

The Lachish Jar Sherd: An Early Alphabetic Inscription Discovered in 2014

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The article presents a 12th-century B.C. alphabetic inscription unearthed at Lachish, Israel, during the 2014 excavation season.

Keywords: alphabet; Lachish; Late Bronze Age; Proto-Canaanite; Proto-Sinaitic; West Semitic palaeography

The Sherd: Archaeological Context and Ceramic Typology

On July 13, 2014, a sherd from a jar was found with an incised alphabetic inscription in Level VI at Tel Lachish,¹ placing its date within the range of the 12th century B.C.E. to ca. 1130 (Ussishkin 2004: 57). The sherd (field no. B1733) was uncovered in Area BB at the northeast corner of the mound, Locus B255 (Fig. 1).

¹ The Fourth Expedition to Lachish is co-sponsored by the Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, and the Institute of Archaeology, Southern Adventist University, under the co-direction of Yosef Garfinkel, Michael G. Hasel, and Martin G. Klingbeil. Consortium institutions include Helderberg College (South Africa), Oakland University (United States), Seoul Jangsin University (Korea), Universidad Adventista de Bolivia (Bolivia), and Virginia Commonwealth University (United States). The excavation work is undertaken in cooperation with the Israel Antiquities Authority, the National Parks Authority, and the Israel Exploration Society, and is affiliated with the American Schools of Oriental Research. The team in 2014 consisted of 110 staff and volunteers from 18 different countries.

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In the 2015 excavation season, it became clear that this location is the inner part of a large temple. Indeed, this location yielded a number of special finds, including two bronze figurines plated with silver depicting a smiting god, fragments of a badly preserved bronze goblet plated with gold, an Egyptian scarab, and a fragment of an outstanding stone object, possibly the base of an Egyptian statue. Thus far, about half of the building has been uncovered, so its exact plan and size are not yet known. It is hoped that further excavations in the vicinity during the 2016 season will shed more light on the temple.

In the 2015 season, further excavations were carried out around the spot where the inscribed sherd had been uncovered, but no other parts of the inscription were found. As this locus is situated at the edge of the mound, it is conceivable that most of the jar has eroded down the slope. An alternative possibility is that the sherd originated in the preceding Level VII and that the rest of the jar will be found below.

The sherd's maximum dimensions are 9.9 × 8.3 cm with a thickness of 0.7 cm, of which the letters in the lower part of the sherd occupy about 3 × 3 cm. Turned 20–30° clockwise relative to the wheel marks, the inscription was incised below the neck into the shoulder of the jar before firing, when the jar was "leather-hard." Traces of another, unexplained incision can be discerned at the top right of the sherd (Fig. 2). Our restoration of the entire vessel (Fig. 2f)² is founded on a type of jar current in Lachish Levels VI and VII and everywhere else in Israel

² The reconstruction follows Yannai 2004: 1053 and figs. 19.45, 19.49.

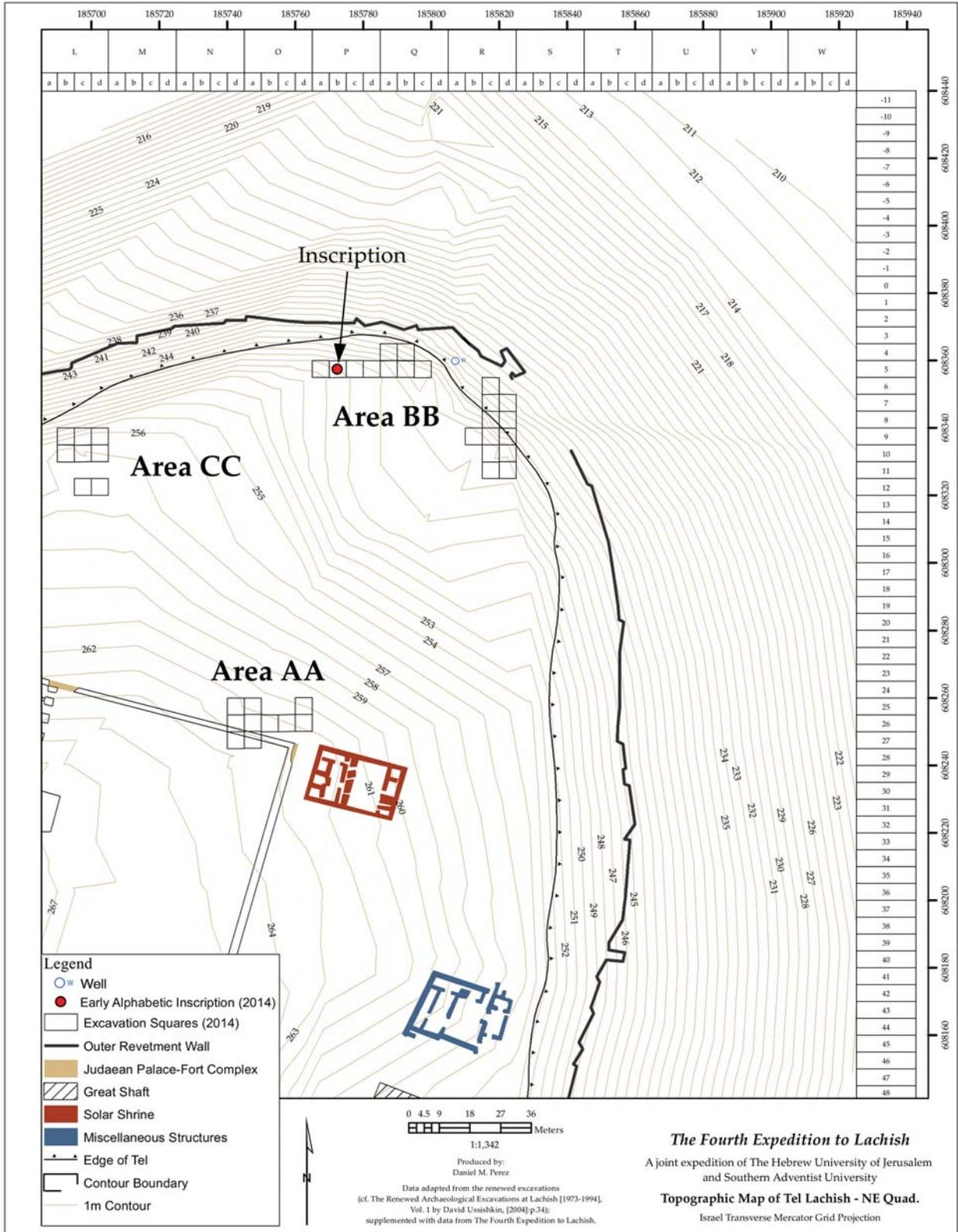


Fig. 1. The location of the Lachish jar sherds. (Map by D. M. Perez)

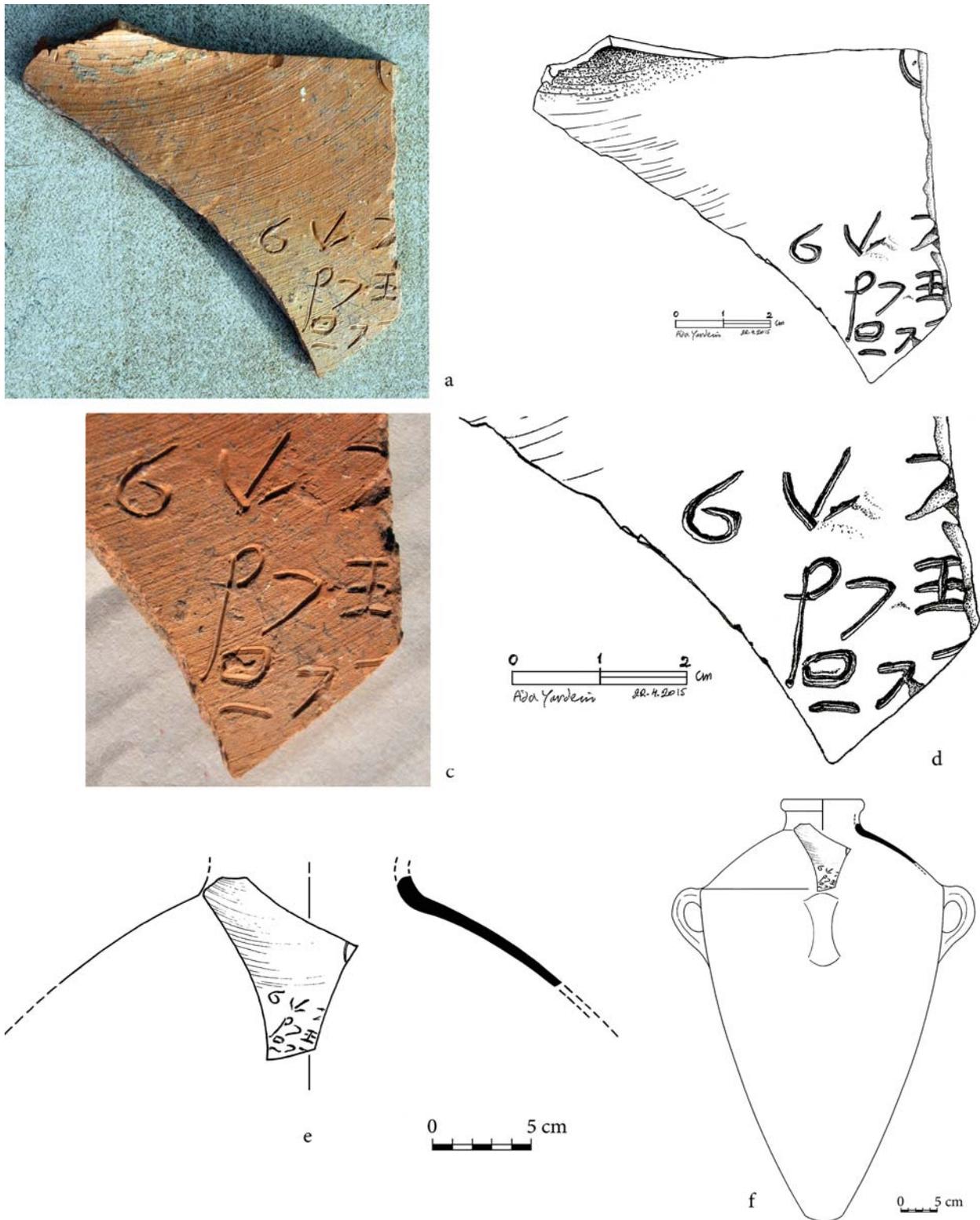


Fig. 2. Lachish jar sherd. (Drawings and reconstruction of the jar by O. Dobovsky; drawing of the inscription by A. Yardeni; photos by T. Rogovski)

in the 13th–12th centuries. It may well fit the shape of the sherd, but this is not absolutely certain.

The Inscription: Introduction

This is the first early alphabetic inscription to be discovered in a Late Bronze Age context in more than 30 years.³ The previous one, from the same site, was the Lachish bowl fragment, unearthed in 1983 (Ussishkin 1983: 115, 155–57; Lemaire 2004).

What remains of the newly found inscription comprises nine letters in three lines, three letters in each line, and no word dividers. The inscription is intact at the top, broken on the right and possibly also at the bottom. On the left, judging by the middle line, the text could be complete, but as the other lines are of unequal length, this is not certain.

Boldly incised before firing, the letters are perfectly clear. All the same, the one at the bottom left is of uncertain meaning, and the one at bottom right is largely broken away. A conceivable reading of the text is:

?] פ כ ל [
 ס פ ר [
 ?] X פ X [

In the middle line, the sequence *spr* (“to count, to recount, inscription/document, account, scribe”) can plausibly be read.⁴ But *sgr* (“to close, closing device, enclosure”) is not to be ruled out (see under *pe* and *resh* below).⁵ Both would indicate that the writing runs from right to left—in the line in question, at any rate. Nonetheless, the text is too fragmentary to make either of these a certainty; moreover, as word division is not marked, the three letters might belong to two adjacent words—for example, [. . .]s *pr*, the latter possibly “fruit” or “bull.”⁶

We thus regard the brief, fragmentary text as undecipherable, with the result that palaeography is the principal subject of this article.

³ By “early alphabetic” or “pre-cursive,” we mean the alphabet phase variously labeled “Proto-Canaanite,” “early Canaanite,” or “linear alphabetic,” the last one devised in order to distinguish this script from the cuneiform alphabet of Ugarit and much of the Levant. On “pre-cursive,” see Sass in press b.

⁴ See, e.g., Olmo Lete and Sanmartín 2003: 767–69; and Tropper 2008: 111.

⁵ See, e.g., Olmo Lete and Sanmartín 2003: 754–55; and Tropper 2008: 109–10.

⁶ Thus, one could alternatively identify hypothetical words in nearly any two-letter sequence here, right to left and left to right. While the sequence *pk*l in the top line might bring to mind a name like the unique biblical פִּיכֹל—Phicol in Gen 21:22, the same uncertainty applies as in *spr*: These three letters may belong to two adjacent words, and the reading direction is uncertain.

Background: The Early West Semitic Alphabet

A framework for the evolution of the alphabet and the dating of the various phases between the later Late Bronze Age and Iron Age IIA has been in place since the mid-20th century (Albright 1947; Cross 1954; 1967). Another framework emerged more recently, founded on stratified inscriptions, ¹⁴C datings, and subsequent developments in the fields of archaeology and West Semitic palaeography (Sass 2005a: 13–95, corrected and updated in Finkelstein and Sass 2013, and in Sass in press a; in press b). The two systems diverge on the attribution of certain alphabetic phenomena to phases within Iron Age I and parts of Iron Age IIA, where stratified inscriptions are mostly a novelty of the last 10–15 years. By contrast, these systems are in accord on the subject of the present article—the alphabet in the Late Bronze Age with its stratified inscriptions, albeit few.

As is well known, there is no unanimity on the absolute dating of Iron Age I and parts of Iron Age IIA. This is why the relevant inscriptions are dated herein by archaeological periods or relative chronology, on which there is broader agreement, rather than by centuries B.C.E.

The study of stratified inscriptions shows that the alphabet has changed relatively little between Late Bronze Age II and late Iron Age I/early Iron Age IIA (Sass 2005a: 52; Finkelstein and Sass 2013: 183–89, and passim). Indeed, some of the parallels to the Lachish jar sherd come from Iron Age I and early Iron Age IIA inscriptions. This is fortunate for the present article, as the Late Bronze Age inscriptions themselves are very rare. The said parallels are taken from the following texts.

Between four and six alphabetic inscriptions exist from the outgoing Late Bronze Age, the 13th century and part of the 12th. These inscriptions have undergone a certain “linearization” compared with the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions, a process whose causes and timing are ill understood (Sass 1988: 162; 2005b: 157; Finkelstein and Sass 2013: 173):⁷

- Lachish ewer (Fig. 3). Fosse Temple III = Level VII, 13th century.
- Lachish bowl (Fig. 4). Tomb 527 = Level VII, 13th century.

⁷ “For instance, the *alep* lost its bull’s-head shape . . . the *ayin* is circular rather than lentoid or eye-shaped, and the *resh* lost its human-head form. Yet some LB II–III letters are still quite close to the earliest pictographs, such as the *bet* of the Lachish bowl fragment with exact comparisons at Wadi el-Hol, and the *he* of the Nagila sherd and Lachish bowl fragment resembling the Sinai and Wadi el-Hol forms” (Finkelstein and Sass 2013: 173).

- Lachish bowl fragment (Fig. 5). Level VI, 12th century.
- Qubur el-Walayda bowl (Fig. 6). 12th-century context.
- Nagila sherd (?) (Fig. 7). Late Late Bronze Age context (?) rather than late Middle Bronze Age.
- Gezer sherd (?) (Fig. 8). Surface find, only broadly datable by letter typology.

The Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions are the earliest evidence of the alphabet,⁸ and the letters are essentially pictographic (Sass 1988: 12–40). Here, we refer for comparison to three of these inscriptions:

- Sinai 349 (Fig. 9).
- Sinai 352 (Fig. 10).
- Sinai 376 (Fig. 11).

The latest Proto-Canaanite inscriptions with letters comparable to the new inscription—in principle, from Iron Age I and early Iron Age IIA, but in practice mostly from early Iron Age IIA⁹—have letter-shapes that have changed little vis-à-vis the Late Bronze Age.¹⁰

- Khirbet Qeiyafa jar (Garfinkel et al. 2015) (Fig. 12). Iron Age I–II transition.
- Khirbet Qeiyafa ostracon (Figs. 13–14). Iron Age I–II transition.
- Tell eṣ-Şafi (Gath) sherd (Fig. 15). Context and pottery type probably early Iron Age IIA, less likely Iron Age I.
- Kefar Veradim bowl (Fig. 16). Context early part of late Iron Age IIA. Manufacture possibly datable by letter typology to early Iron Age IIA (Finkelstein and Sass 2013: 151, 161–62), or early in late Iron Age IIA (Finkelstein and Sass forthcoming)?
- Ophel pithos sherd (Fig. 17). Secondary deposition, with parallels for the pithos seemingly very late in Iron Age IIA and mainly Iron Age IIB, and parallels for the letter-forms seemingly Iron Age IIA, both early and late but none from its very end. These outwardly conflicting chronological data require further study (meanwhile, see Finkelstein and Sass forthcoming).

⁸ Together with the Wadi el-Hol inscriptions (not addressed herein). The dating of the Sinai and Wadi el-Hol inscriptions is uncertain, either the 19th–18th centuries (Goldwasser 2012: 12) or the 13th century (Sass 2005b: 157).

⁹ The alphabet obviously also existed during Iron Age I, but the attribution of stratified inscriptions to this period, in particular to early and middle Iron Age I, is uncertain (Finkelstein and Sass 2013: 173, 176).

¹⁰ For all of these inscriptions, except the Khirbet Qeiyafa jar, see Finkelstein and Sass 2013: 157–63, with earlier references.



Fig. 3. Lachish ewer (from Sass 1988: fig. 156).



Fig. 4. Lachish bowl (from Sass 1988: fig. 166).

- Beth-Shemesh Baal sherd (Fig. 18). Secondary deposition, possibly datable by letter typology to early Iron Age IIA, less likely to Iron Age I.
- ʿIzbet Şarṭah ostracon (Fig. 19). Secondary deposition, possibly datable by letter typology to early Iron Age IIA, less likely to Iron Age I. The abecedary in line 5 could have been an important datum despite the ambiguous context, had not many of the letters been so ineptly incised.¹¹
- Beth-Shemesh ostracon (Fig. 20). Unstratified. By letter typology, possibly contemporary with Qeiyafa.

¹¹ “[T]he ʿIzbet Şarṭah ostracon contains the attempt of an unskilled person . . . to write an abecedary with the twenty-two Canaanite letters. . . . His confusion of letters and his mistakes seem to be so serious that I would not recommend the drawing of paleographic conclusions from any of the forms produced by him. We cannot know which letter forms are based on the contemporary scribal tradition and which are the products of either the writer’s poor training or his bad memory” (Naveh 1978: 35).



Fig. 5. Lachish bowl fragment (from Sass 1988: fig. 164).



Fig. 6. Qubur el-Walayda bowl (from Sass 1988: fig. 180).



Fig. 7. Nagila sherd (from Sass 1988: fig. 143).

- El-Khadr arrowhead 1 (Fig. 21). Unprovenanced. Possibly datable by letter typology to early Iron Age IIA, or early in late Iron Age IIA (Finkelstein and Sass forthcoming).¹²
- Ruweiseh arrowhead (Fig. 22). No context. Possibly datable by letter typology to the earlier half of late Iron Age IIA.

¹² Among the dozens of published arrowheads with inscriptions, all unprovenanced except the Ruweiseh item, only the nine known prior to the 1960s seem beyond reasonable doubt and usable for comparison (see Finkelstein and Sass 2013: 163 with n. 58).



Fig. 8. Gezer sherd (from Sass 1988: fig. 145).

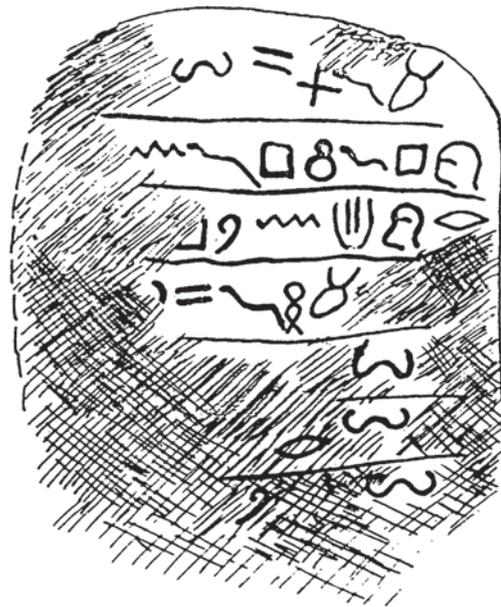


Fig. 9. Sinai 349 (from Sass 1988: fig. 27).



Fig. 10. Sinai 352 (from Sass 1988: fig. 40).

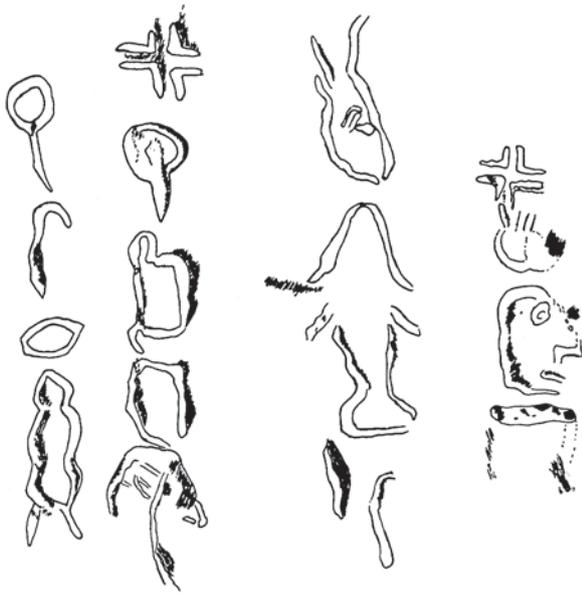


Fig. 11. Sinai 376 (from Sass 1988: fig. 91).



Fig. 12. Khirbet Qeiyafa jar (from Garfinkel et al. 2015: 227; drawing by A. Yardeni).

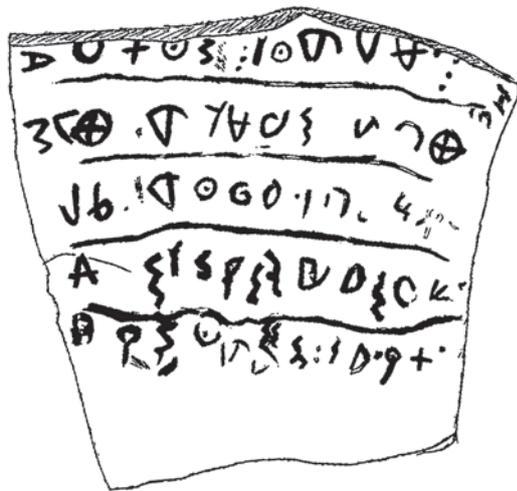


Fig. 13. Khirbet Qeiyafa ostrakon (from Misgav, Garfinkel, and Ganor 2009: 245).



Fig. 14. Khirbet Qeiyafa ostrakon (from Yardeni 2009: 259; drawing by A. Yardeni).

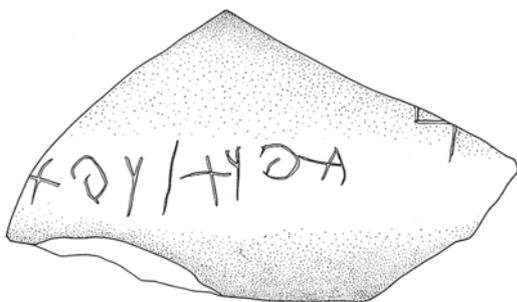


Fig. 15. Tell eš-Šafi sherd 821141 (from Maeir et al. 2008: 49).



Fig. 16. Kefar Veradim bowl (from Alexandre 2006: 27).



Fig. 17. Ophel pithos sherd (from Mazar, Ben-Shlomo, and Ahituv 2013: 41).



Fig. 18. Beth-Shemesh Baal sherd (from McCarter, Bunimovitz, and Lederman 2011: 188).

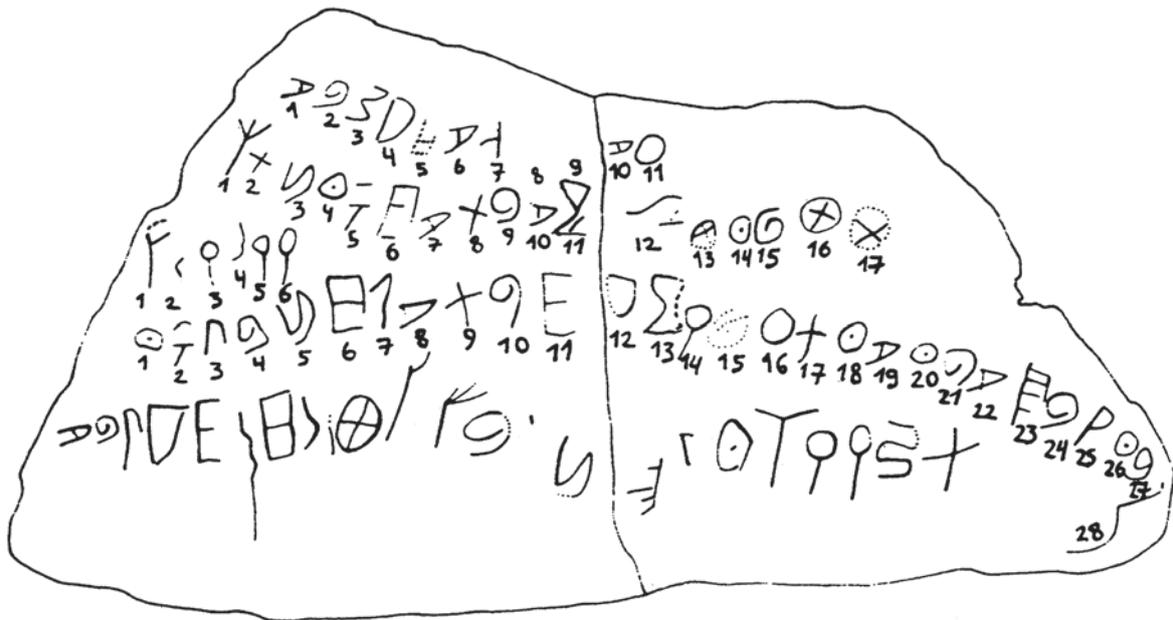


Fig. 19. Izbet Sartah ostrakon (from Sass 1988: fig. 175).



Fig. 20. Beth-Shemesh ostrakon (from Sass 1988: figs. 169–70).

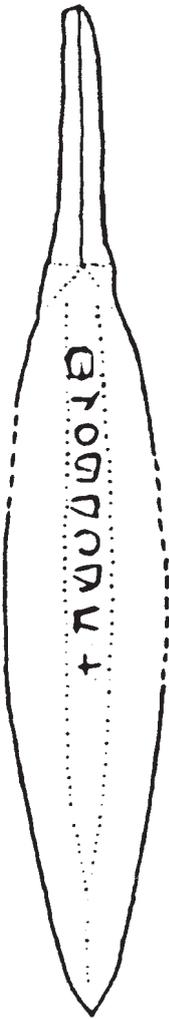


Fig. 21. El-Khadr arrowhead 1 (from Sass 1988: fig. 185).

The Late Bronze inscriptions, and the preceding and succeeding ones, are so scarce that several letters of the alphabet remain undocumented in each of the three phases. For the outgoing Late Bronze Age, the stratified texts numbered just four to six prior to the present discovery, as noted, so that each new document may bring about a shake-up in our understanding. Indeed, our inscription, its incised letters particularly clear, elucidates the shape of four letters hitherto unrecorded or insufficiently recorded in the period in question. It also adds an enigmatic shape.

The Inscription: Letter by Letter

Gimel. See *pe*.

Kap. The trident-like letter is the earliest stratified documentation of a *kap* altogether. Its shape has undergone a lin-

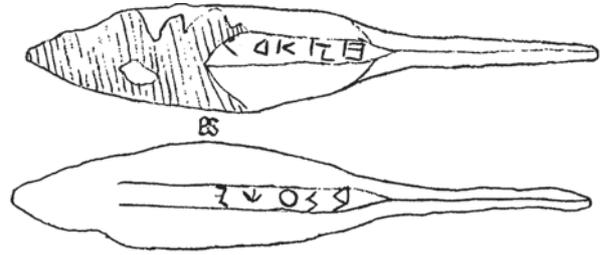


Fig. 22. Ruweiseh arrowhead (from Sass 1988: fig. 208).

earization (Sass 1988: 122) compared with both the Proto-Sinaitic pictograph with a rounded base and four fingers (see Fig. 9) and with a similar pictograph in the unstratified and undated Gezer sherd (see Fig. 8). In the latter, four fingers are visible, and a possible fifth is missing in the broken part on the left (Sass 1988: 122; Finkelstein and Sass 2013: 156). In its turn, the trident form continued from the Late Bronze Age until the end of the early alphabetic phase. It is documented in *ks* (“cup”) on the Kefar Veradim bowl (see Fig. 16); possibly also on the Qeiyafa jar, third sign from the right (see Fig. 12, if not a numeral) and on the Qeiyafa ostrakon (see Figs. 13–14), the latter in a sequence that both Haggai Misgav (Misgav, Garfinkel, and Ganor 2009: 254–55) and Ada Yardeni (2009) read as *mlk*. The same letter-form is to be seen on the context-less Ruweiseh arrowhead (see Fig. 22).¹³ As an archaizing feature, the trident shape lingers in the *kaps* on the monumental inscriptions from Byblos (Sass 2005a: 24–25).

<i>Kap</i>					
Sinai 349	Gezer sherd	Lachish jar sherd	Qeiyafa ostrakon	Kefar Veradim bowl	Ruweiseh arrowhead
<i>šade</i>					
Sinai 352	El-Khadr arrowhead 1	Ruweiseh arrowhead			

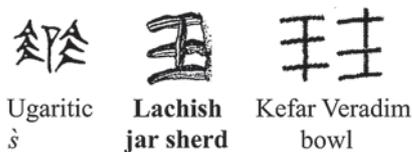
If indeed a *kap*, the form of the letter is atypical. This is why a *šade* should perhaps be considered as an alternative. It is founded on the tentative identification of a Proto-Sinaitic form (see Fig. 10) (Sass 1988: 128–29), documented twice in the string presumed to read *bnzr/bnšr*, a personal name (Sass 1988: 48). It is also doubtful because it is not known exactly when the *kap* evolved from the palm-of-hand

¹³ The *kap* on the ‘Izbet Šarṭah ostrakon (see Fig. 19) is atypical and perhaps incompetently written (see Naveh 1978: 34, followed by Sass 1988: 123).

pictograph to the linearized trident shape, nor when the trident-shaped or plant-shaped Proto-Sinaitic letter, if indeed a *šade*, became the form now documented since Iron Age IIA (see, e.g., Figs. 21–22, the former possibly dated by letter typology to early Iron Age IIA).¹⁴

Lamed. The coiled *lamed* is well documented in the late Late Bronze Age—on the Lachish ewer (see Fig. 3), Lachish bowl (see Fig. 4), Lachish bowl fragment (see Fig. 5), and the Qubur el-Walayda bowl (see Fig. 6) (Sass 1988: 60–64, 70–71; Finkelstein and Sass 2013: 153–56). The same form continued until the end of the early alphabetic, pre-cursive phase—for instance, on the stratified Tell eš-Šafi (Gath) sherd, probably in early Iron Age IIA (see Fig. 15), and the slightly earlier Qeiyafa jar and ostrakon (see Figs. 12–14).

Samek. Composed of three horizontals joined in their middle by a vertical, this is the earliest secure occurrence of the letter. Hitherto it was unidentified in the linear alphabet of the Late Bronze Age, though echoed in the contemporary form of Ugaritic /š/ (see, e.g., Eissfeldt 1938: n. 10, quoting Hans Bauer without an exact reference; Segert 1983: 202; and Sass 1988: 126). Despite various attempts, *samek* is still not identified with certainty in the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions (on the diverse proposals, see Sass 1988: 126). The post-Late Bronze *samek* seems not to have changed for several centuries. The two *sameks* on the Kefar Veradim bowl (see Fig. 16) (Alexandre 2002: 68; Sass 2005a: 36–39; Finkelstein and Sass 2013: 161–62) are very similar to the Lachish shape. The nondescript *samek* on the ‘Izbet Šarṭah ostrakon is unhelpful (see Fig. 19). In the next earliest cursive phase of late Iron Age IIA, the vertical is lengthened downward to become the leg of the letter.¹⁵

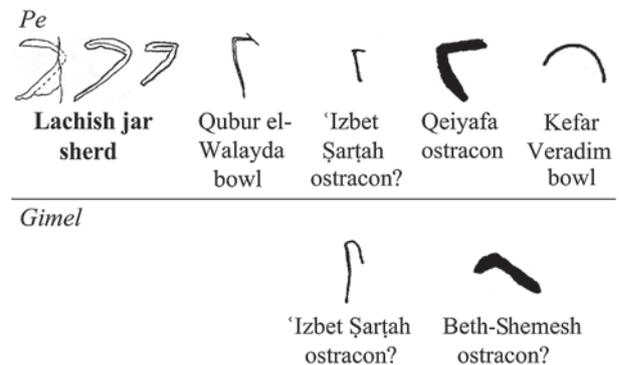


¹⁴ An incomplete right-angled letter on the Lachish bowl fragment (see Fig. 5)—bottom line, third from right—was variously identified by David Ussishkin (1983: 157) and Sass (1988: 62–63, 128–29) as *gimel* (?) or *pe* (?), and by Frank Moore Cross (1984: 72) and André Lemaire (2004: 1599) as *šade*: As shown by the different drawings in comparison with the photograph, the identification of the letter depends on the importance each author accorded the short stroke at the top left. While Ussishkin, Cross, and Lemaire perceived it as vertical and rather prominent, to one of us (Sass) this stroke seems shorter and thinner, and inclined toward the right, which might make it an accidental extension of the main vertical.

¹⁵ The slight extension of the Kefar Veradim vertical either above or below the horizontals should be regarded as incidental, suggesting that at this stage the letter was still perceived as legless, just as in the Lachish jar sherd.

For want of stratified examples, the first securely attested *sameks* with a prominent shaft are found on the monumental Mesha, Kulamuwa, and Dan inscriptions dated historically to the 830s onward (Sass 2005a: 24–25).

Pe. There are three examples in the Lachish jar sherd. In the handful of stratified Late Bronze inscriptions, there is not enough documentation to differentiate *gimel* from *pe* by their shape. The identification of our letter as *pe* is founded chiefly on its occurrence, noted above, in the presumed sequence *spr*, combined with a lone near-parallel in the contemporary Qubur el-Walayda bowl (see Fig. 6). The latter is recognized on the strength of its presence in a sequence understood to read *pʿl* in the PN *šmpʿl* (Cross 1980: 1–4, followed by Sass 1988: 70). There are no clear comparisons in the other three or four Late Bronze inscriptions from contexts considered reliable (Sass 1988: 128, 184; 2005b: 159; see also n. 14 herein). Yet toward the end of the early alphabetic, pre-cursive continuum, in the Qeiyafa ostrakon (see Figs. 13–14), a *pe* similar to the Lachish letter is found, identified by its occurrence in the sequence *špʿt*. *Pe* differs from *gimel* in the ‘Izbet Šarṭah abecedary (Fig. 19), though the validity of this difference is in doubt.



The *gimel*, not securely attested in the early alphabetic phase (Sass 1988: 112–13), probably is in the shape of an angled line too; yet it is unknown whether the angle and/or stance of the letter was different in all inscriptions of any given period in order to distinguish it from *pe*. An example is the obtuse-angled letter in the unstratified Beth-Shemesh ostrakon (see Fig. 18), hesitatingly considered a *gimel* by William F. Albright (1936: 9).

In sum, it is the Qubur el-Walayda letter in *pʿl* and the Qeiyafa letter in *špʿt* that tip the scales in favor of recognizing the similar Lachish letter as *pe* in *spr*.

Sade. See *kap*.

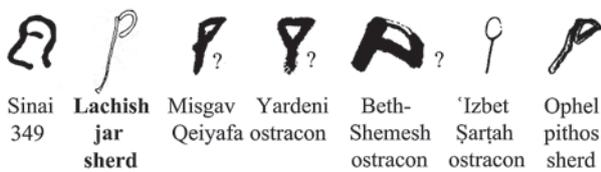
Qop. See *resh*.

Resh. Comprising a remarkably long shaft—a scribal flourish, it would seem—extending down to the bottom line, with a semicircle joined to its top right, the left-hand letter in the middle line is probably best identified as a *resh*.¹⁶ If so, it is the earliest documentation of the linear shape, which is supposed to have evolved from the Proto-Sinaitic human-head-and-neck-in-profile pictograph (see Fig. 9; Sass 1988: 131).

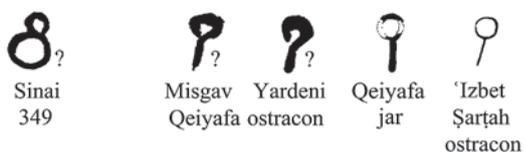


On the unstratified Beth-Shemesh ostrakon (see Fig. 20), a letter with the same orientation as its Lachish counterpart but a larger head and shorter leg was habitually identified as a *resh*. A letter with a similar shape and orientation to the Lachish letter is further found on the Ophel pithos sherd (see Fig. 17), possibly from the beginning of late Iron Age IIA (Mazar, Ben-Shlomo, and Aḥituv 2013: 45; Finkelstein and Sass 2013: 162–63), second letter from the left. In the *editio princeps*, a *qop* was preferred, with *resh* a distant second; but others (most of them mentioned in Millard 2014: 51) would rather read it as a *resh*. In the ‘Izbet Ṣarṭaḥ abecedary (see Fig. 19), the *qop* is documented in its habitual place; yet the careless writer of the ostrakon gave his *resh* exactly the same form. Also in the Qeiyafa jar (see Fig. 12) and ostrakon (see Figs. 13–14), *qop* and *resh* are not evidently distinguishable.

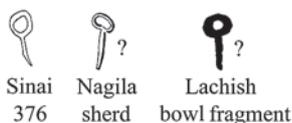
Resh



Qop



Waw



¹⁶ Whereas Yardeni, who has drawn the inscription, regards the tiny extension to the left of the shaft as part of the letter, one of us (Sass) considers it accidental. Both observations are founded on examinations of the original.

Casting the later shapes of *resh* and *qop* back in time to the latest early alphabetic or pre-cursive phase in early Iron Age IIA and before, one would expect the *resh* to be asymmetrical—a semicircle or triangle joined to the top of a shaft, and the *qop* to be symmetrical—a circle or oval on a shaft. But, as we have seen for the ‘Izbet Ṣarṭaḥ ostrakon and Ophel pithos sherd, it is uncertain how, or whether, this distinction functioned in practice. And as to the Late Bronze Age, the development of *qop* and *resh* is not yet clear; there are no stratified parallels.¹⁷

Chiefly due to the proposed reading *spr* (less likely *sgr*), *resh* seems preferable to *qop* on the Lachish jar sherd. That the letter is oriented left to right does not necessarily contradict the right-to-left reading of the line as a whole, proposed above; such a mix occurs often in the early alphabetic inscriptions—for instance, in the Khirbet Qeiyafa ostrakon (see Figs. 13–14).

The Left-Hand Letter in the Bottom Line. The irregular rectangle with a horizontal line underneath does not resemble any known letter. Do we have here an ‘*ayin*¹⁸ with a mark underneath? Alternatively, could this mark, with or without the rectangle above, stand for a numeral or a measure?¹⁹



The Right-Hand Letter in the Bottom Line. There are several possibilities—for example, *gimel*, *zayin*, *yod*, *samek*, *pe*, and *shin*—some of them more hypothetical than others, as their Late Bronze Age form is not yet documented for certain.

¹⁷ An added difficulty is that the Proto-Sinaitic circle-on-shaft letter is habitually identified as a *waw*, whereas the Proto-Sinaitic sign considered a *qop* is quite different. While this issue is too far from the subject of the present discussion, the question of when exactly did the *qop* become a circle on a shaft and the *waw* a semicircle on a shaft still awaits an answer in stratified inscriptions. The Late Bronze Lachish bowl fragment (see Fig. 5) has a circle on a shaft (cf. Ussishkin 1983: 155–57; Sass 1988: 62, 130; and Lemaire 2004: 1599), the identification of which remains uncertain. A similar form is attested on the Nagila sherd (Fig. 7), possibly of the 13th–12th century (Sass 2005b: 159; Finkelstein and Sass 2013: 156). The ‘Izbet Ṣarṭaḥ *waw* is unusable, and the earliest *waws* in the form of a semicircle on a shaft are not securely attested before the monumental inscriptions dated historically to around the last third of the ninth century (Sass 2005a: 24–25).

¹⁸ What might look in the photograph like a dot in the letter is, in fact, an excess of clay, not wiped away after the sign was incised.

¹⁹ Or else an atypical *bet*, its bottom line detached?

Conclusions

A text incised on a store-jar before firing is expected to mention a personal name, title, or institution and/or a place-name, all referring to either the origin of the jar's contents or to its destination. The contents themselves and/or their weight or volume could be stated as well. Alternatively, the text may be dedicatory. Which is likelier? And what does *spr*, if correctly read, signify in such a context? The inscription lacks word dividers, and it is too short and fragmentary to provide answers, yet the temple context may substantiate a dedicatory understanding.²⁰

²⁰ The 20–30° tilt of the inscription relative to the wheel-marks is also unexplained.

Therefore the contribution of the Lachish jar sherd to our knowledge is essentially palaeographic. The number of Late Bronze Age inscriptions from secure contexts was four, with probably one or two more.²¹ On this modest background, the impact of a single new text may be considerable. Whereas the shape of the *lamed* in the Lachish jar sherd was well known before, the new inscription provides the earliest stratified attestations of *kap*,²² *samek*, and *resh*,²³ and the second Late Bronze Age occurrence of a relatively secure *pe*,²⁴ as well as a new—so far unidentifiable—sign or two signs, one on top of the other.

²¹ The Lachish ewer, bowl, and bowl fragment, and Qubur el-Walayda bowl; possibly also the Gezer and Nagila sherds.

²² Less likely *šade*.

²³ Less likely *qop*.

²⁴ Less likely *gimel*.

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