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A Second Temple Period Inscription on a Stone Ossuary Lid from the City of David, Jerusalem

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A stone fragment bearing a Hebrew or Aramaic inscription was discovered in the debris piled up along the Early Roman period Stepped Street in the Tyropoeon Valley, on the west slope of the City of David hill. The inscription preserves part of a list mentioning proper names and sums of money. Similar lists are known from the Second Temple period, commonly interpreted as payment received or rendered from individuals. This is the first inscription to be found inside the city. It is unclear whether the inscription was connected to the ossuary on which it was inscribed, perhaps by the ossuary craftsman?

Keywords: Jerusalem, Second Temple period, Hebrew, Aramaic, epigraphy, Jewish, ossuary, payment

Introduction

A stone fragment bearing a Hebrew or Aramaic inscription was discovered in the debris piled up during the 2016 salvage excavations along the Early Roman period Stepped Street in the Tyropoeon Valley, on the west slope of the City of David hill (L8003, B800490;[2] see Szanton and Uziel 2015; 2016; Szanton and Zillberstain 2016; Szanton et al. 2016;

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[2] The excavations discussed here were undertaken in the Slepped Street excavations, along the course of the Tyropoeon Valley, within the confines of the City of David National Park. The excavations were conducted by N. Szanton, on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority, and funded by the El'ad Foundation. We would like to thank the many people who have assisted in the excavations, including Ari Levy, Annette Landes-Nagar, Ayala Zilberstein, Sara Tal, Navot Rom, Meidad Shor, Michal Haber, Aimee Kessler, Oscar Bejarano, Ortal Chalaf, Tehillah Sadiel, Hannah Ripps, Rebecca Pfuester, Katharina Palmberger, Bracha Soiblman (area supervisors), Vadim Essman, Yaakov Shmidov, Or Zakaim, Alexander Wiegmann (surveying and plans), Nissim Mizrahi, Gil Berkovitz, Abraham Ajami, S. Rappaport and Yosef Carmeli (foremen), Assaf Peretz, Atalya Fadidah, Clara Amit and Shai Halevy (photography), Irina Lidsky-Reznikov (finds drawing), Avshalom Karasik (digital artifact drawing), as well as Joe Uziel and Moran Hagbi from Jerusalem District in the IAA. The article was written while Esther Eshel was head of the IIAS group, from Creation to Sinai 2017.

2019; Szanton, Shor and Hagbi 2017). The origin of the stone is unclear. It was found in Area S8 of the 'Stepped Street' excavations, near Point J3 in the tunnel excavated by Bliss and Dickie (1898). The stone is flat, its profile typical of ossuary lid stones from the Early Roman period (9 cm long, 3–7 cm wide, 1.5–2.0 cm thick; Fig. 1). Its upper part is light brown, while its lower part is blackish. Remains of six or seven written lines were observed.

THE INSCRIPTION

The seven-line cursive inscription was incised on the stone with a sharp tool (Figs. 1, 2). The stone is broken above Line 1, and below Line 6 are remains of what may be another line. Therefore, the original beginning, as well as the end of the inscription and the left margin, are missing. In Line 1, the remains of the right side of a letter can be seen, probably a *resh*. There is no indication as to what language it was written in, either Aramaic or Hebrew, as

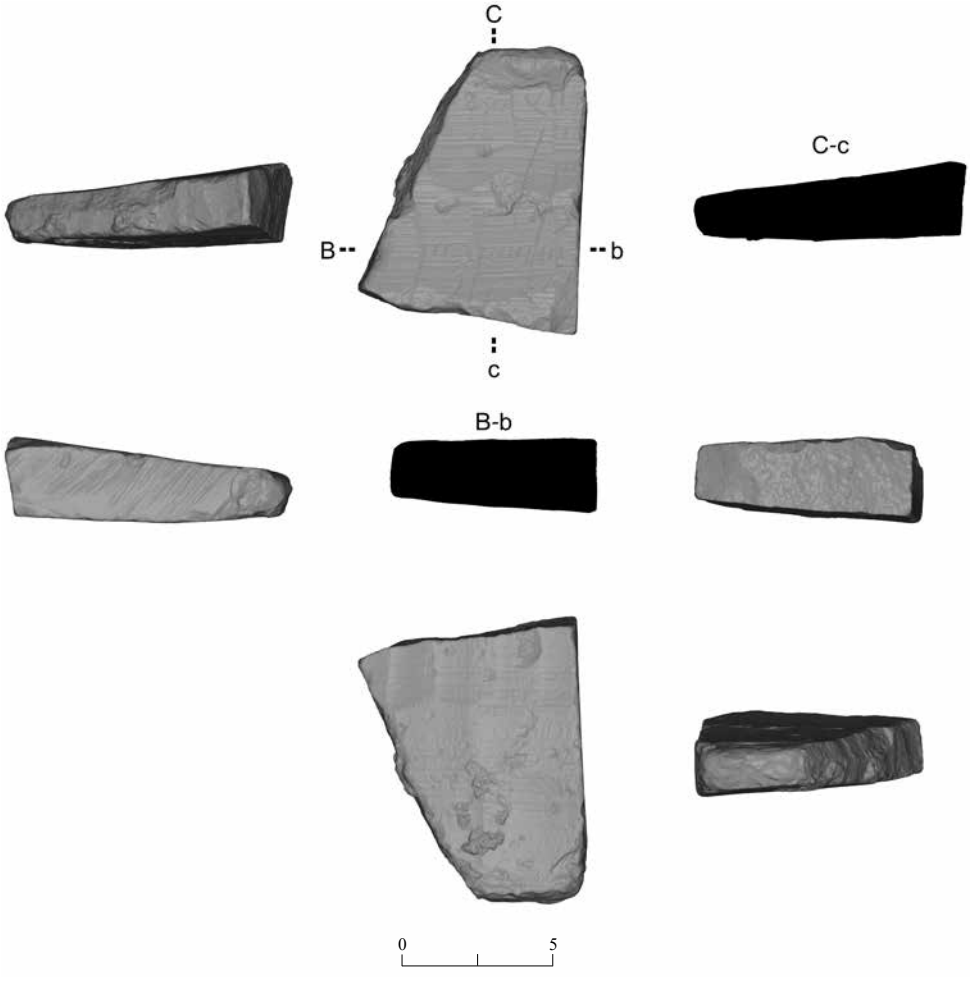

Fig. 1. Digital drawing of the inscription.

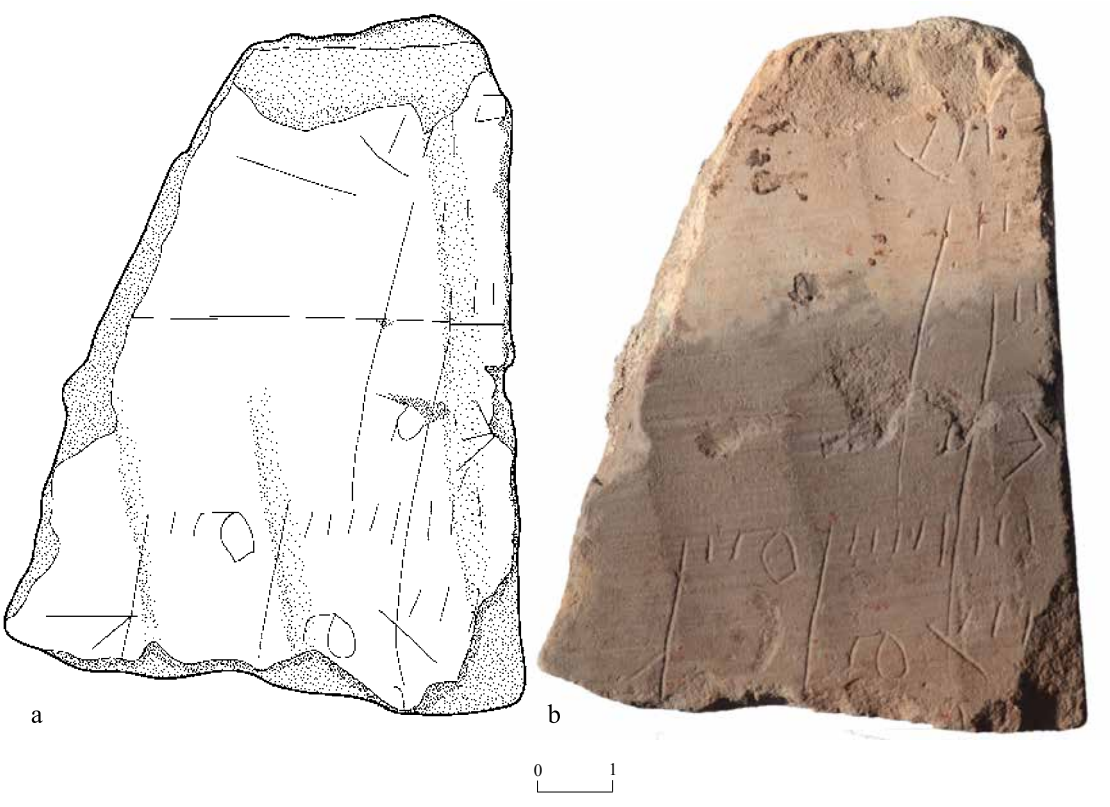

Fig. 2. The inscription: drawing (a) and photograph (b).

only the end of a personal name and sums of *reva'im* and *ma'ot* remained. The inscription reads as follows:

Transcript and Translation:

1	[…] 4 *reva'im*	[...]ל ״״	1
2	[…] 3[+]	[...] ״״	2
3	[…] 3	[...]״״	3
4	[…Shi]mon, [X] *ma'ot*	[...] מ֗עוֹן מ֗ [... ש]	4
5	[…] 9 [*reva'im*], 3 *ma'ot*	[...ר]״״״״״״ מ ״״	5
6	4[+][*reva'im*], [x] *ma'ot*	[...ר]״״ מ ״	6
7	[…]	[...]◦[...]	7

The Script

The inscription is written in Jewish cursive script by a non-professional, as can be deduced *inter alia* from the rendering of the letter *'ayin* in Line 4. It is dated between the first century BCE and the first century CE.

Mem (מ). Formatted as a round closed loop, the letter seems to have been written in one movement clockwise. The left stroke is drawn horizontally. This letter-type is widespread from the end of the first century BCE to the first century CE (Yardeni 2000b:192–193, Type 1a4). Here, the left stroke joins the numeral sign that follows it as a ligature. The same type of *mem*, also sometimes written in ligature, was found on an ossuary lid from Bethphage (esp. Lines 5–7, 11; Yardeni 2000a:220–223), dated to the mid-first century CE (see *Discussion*, below). The break at the right side of Line 4 might be the left side of a *mem*, although not written in normal form, as the *ʿayin* following it.

ʿAyin (ע). The letter is written in two strokes. The first stroke inclines downward, almost vertically to the right, turning in an angle of a little more than 90 degrees to the left. The second stroke is shorter, extending down from left to right and joining the first stroke a little before it bends. The letter is written some degrees contra-clockwise to the line.

Resh (ר). In Line 1, only the curved serif survived, and in Line 4, it was only partially preserved.

The numbers are written as vertical strokes. Line 6 exhibits two types: (1) very long vertical strokes that continue to the next line, as in Lines 2 and 5, or change their direction from upper left to bottom right, as in Lines 1 and 6; (2) the pan-ultimate stroke also changes its direction, extending down from right to left toward the final stroke. These two types are also documented in the Bethphage inscription (see *Discussion*, below).

Commentary

The inscription preserves part of a list, mentioning sums of *maʿot* and *revaʿim*. If the reading of Line 4, מ[ש]עון, [Shi]mʿon, is accepted, we may reconstruct a list of proper names on the right with sums of money on the left. The name Shimʿon, first mentioned in the Bible as the son of Jacob, "was the most popular name for Jewish Palestinian males in this period" (Ilan 2002:226; for its documentation, see Ilan 2002:218–235). The letter מ stands for מעה, *maʿah*, a coin which is 1/6 of a denarius. The letter ר is short for רבע, *revaʿ*, a coin equal to one dinar. There are 6 *maʿot* in a *revaʿ*.

The signs of מ for *maʿot* and ר for *revaʿim*, followed by numbers, are known in Palestine since the fourth century BCE, e.g., in the Jericho papyrus (Eshel and Misgav 2000:Lines 9, 10, 12), in an ostracon from Egypt (Berlin P. 10678; Yardeni 2000a:394) and in many ostraca from Idumea (Yardeni 2016:638; 652).

DISCUSSION

Lists rendering names and numbers are widely known from the Second Temple period, the most important and long one of which was found incised in Hebrew on an ossuary lid from Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, dated to the first century CE (*CIIP* I/1:681–

686, No. 693, and see further references therein). The Bethphage list comprises 27 short lines arranged in two columns, understood to be a record of payments to, or paid by, individuals; beside each name is a sum of money, designated by the letters ר for רבע, מ for מעה, or ף for פלג. Most of the names are marked by a small horizontal line, interpreted as an indication of those who received/rendered payment. It was also suggested that "The list may be of workers and their salaries… If it is a list of people who rendered payment for some purpose, their connection to this burial cave is not known" (*CIIP* I/1:684). Regarding the names mentioned in the Bethphage list, it is noted that "All but one … are shortened forms (personal names without patronym, or just patronym) and nicknames… reflecting what individuals were called in informal social setting" (*CIIP* I/1:684; see Naveh 2009).

Similar lists were found on two other ossuaries, dated between the first century BCE and the first century CE, which were conceived as sums paid for the ossuary. The first list, originating in the antiquities' market, today in the Hecht Museum, reads: 2 יהסף בר שאול ר 4 שמעון מ, "Yehosef son of Shʿaul. 2 *reva'im*; Shimʿon 4 *ma'ot*" (*CIIP* I/1:493–494, No. 471), and the other list, uncovered at Bet Shemesh, reads: 4 מ 1 ר, "One revaʿ and four maʿot" (*CIIP* I/1:134, No. 91).

All the above-mentioned inscriptions were incised with a sharp tool on a stone ossuary lid. Although the inscription discussed here was incised on a broken stone, its flat appearance and dimensions allow us to identify it as an ossuary lid. If so, the question remains: are the inscriptions connected to the ossuaries on which they were inscribed? As in the case of the Bethphage inscription, we might suggest that our inscription was inscribed by the ossuary craftsman, who documented his sales: money paid or still owed by his clients.

Although the inscription was found in the Bliss and Dickie tunnel and not *in situ*, this tunnel was located on top of a paved plaza in the southern part of the Stepped Street (Bliss and Dickie 1898:143–144). Recently, it was proposed to identify this area with the "square" or "lower market" of Jerusalem where it is very possible that various commercial activities took place (Szanton, Shor and Hagbi 2017:26). Substantial evidence for commercial activity in this area is a stone measuring table found on-site (Levy 2020:46–47, Fig. 6; Reich 2021), belonging to the Supervisor of Measures and Weights of the market (Reich, Amit and Bar-Nathan 2014). It seems therefore, that the new inscription found in the vicinity of the plaza is also related to the commercial activity at the site.

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