. II Samuel 12:27 mentions “the water city” (*ir hammayim*) of Rabbah of the Ammonites as a distinct part of the Ammonite capital; this was most probably the fortified water source of Rabbah, lying on a lower level than the city itself and outside its original walls. It is also possible to interpret *mkrt* as a place name and equate it to the city of Hopher the Mecherathite (חפר המכרתי), one of David’s thirty warriors (I Chronicles 11:36). Even if the text of Chronicles is uncertain – the parallel text in II Samuel 23:34 has the more common Maacathite (המעכתי) – it may be that the existence of a place name *mkrb* (<*mkrt*) made the interchange of the place names possible. I still prefer the first interpretation. The *b* of the word *wb’sry* is the *b instrumentalis*.

mkrt For the (feminine) noun from the root *KRH*, “to dig,” compare to Hebrew *mikrebh* (masculine). The feminine marker *t* is preserved in Moabite, cf. *hbmt z’t*, “this high place” in the Mesha Stele (line 2). In the Mesha Stele we have the plural *mkrtt*.

s’r’dr Mighty and/or strong gate.

Line 4

wbmqnh wbbqr In biblical Hebrew *mqnh* is a common name for livestock, cf. Genesis 26:14: *מקנה צאן ומקנה בקר*, “possession of small cattle [goats and sheep] and possession of cattle”; Job 1:3: “his possessions (מקנהו) were seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, and five hundred she-asses. . . .”

Line 5

[ns’ty] sm To Beth-har’osh; following the Mesha Stele, lines 30–31: *w’s’ sm ’t* [...] *s’n h’rs*, “and I carried there the [...] small cattle of the land.”⁸ The traces of *sm* are most plausible, but this cannot be confirmed.

wyr’ bny’mn yr’ may be rendered as plural in defective spelling: *וַיִּרְאוּ*, “and they saw.” However, it is preferable to interpret *yr’* as singular: *וַיִּרְא*, *bny’mn* being a proper noun treated as singular. I prefer rendering *yr’* from the root *R’H*, “to see,” as opposed to *YR’*, “to be afraid.” The phrase *וַיִּרְא/וּ וַיִּרְאוּ כִי* . . . (and he/they saw) is common in the Bible (e.g., Genesis 1:10, 6:5, 37:4, 50:15).

ky hlb bkl The traces of the *k* are clear. *hlb* is “to be ill,” but also “to become weak,” cf. Judges 16:7, 11: “I should become as weak (וחליתי) as an ordinary man.”

Line 6

I cannot interpret the traces of the letter before the partially preserved *h* as anything other than *s*. The letters *s* and *h* do not seem to belong to the same word: there is a space between them sufficient for a dividing dot.

qrb The reading is very problematic. The first letter should be *q*, since its upper part and the tip of its shaft are traceable; compare to the *q* with the rhomboid head in the word *wbbqr* (line 4). The long leg of the second letter fits *r* and precludes *d*. The third letter is clearly a *b*. The last letter is slightly problematic, but a careful examination of the stone confirms it to be another *b*. There is a hole between the *r* and the first *b* (not the deep round hole between the *q* and the *r*), but it is almost impossible to determine whether it is a dividing dot or just a natural hole. If it is a dividing dot, we should read: *qr bb*. *qr* means “a wall” or “a city,” as in the names Kir Hēreś and Kir Moab. In this case, the following first *b* would be the preposition “in.” If, on the other hand, the hole is not a dividing dot, then the *q* and the *rbb* do not belong together; thus, the word *rbb* could be read *רביב*, “rain, shower” or a verbal form from the root *RBB*, “to shoot.” Alternatively, the characters might be the first three letters of the number *rbbh* “myriad.” However,

there is almost certainly a dividing dot after the last *b*, and since in this inscription words do not break to run into the following lines, *rbbh* should be excluded.

Line 7

Only remnants of two letters are discernible, most probably an ' and a *y*.

Linguistically, the inscription falls in line with the Mesha Stele, and it is of the same literary genre. This was the literary genre of the West Semitic royal inscriptions of that period. It may be compared to the stele of Azatiwada from Karatepe, also of the eighth century BCE: *wbn 'nk hmyt 'zt*, "and I built strong walls" (A i: 13–14) and *wbn 'nk hqrt z* "and I built this city" (A ii: 9).⁹

The Historical Background

In the present inscription, a king of Moab of the eighth century BCE boasts of his victory over his neighbors, the Ammonites. The relations between the neighboring kingdoms of Moab and Ammon were probably not unlike the relations between the sister kingdoms of Israel and Judah – sometimes amicable and other times bellicose (Amos 1:13, 2:1). I assume that the presence of Ammonite ostraca in the land of Moab, such as the Heshbon (Tell Hisbān and Tell el-Mazār ostraca, hints not only at Ammonite influence in Moab, but also at Ammonite political hegemony over Moab. An opposite situation, however, is suggested by this new inscription.

It seems that the inscription, which records the capture of many prisoners-of-war, does not deal with some minor frontier skirmish, but rather with a major war of an expansionist nature. This being the case, we need to look for an appropriate period in the eighth century BCE when such a war could have taken place. This might have been a

time when there was no dominant power in the region able to control the rival states of Transjordan.

At some time during the reign of Jehu (842–814 BCE),¹⁰ who formerly seems to have controlled the territory north of the Arnon River, the Aramaeans oppressed Israel: "In those days YHWH began to reduce Israel; and Hazael harassed them throughout the territory of Israel east of the Jordan, all the land of Gilead – the Gadites, the Reubenites, and the Manassites – from Aroer, by the Arnon River, up to Gilead and Bashan" (II Kings 10:32–33). Hazael's territory apparently extended west of the Jordan, as well, as far as the city of Gath; and King Jehoash of Judah (836–798 BCE) bought Hazael off with gold from the treasury of the Temple (II Kings 12: 18). The Aramaean hegemony continued during the reign of Jehoahaz son of Jehu (814–800 BCE), who suffered the Aramaean oppression of Hazael and his son Ben-hadad III (II Kings 13:3). Aramaean hegemony ended only when "YHWH granted Israel a deliverer, and they gained their freedom from Aram" (II Kings 13:5). It may be that not only Israel was delivered from Aramaean oppression, but Israel's Transjordanian neighbors, as well. This "deliverer" could have been Jehoash son of Jehoahaz of Israel (800–784 BCE), who defeated Ben-hadad III three times and recovered the towns that Hazael had taken from his father (II Kings 13:24–25). Another candidate for "deliverer" is Adadnirari III of Assyria (811–783 BCE).¹¹ However, it seems that Jehoash, who had been obliged to pay tribute to Adadnirari III, might have been too weak to renew Israel's hegemony in Transjordan, and that its restoration was left to Jeroboam II son of Jehoash (784–747 BCE), who "restored the territory of Israel from Lebo-hamath to the Sea of the Arabah" (II Kings 14:25). It

was Jeroboam II who conquered Lo-dabar in northern Gilead and Qarna'im in the Bashan (Amos 6:13). Amos refers to the political situation after the conquests of Jeroboam II in his prophecy: "But I, O House of Israel, will raise up a nation against you – declares YHWH, the God of Hosts – who will harass you from Lebo-hamath to the wadi Arabah" (Amos 6:14), i.e., throughout the vast territory of Israel. While Lebo-hamath might be taken as a conventional designation for the extreme point of the border of Israel, this is not the case for "the sea of the Arabah, the Dead Sea" (Deuteronomy 3:17) or "the wadi Arabah," one of the wadis near the northeastern tip of the Dead Sea, taking its name from the Arabah, "the Steppes of Moab." This period of Israelite hegemony in Transjordan must have been a short one, occurring during an interlude in the Assyrian campaigns to the West under the reigns of Shalmaneser IV (782–773 BCE)¹² and his successors up until Tiglath-pileser III (745–727 BCE). Shalmaneser IV did not conduct any campaigns to the West until his last year, which is defined in the Assyrian Eponym Chronicle as "against Damascus."¹³ Nor did his two immediate successors penetrate very far southward. Jeroboam's conquests could therefore have taken place either before Shalmaneser IV's campaign to the West in 773 BCE or in the following years of Assyrian weakness.

With the death of Jeroboam II, the political situation changed, and Israel lost its power. Within six months of his death, Israel became embroiled in inner strife, and only a decade later Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria made his first invasion into the region (734 BCE), and the kings of Judah, Ashkelon, Moab, and Ammon were forced to pay him tribute.

Looking for a possible niche for the events referred to in the new Moabite

inscription, one may choose between the reign of Jeroboam II (either before or after 773 BCE), or the unstable period in Israel following his death, prior to Tiglath-pileser III's march on the West. Palaeography favors a later date; thus, a date in the second third – or even the third quarter – of the eighth century BCE seems appropriate.

This inscription helps us fill a gap in the history of Ammon and Moab between the liberation of Moab from the Israelite yoke by King Mesha and the establishment of Assyrian hegemony in the West, adding another stone to the lost mosaic of history.

* Photos © The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, by P. Lanyi. Drawing by A. Yardeni.

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² Worschech 1990, 87 and pl. 1A.

³ Asterisks stand for missing letters. I did not count dividing dots between words.

⁴ Ahituv 1992, 250.

⁵ Miller 1991, 157–58.

⁶ Miller 1991, 149–50.

⁷ Ahituv 1992, 250.

⁸ Ahituv 1992, 250.

⁹ Donner and Röllig 1962–64, no. 26.

¹⁰ Dates after Cogan 1992, 1010.

¹¹ See Cogan and Tadmor 1988, 143, 151–52.

¹² Dates after Cogan and Tadmor 1988, 343.

¹³ Millard 1997, 466. In point of fact, it was not the king himself who went "against Damascus" but his chief-of-staff, the *turtanu*.

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