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From *Nasas* to *Semakhyahu*: Two New Engraved Inscriptions from Iron Age Moẓa

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Two inscriptions recently found on jar fragments at Tel Moẓa help clarify the reading of two previously uncovered inscriptions at the site. The four ancient Hebrew inscriptions, all inscribed on jars before firing, render a unique formula, where both the sender and recipient are mentioned, representing a new, heretofore unattested category of ownership inscriptions. Drawing both on the stratigraphic and epigraphic evidence, all four inscriptions can be placed in the seventh century BCE, a time when Tel Moẓa appears to have been an important economic and administrative center, as well as a cultic one.

Keywords: Kingdom of Judah, cult, potters, economy, epigraphy, Hebrew script

Introduction

Two engraved inscriptions in ancient Hebrew script were recently uncovered in fills overlying ancient terraces in the Soreq Valley, below Tel Moẓa.[2] The excavation, extending over eight squares (5 × 5 m each), in three different excavation areas (A–C), was conducted on the western bank of Naḥal Soreq (Fig. 1), near the eastern margins of the tell.

The fills in which the inscriptions were exposed covered a series of massive retaining walls, built on the streambank parallel to the stream (Area A; Plan 1). The remains, located directly north of the ruins of a Byzantine-period farmstead and at a somewhat lower elevation than the ruins (Permit No. A-7906; Dallasheh, Habas and Khalaily 2019), were covered by a thick sterile layer of alluvial soil. The stratigraphic position of the remains, together with the fact that they were associated with only Iron Age material, clearly assigns them to this

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[2] The trial excavation was carried out in May–June 2021 by Marion Sindel, on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority (Permit No. A-8966) prior to the construction of a waterline to Jerusalem. The excavation, funded by Mekorot, was conducted with the assistance of D. Ben Ayoun (surveying and area supervision), J. Tiano (surveying and area supervision), E. Marco (area supervision, aerial drone photography), Shai Halevi (field and studio photography, and aerial drone photography) and S. Gendler (metal detection), Or Zakaim (drafting and plans), B. Silvain (finds drawing), Anna Eirikh-Rose and Yehiel Zelinger (scientific advice and guidance).

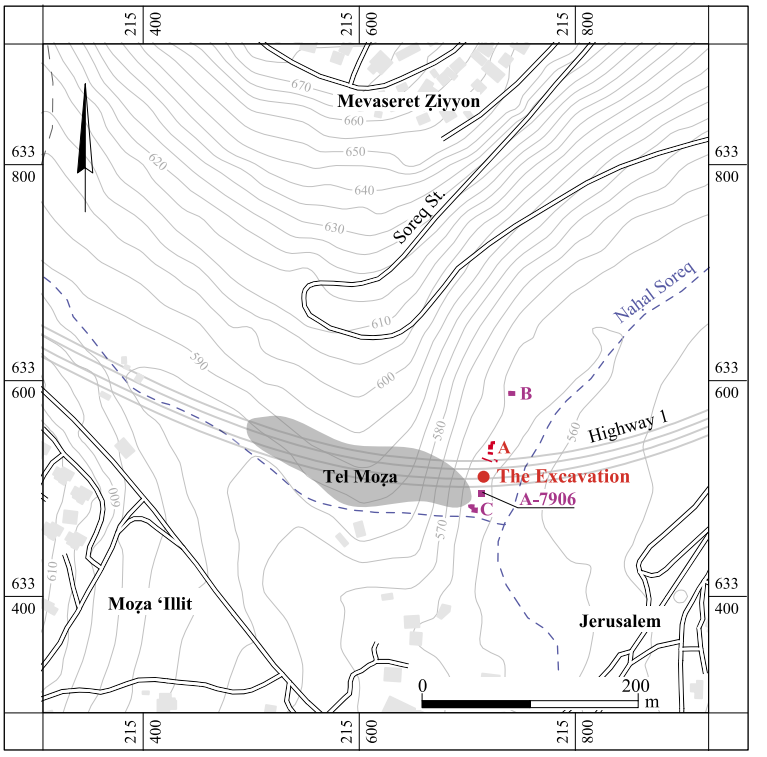
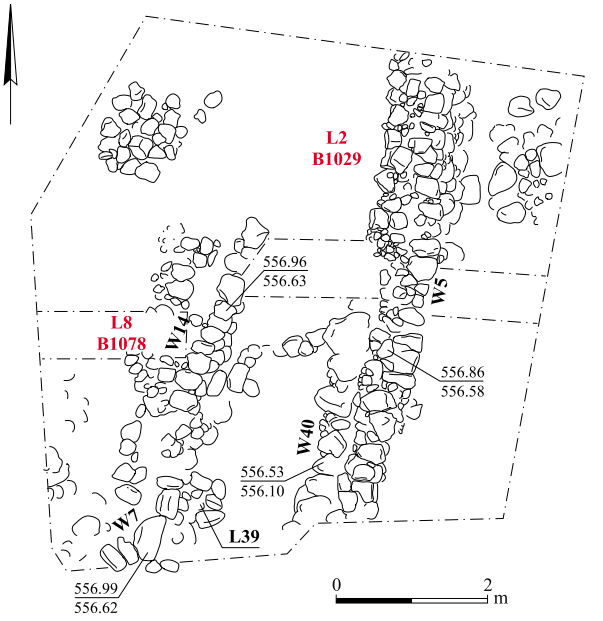


Fig. 1. Location map.



Plan 1. The southern squares of Area A, showing (in red) the location where the two inscriptions were discovered.

period, apparently within Iron Age II.[3] The two inscriptions probably originated from the occupation layer of this period within Tel Moẓa.

The location of the walls within the valley, their general orientation alongside the riverbed, as well as their relatively massive dimensions, suggest that they were not merely agricultural terraces, but were possibly built as retaining walls to stabilize the banks and protect the base of the soft limestone cliff on which the tell stood from water erosion. The walls underwent repair at least once. Their construction and maintenance over time, costly in terms of human and financial resources, indicate a well-planned management of the site's natural surroundings, consistent with the existence at this time of a centralized power that could coordinate such work.

Two other engraved inscriptions in ancient Hebrew script (Vainstub 2009:137–147, Fig. 5.11), previously retrieved in collapsed debris north of the Iron II temple complex uncovered on the tell, were attributed by the excavators to the temple's abandonment phase (Greenhut and De Groot 2009:52–53). Due to close similarities among the four inscriptions and the high likelihood that they belong to the same occupation phase at Tel Moẓa, all four are described below in detail.

Previous Excavations at the Site

Tel Moẓa is located in the Judean Hills, c. 7 km west of the ancient city of Jerusalem, on the southern slope of a spur overlooking the confluence of Naḥal Soreq and its tributary, Naḥal Moẓa/Arza. The area, containing numerous freshwater springs and drained by the seasonal flows of the streams, is covered by particularly fertile alluvial soil. The tell stands at a strategic location in the region, overlooking the road from the Shephelah to Jerusalem, an area which has been intensively settled by agricultural communities from the Neolithic period to modern times (Greenhut and De Groot 2009; Khalaily et al. 2020).

Although the identification of the tell with biblical Moẓa[4] was suggested as early as 1932 (Vincent and Abel 1932:284), it was not until 1993 that a salvage excavation was first conducted at the site by the Israel Antiquities Authority, prior to the construction of the Tel Aviv–Jerusalem Highway. Further excavations were conducted on the tell in 2002–2003 (Greenhut and De Groot, 2009) and in 2012– 2013 (Kisilevitz 2015), and an ongoing expedition by Tel Aviv University began in 2019.

The excavations exposed a series of occupation layers on the tell spanning the Neolithic period and recent times; the settlement apparently reached a peak in Iron Age II, from the tenth century to the Babylonian conquest in 586 BCE (Greenhut and De Groot 2009; Kisilevitz et al. 2014; Kisilevitz 2015; Kisilevitz and Lipschits 2020). The exposed remains suggest that Moẓa was an important economic and administrative center of the Kingdom of Judah (Greenhut and De Groot 2009:219–225). This conclusion was based in large

[3] For a detailed description of the excavation results, see Sindel, forthcoming.

[4] Moẓa is mentioned in the book of Joshua as a town in the territory of the tribe of Benjamin (Joshua 18:26).

part on the finding of numerous large-sized silos and many storage vessels, suggesting an exceptional storage capacity exceeding the needs of the site's inhabitants and leading to the identification of the unearthed remains as a 'royal granary,' established to supply the nearby city of Jerusalem (Greenhut and De Groot 2009:223).

The large Iron II temple complex uncovered at the site was among its most striking features. It is the only known temple found within the very heart of the Kingdom of Judah, and the second known temple in the kingdom, together with that of 'Arad. Oriented east–west, the complex comprises a monumental temple[5] with its entrance toward the east, preceded by a courtyard. The temple was built according to the plan of northern Syrian temples from the third millennium BCE through the Iron Age, known as the *in antis* long room plan (Kisilevitz 2015; Shapira 2018; Kisilevitz and Lipschits 2020). At least four different phases, marked by successive floor raisings, were identified in the courtyard, providing evidence of the prolonged activity of the complex during Iron II. The earliest phase of the temple complex yielded a cache of cultic artefacts, dated to Iron Age IIA (Kisilevitz 2014). The objects, appearing to have been intentionally broken and sealed under a newly laid floor, date the foundation of the temple to the late tenth or early ninth century BCE (Kisilevitz 2015; Kisilevitz and Lipschits 2020); it is noteworthy that recent excavations suggest that it was built atop an earlier, smaller complex (Kisilevitz and Lipshits 2020). In its latest identified phase, dated between the seventh and sixth centuries BCE (Kisilevitz 2020), the altar was rebuilt and three stone-built steps were installed in front of the entrance to the temple, adding to its monumentality. As the late phases of the complex suffered from heavy erosion, it remains unclear exactly when and why this monumental complex went out of use. While many unanswered questions remain regarding the nature and function of this temple near Jerusalem, it has been speculated that it served a combined function related to both economic and cultic activity, given that grain production and cult were often intertwined in the ancient Near East (Greenhut 2011).

The Inscriptions

The 2003 Inscriptions

An inscription engraved on the rim of a holemouth jar (Vainstub 2009: No. 61). Its surviving part reads:

צפן בן נסס[

]ṣpn bn Nss

Translation: [to]Ṣpn son of Nss

[5] The temple was at least 21 m long and 10 m wide, and its northern wall was more than 2 m thick (Kisilevitz and Lipschits 2020).

This inscription clearly belongs to the category of ownership inscriptions, commonly occurring in the Iron Age. However, the name *Nss* is unique and highly unusual in its form. As a non-theophoric name, it most probably derives from the function or title of its bearer. According to Vainstub (2009:139), it is clearly related to the biblical word *nes*. The word *Nasas* or *Noses* should, therefore, designate the 'Nose ha nes', the standard bearer. This function, unknown in the context of ancient Judah until the discovery of this inscription, is nevertheless, well-known from neighboring countries, where standard-bearers were high-ranking public officials, officiating mostly in a military context but also in royal processions and cultic activities (Vainstub 2009:140–141).

The other inscription, engraved on a vessel handle, is more remarkable (Vainstub 2009: No. 62). It also belongs as well to the category of ownership inscriptions, and reads:
סס לסמכיהו[ ]
[ ]ss lsmkyhw

Vainstub (2009:141–142) proposed two possible readings of the inscription. The first possibility is "[ ]*ss lSmkyhw*" (*[ ]ss to Smkyhw*), where *[ ]ss* refers to the content of the vessel to which the handle belonged, perhaps wine, delivered to *Smkyhw*, the recipient. A second possible reading is *[mN]ss lSmkyhw*, ([from *N*]*ss* to *Smkyhw*), proposing a connection between this and the former inscription, as both would include the name *Nss*. Considered on its own, this reading seems unlikely as ownership inscriptions on jars usually bear only the recipient's name; however, Vainstub suggested this interpretation based on the fact that the two inscriptions were found together in one context.

Both inscriptions were engraved prior to firing, the writing style of the former inscription indicating its execution by a well-trained scribe, experienced in engraving, while that of the latter indicates a freer style, possibly executed by someone more accustomed to writing with ink. Both were incised in the cursive style of the seventh century BCE in Judah, a dating consistent with the other finds retrieved from the collapsed debris in which the inscriptions were found (Greenhut and De Groot 2009:53). Although the exact stratigraphic context of the two inscriptions was unclear, their particular significance stems from the fact that they were discovered within the temple complex. Greenhut and De Groot (2009:225) suggested that the inscriptions should be understood in the context of the temple and the overall economic function of the site, conveying evidence of the existence of a joint authority, both cultic and military in nature, responsible for the storage of grain and other goods and their supply to Jerusalem.

The 2021 Inscriptions

Both of these inscriptions are partially preserved, with an extant length of approximately 5 cm. As with the 2003 inscriptions, they belong to the category of ownership inscriptions. They were both engraved on the handle of a vessel in the fresh clay prior to firing and executed in the formal style of the seventh and sixth centuries BCE in Judah (Naveh 1982:75–77, 89–100; Misgav 2019).

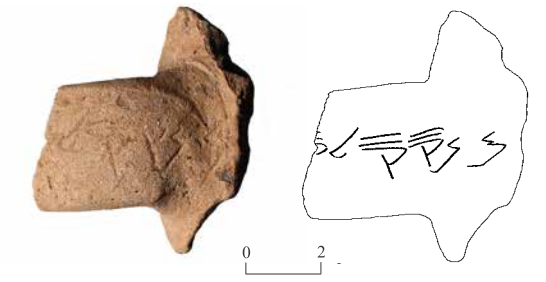


Fig. 2. Inscription 1.

1. Area A, L2, B1029 (Fig. 2)
The inscription begins near the joining of the handle to the vessel's body. Its surviving part reads:
]מנסס לס
mnss ls[

Translation: from Nss to S[

This inscription is of tremendous importance as it sheds light on the reading of the previously published inscriptions from Tel Moẓa, adding further insight. As mentioned above, the name *Nss* is only known from Moẓa. It is unknown in the Hebrew onomasticon, and appears once in connection with an archaeological find, inscribed on an Ammonite seal, where it is preceded by the definite article 'the' and hence cannot be a name (Avigad 1970:284–295; see also Vainstub 2009:139). While Vainstub (2009) proposed that the word may derive from or may indicate a function or title, possibly that of a standard-bearer, the absence of a definite article in the Moẓa inscription suggests that it was rather a personal name. This reading is consistent with Vainstub's (2009) reading of the inscription]צפן בן נסס, "*Ṣfn* son of *Nss*[", where *Nss* clearly appears as a personal name.

The formula of this inscription is furthermore unparalleled. Ownership inscriptions on jars typically bear the name of the recipient, while here the name of the recipient, only partially preserved, is clearly preceded by that of the sender: *Nss*. The inscription appears to perfectly complement Vainstub's reading of Inscription No. 62, "from *Nss* to *Semakhyahu,*" which he cautiously suggested due to the highly unusual nature of the formula (Vainstub 2009:138–141). The present find practically dismisses doubt, reinforcing Vainstub's suggestion. Considering Vainstub's reading of Inscription No. 62, the present inscription can be reconstructed as follows:
[מנסס לס[מכיהו
mnss ls[mkyhw]

Translation: from Nss to Semakhyahu

This reading is further reinforced by the second inscription discovered during the 2021 excavation.

Fig. 3. Inscription 2.

2. Area A, L8, B1078 (Fig. 3)
The surviving part of the inscription reads:
]סמכיהו
]śmkyhw

Translation: Semakhyahu

This is the second occurrence in Moẓa of the name *Semakhyahu*, a common name in this period (Vainstub 2009:142), with the first occurrence being that of Vainstub's inscription No. 62. It was engraved beginning from the exterior part of the handle, extending toward its join with the vessel's body. As the handle is broken at its middle, it is quite probable that more text preceded the name *Smkyhw*. In keeping with the readings of the other inscriptions described above, it seems that the name *Smkyhw* must have been preceded by the phrase "from *Nss* to," thus suggesting the completion of this inscription.

Discussion and Conclusions

The two new inscriptions found at the foot of Tel Moẓa shed further light regarding the inscriptions found at the tell in 2003. They definitively clarify the reading of the inscriptions published by Vainstub, jointly forming a series of coherent and complimentary ancient Hebrew inscriptions, which probably belong to one phase of the Iron II temple complex. Consequently, the formerly unique formula of *mnss lsmkyhw*, including both the sender's and recipient's names, is no longer an isolated example. This formula is shown to represent a new category of ownership inscription, found so far only in Moẓa. Drawing both on the stratigraphic and epigraphic evidence, all four inscriptions can be placed in the seventh century BCE, despite uncertainties due to the secondary context in which the latest two inscriptions were uncovered.

The fact that all the inscriptions were engraved on the vessels prior to firing indicates that they were manufactured with the intention of being delivered to an individual, *Semakhyahu*. The three different styles of handwriting suggest that three different scribes were involved in the manufacturing process. This strongly suggests that engraving the inscriptions on the jars was part of a routine procedure. As Tel Moẓa appears to have been an important

economic and administrative center, it was most probably also home to a high-ranking bureaucracy. If each handle was engraved by a different hand, this may suggest that the potters themselves were responsible for the engraving, implying that the craftsmen were literate. This suggestion is consistent with what we know of the prevalence of literacy and a fairly high level of education in this period (Demsky 2012; Misgav 2016).

It remains unknown whether the inscriptions reflect a tax payment, or another kind of administrative notation, and what was the nature of the hierarchical relationship between *Nss* and *Semakhyahu*, questions which certainly evoke an intriguing discussion. *Semakhyahu* appears to have held the traditional role of recipient of jars and their contents, possibly a civil administrative authority under which the jars were placed for storage or distribution.

The personal name *Nss* most probably derived from, or refers to the function of the name bearer. It is likely that this name represented an individual of sufficiently high status as to repeatedly occur on the vessels, while he himself was not their recipient. This person was mentioned twice as the sender of the vessels and once as the father of the recipient. Drawing on Vainstub's (2009) suggestion to interpret this name as referring to a standard bearer, it appears to have been a specific function related to the unique nature of economic, social, cultic and possibly military activities conducted at Moẓa in Iron II.

The series of four inscriptions from Moẓa indicate the contemporary presence at the site of two high-ranking officials at a time when the settlement functioned as an economic and religious center of the Kingdom of Judah. It is tempting to see in the two figures of authority, *Nss* and *Semakhyahu*, a reflection of the dual function of Moẓa. We might further see here the rise of a military figure on the tell, *Nss*, at a time of increasing political instability during the eighth and seventh centuries, when the military campaign of Sennacherib against Judah took place (701 BCE), highlighting the importance of Moẓa as the site of the royal granary responsible for Jerusalem's food supply.

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