

*Erasmus Gass (University of Tübingen)\**

## **SAMSON AND DELILAH IN A NEWLY FOUND INSCRIPTION?**

### **ABSTRACT**

*In a lengthy discussion Shea has proposed many new readings of an ostrakon which was found in the late-seventh-century-B.C.E. destruction layer of Ashkelon. Contrary to the proposal of Cross, he tries to establish some new readings which could be of importance for biblical scholars inasmuch as he finds Samson and Delilah on this ostrakon. This critique of the new readings of Shea focuses on palaeographical, orthographical and syntactical problems which make it difficult to accept his transliteration, translation and historical conclusions. Shea's reconstruction of this ostrakon's original text is therefore rejected, and a new translation of this fragmentary text is given.*

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

In a recently published article Shea offered a new interpretation of an ostrakon which was found in the late-seventh-century-B.C.E. destruction layer of Ashkelon within the so-called "Counting House."<sup>1</sup> In his lengthy discussion Shea proposed many new readings. Insofar as he discerned in these new readings indications of the biblical figures Samson and Delilah, a few critical remarks are necessary in order to evaluate his arguments and to prevent the reader being led astray by them.

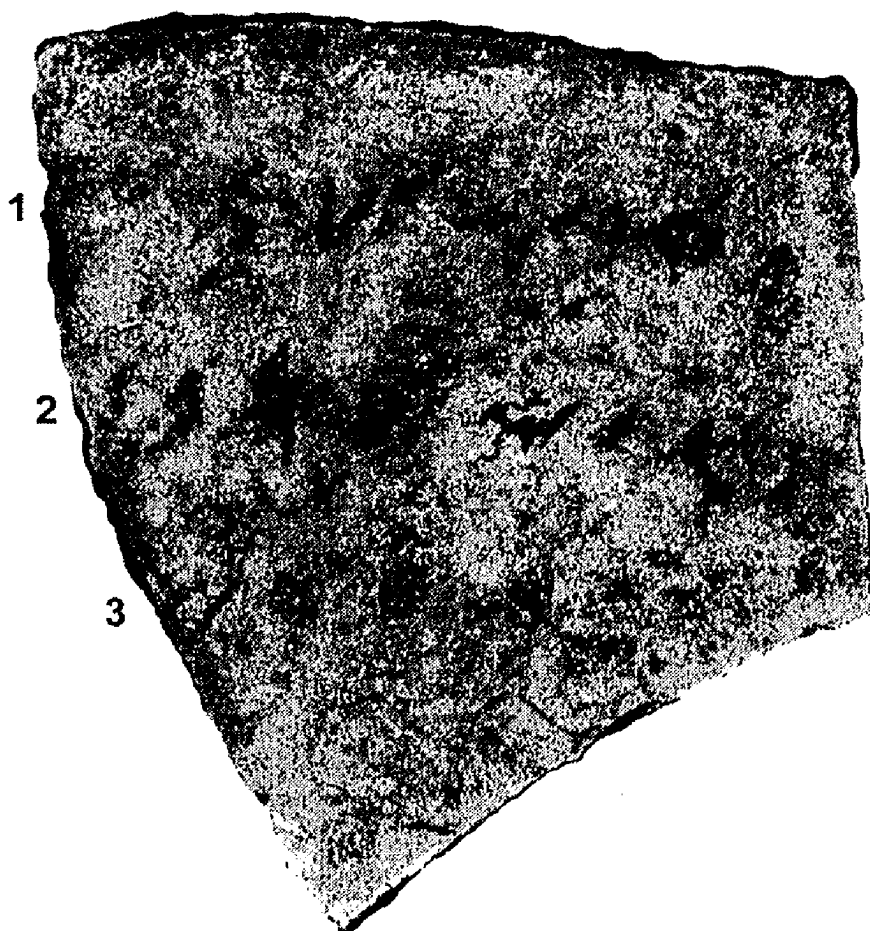
In the preliminary report of the ostrakon, Cross describes it as a "weathered body sherd of an Iron Age II jar with red slip and burnishing. The text of the inscription penned on the sherd is only partially preserved – it is broken off on both sides and the ink is only faintly preserved in some words."<sup>2</sup> The weathered condition of the ostrakon and the faintly preserved ink should prevent the epigrapher from accepting without demur far-reaching conclusions regarding the historical impact of this potsherd. The published photograph clearly shows the remains of three lines which can be deciphered to some extent.

---

\* Many thanks to Timothy B Sailors, University of Tübingen, for improving the English version of this article.

1 For the archaeological context see Stager (1996:57-69).

2 Cross (1996:64).



Original Photo by *Zev Radovan*

According to Cross, one can read some words in these three lines. The following translation reflects his suggestions:

1	מעבר. ש. חש	... from the (cereal) crop which you ...
2	בו. ישאן. ל	... they shall pay to ...
3	ע. בר. צפן	... (cereal) crop of Şapan ...

This fragmentary text may refer to the purchase of grain. The word עבר in line 1 is mainly attested in Official Aramaic and can be translated as “crop” or “grain.”<sup>3</sup> The relative pronoun ש is characteristic of Phoenician and Punic texts, but it also occurs in Hebrew and Ammonite.<sup>4</sup>

The first two characters of line 2 might belong with the last characters of line 1, so that one suspects an imperfect form of the verb שכך “to let down” to which an enclitic personal pronoun, third person masculine, is attached. The stem and etymology of ישאן in line 2 is not clear. It seems

3 DNWSI 2, 822-823.

4 For this pronoun see Kienast (2001:51-52).

that it must be related to the stem נשא which usually means “to lift up.” The letter ך suffixed to the imperfect form might be a so-called *nun energicum*.

As observed by Cross, there are word dividers between each word. In line 3, ץ and בר are separated by one of these word dividers and therefore cannot be attached to one another. The noun בר “son” is usually attested within the Aramaic branch of the Northwest Semitic languages. But in the multi-cultural context of a coastal town like Ashkelon different languages can intermingle. Thus the following reading of this short ostrakon is proposed with due caution:

From the (cereal) crop which you have  
let down one shall lift up for [---]’  
son of Şapan-[---]

## 2. DISCUSSION OF SHEA’S RECONSTRUCTION

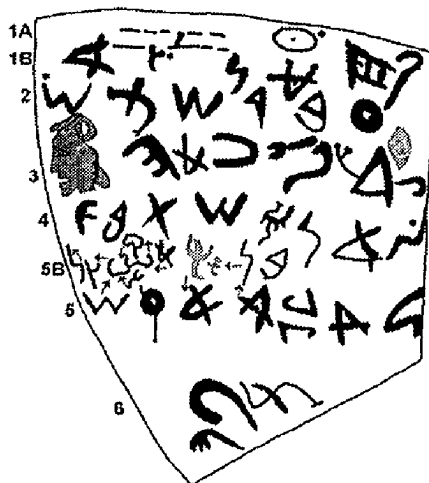
It is remarkable that the script of this ostrakon is neither Phoenician nor Aramaic like that of the other ostraca found in Ashkelon, but is similar to Hebrew with some distinctive typological characteristics which give it a unique appearance. Cross (1996:65), therefore, calls this special script “Neo-Philistine” and dates the borrowing of Hebrew features by this type of script to the period of the united kingdom when there was a strong cultural influence on the Philistines by the Israelites.

Contra Cross, a new reading of this ostrakon is presented in the treatment by Shea (2003). It consists of at least six lines, two of which are further sub-divided (1A and 1B, 5 and 5B). Shea alleges that the additional lines, though faint and less distinct, can be seen “with adequate magnification and illumination” (2003:78). It is not stated in the article whether he had the opportunity to examine the original ostrakon in person or whether his claim is based on an examination of the photograph taken by Radovan.<sup>5</sup>

The following critique of the new readings proposed by Shea will focus on palaeographical, orthographical and syntactical problems which make it difficult to accept his transliteration, translation and historical conclusions. Not included is a discussion of why these newly found lines were not discovered by Cross.<sup>6</sup>

5 Shea (2003:74) refers to it as “a clear photograph of the sherd.”

6 Shea (2003:84) supposes the following: “It may have to do with irregularities in the surface of the sherd or its burnishing. Or it may have to do with the way

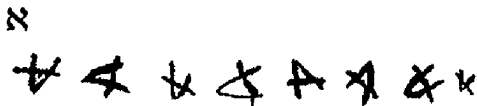


- |    |             |
|----|-------------|
| 1A | עז          |
| 1B | לחאנו א     |
| 2  | עבר שמש     |
| 3  | לדילילאה    |
| 4  | ן אני שת בי |
| 5B | בן אשקילון  |
| 5  | ד אגגא אקש  |
| 6  | מלך         |

Proposed readings by Shea  
(with additional symbols indicating reading order)

### 2.1 *Palaeographical problems*

Shea has presented types of script which have no parallels either in the Hebrew or in the Aramaic palaeographical chart.<sup>7</sup> Some signs, especially within his newly found lines, look rather awkward and inconsistent. Only those with unusual and inconsistent shape will be discussed here:




All eight forms of this letter are written similarly. They are V-shaped with a horizontal stroke. The only problem is the orientation of this letter, which can differ greatly even within one line.


---

in which the text weathered as it lay in the ground". But such differences of light and dark ink cannot be explained either by the sherd or by the depository. There are too many well preserved ostraca which do not show such blatant differences.


<sup>7</sup> Despite the lengthy discussion in Shea (2003:75-83), his palaeographical claims are entirely unconvincing.

λ  



This character is seen in line 5 and has a sharply angled head which is typical for the letter.<sup>8</sup> The problem with the characters on this ostrakon is the hooked serif on their tail which is hitherto unattested.<sup>9</sup> The pair of λs is written one above the other with mirror symmetry, which is another unique feature of this script.

ι  


The letter ι has a cup-shaped head and a long vertical stroke in line 1B. Another example of this character in line 5B looks slightly different because the cup shape is attached on the right side of the vertical stroke but not put on top of it.

τ  


The two horizontal lines in line 1A are too long to represent the letter τ.<sup>10</sup> Although this could be a scribal variation of a normal character, the space required for this sign is so great as to suggest that it is not an orthographical character at all.

ϛ  


This character appears twice in lines 3 and 4, as well as once in line 5B. The first example in line 3 has a tail curved to the right and a cup-shaped head attached on the right. A similar letter can be found in line 4 but rotated a little bit clockwise. The second sign for ϛ in line 3 has a cup-shaped head on top, a long vertical stroke, and is turned to the left. This shape also appears in line 5B but rotated to the right. Thus there are two forms for this character: a cup shape attached either on the right or put on top of a vertical stroke which serves as a tail though differing in its

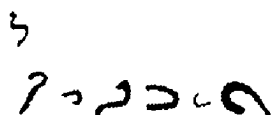
8 Cf. Renz (1995:114).

9 Shea (2003:81) explains this as “a specific Philistine trait.”

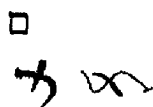
10 Cf. Renz (1995:138).

curvature. The first example in line 4 looks rather awkward in Shea's line drawing and cannot be classified with either type.

There is another problem with Shea's identification of this letter. Namely, the second shape for ʾ has pronounced affinities to a turned ʾ. There is virtually no difference between ʾ and ʾ except for their orientation: both have a cup shape and a long stroke.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the shape of the letter ʾ in this ostrakon is rather unusual as ʾ is normally Z-shaped with a small horizontal stroke.<sup>12</sup>



The first character of line 1 is unique. It looks like a shepherd's staff with the crook pointing to the left. The usual form of the letter ʾ looks similar, but is inverted. Shea reads a similar character in line 6 but this one is turned slightly anticlockwise. In line 3 alone there are three different forms of the letter ʾ. Only the first one can be understood as a conventional but mirrored character which is turned on its side. A nearly identical form, rotated clockwise, can be found in line 5B. The other two forms of the letter in line 3 are totally different. The second ʾ in line 3 curves up on the right and down on the left (including a downward-pointing serif), making it "irregular in form" though accepted by Shea (2003:78). The third ʾ is a curve with ends of equal length. Although of a "slightly different configuration" it is interpreted as another ʾ.<sup>13</sup> So within one line there are, according to Shea, three totally different letterforms used to represent one letter. This is manifestly unusual.



The character □ in line 2, which was supposed by Cross to be the letter ʾ, is unique in the way that the middle stroke crosses the curve. Although there is a tendency, especially in late Iron Age inscriptions, to use a short vertical stroke, this stroke never intersects the main curve.<sup>14</sup> Only the letter ʾ is always cross-shaped. A similar character is seen in line 6 but with a one-quarter rotation to the left.

11 Shea (2003:79) remarks about the resemblance of these letters.

12 Cf. Renz (1995:149-150).

13 It looks, however, like the Aramaic form of the character ʾ.

14 Cf. Renz (1995:169).

7  
 7 7 7 7

The letter 7 in line 1B has a slightly notched head and a tail which angles to the left. This is the standard form of the character 7, whereas in line 4 the first 7 seems to be a mirror image and only the second normal. Two further examples can be found in line 5B but with heads of different lengths.

Apart from these anomalies in the palaeographical chart all other characters resemble their usual form and can be readily deduced from the standard Hebrew palaeography.

Shea posits some new forms within his lengthy palaeographical discussion which cannot be accounted for using the usual palaeographical canon. The scribe of this ostrakon changes, even within the same line, the form of characters which nevertheless denote the same letter. Because he utilised such diverse letterforms, one wonders whether this scribe was uneducated. But this peculiarity also poses problems for correct reading. Written so inconsistently, the text can hardly be understood. If the characters Shea has observed really look like his line drawing, the writing on this ostrakon seems to be a pupil's exercise at best, not an official letter. In light of the high standard of writing in the nearby Shephelah – especially as observed in the Lachish Ostraca – one would expect a better script of a learned scribe. Thus the palaeographical discussion throws many doubts on Shea's reconstruction.

In addition to the palaeographical anomalies there are further problems with the new readings proposed by Shea. The three alleged pictograms are rather unique features in view of the usual and known conventions of Northwest Semitic inscriptions. Furthermore, these pictograms are not used in a similar fashion. The first pictogram is said to refer to the word "head" whereas the second pictogram stands after the name "Delilah" and has no meaning on its own. Even the third pictogram, interpreted as "father and son," does not represent a certain word. According to Shea's reconstruction, pictograms could on the one hand replace words, and on the other hand be used only for decoration. This inconsistent use is all the more conspicuous given the singular position in two cases of the pictogram after or above the related word.

Shea's reading of the sequence of signs is also arbitrary. In line 1, which bifurcates in the middle, one has to first read three consonants in line 1B, then switch to line 1A and finally end with the last letter in 1B.

For the last letter of the name “Samson” in line 2, one must skip over line 3 to the beginning of line 4. The same licentious reading can be observed in line 5. After the name  $\aleph\aleph\aleph$  one has to switch to line 5B, read only the word  $\eta$  and then return to line 5 for the name  $\psi\aleph\aleph$ . After that one has to move again to line 5B to add the place-name “Ashkelon.” One wonders how skilled the scribe and reader must have been to understand a logic like this. Furthermore, to which word should the decorative pictogram between  $\eta$  and “Ashkelon” in line 5B belong? Finally, the reading of the place-name “Ashkelon” ( $\eta\psi\aleph\aleph$ ) is peculiar as the  $\aleph$  stands above the  $\psi$  and the following below the  $\psi$ .

## 2.2 Orthographical problems

According to Shea there seems to be plene writing within some of the words. The letter  $\aleph$  stands for the vowel /a/ in the name “Hanno” and as a final consonant in the place-name “Gaza” and the name “Delilah.” Although it might be possible to express the final sound  $\bar{a}$  with the character  $\aleph$ , it is more common to use the consonant  $\eta$ , especially for morphological reasons. The letter  $\upsilon$  is used within a word for the contracted vowel  $\bar{e}$  and for the long vowel  $\bar{i}$ , whereas it is used as a final vowel for  $\bar{i}$ . The character  $\uparrow$  is used in the name “Hanno” for the long final vowel. However, this proposed practice of plene writing is not used consistently and raises serious doubts about Shea’s reconstruction. Moreover, the gentilic noun for “Hebrew” needs the nisbe  $\gamma$  – otherwise it cannot be understood.<sup>15</sup> Most of the alleged plene writing stands in sharp contrast to other well documented examples of defective spelling: “Hanno” is well documented in the form  $\aleph\eta\aleph$  but never like here as  $\eta\aleph\aleph$ .<sup>16</sup> The name “Delilah” is never written like here ( $\eta\psi\aleph\aleph$ ), with two plenes probably indicating different sounds. Moreover, the double ending  $\eta\aleph$  for the final sound is conspicuous as there is the apparent tendency within this ostrakon to use  $\aleph$  to indicate a long final  $\bar{a}$ . The plene writing of “Ashkelon” with  $\upsilon$  is also unnecessary.

Similar doubts have to be raised concerning defective writing, especially regarding the spelling of the personal name “Samson” in lines 2/4. All biblical examples are written  $\eta\psi\aleph\aleph$ , not  $\psi\aleph\aleph$ . Even the name “Achish” is written biblically and extrabiblically with the letter  $\gamma$ , which

15 For nisbation within the Semitic languages see Segert (1997:180); Stempel (1999:90); Kienast (2001:173-175); Lipiński (2001:229-231).

16 KAI 62,6; 63,1; 64,2; 81,6; 87,5; 93,2; 101,6; 104,2; 120,2; 122,2; 124,1.4, 129,4; 130,6.



is missing here. Moreover, this personal name would then be written with the wrong consonant – ק instead of the correct ט.<sup>17</sup>

Usually, doubled consonants are not expressed by actually writing the consonant twice. In this respect, נגגנ is rather peculiar and can hardly be explained by other parallels.<sup>18</sup>

Like the palaeography, the orthography of Shea's reconstruction casts serious doubts on its correctness. It is not only inconsistent, but unique when compared to other inscriptional evidence.

### 2.3 *Syntactical problems*

The omission of the title מלך between “Hanno” and “Gaza” in line 1 is striking in that a construct chain between a personal name and a place-name does not really make sense. To avoid such problems one can use the gentilic form of the toponym.<sup>19</sup> The same problem can be found in lines 5B–6 insofar as the title מלך should precede the place-name “Ashkelon.” It is improbable that it be in apposition behind the place-name.

In line 2 the gentilic “Hebrew” stands in front of “Samson,” the related personal name. Usually gentilics are treated like adjectives. However, as an attribute of a personal name which is determined by class, the alleged gentilic needs the article which is apparently missing here.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, in most cases the gentilic has to follow the related noun, not precede it.<sup>21</sup> Only when special emphasis is placed on the attribute does it precede the

---

17 According to Shea (2003:82) the shift in velar letters does not change the name at all. The referent here is the king of Ashkelon not of Ekron. For “Achish” on the Ekron Inscription (now KAI 286) see Sasson (1997); Naveh (1998); Lehmann (1999). According to biblical sources there was a certain Achish of Gath, see 1 Sam 21:11-13, 15; 27:2, 3, 5, 6, 9, 10, 12; 28:1, 2; 29:2, 3, 6, 8, 9; 1 Kgs 2:39, 40.

18 Shea (2003:81) notes the problem but thinks that this is due to the fact that these letters belong to a personal name. According to Lipiński (2001:180-181) there are examples of double spelling for geminated consonants.

19 Like in KAI 181,1-2.

20 See PGG §298c; Lipiński (2001:505).

21 Like all attributive modifiers; see Steiner (1997:165); Kienast (2001:420); Lipiński (2001:504).

noun.<sup>22</sup> Shea's reading of the Hebrew "Samson" is therefore not at all certain.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Shea's reconstruction of this ostrakon's original text must be rejected on palaeographical, orthographical and syntactical grounds. Needless to say, there is no reason to augment the onomasticon of Philistine kings with Hanno of Gaza and Achish of Ashkelon. Moreover, mainly due to orthographic reasons, there is no evidence for the citation of the two Philistine cities of Ashkelon and Gaza on this ostrakon. Thus one still has to wait for the first mention of these cities in extrabiblical Northwest Semitic texts. The identification of Philistine Ashkelon with *ʿAsqalān* (1070.1190) is well established<sup>23</sup> and does not need this ostrakon found during excavations on the tell of *ʿAsqalān* as further evidence.

Although there might have been the custom of decapitation and parading the enemy's head around the country,<sup>24</sup> this small ostrakon reflects neither such a custom in the case of Samson nor the historicity of Samson's death in Gaza.

All in all, one has to be rather cautious with restorations like these, and abstain from rash conclusions based on a rather questionable text edition. Ultimately, a thorough examination of the original ostrakon with elaborate discussion is needed to settle the textual problem as well as its interpretation.

The solution presented above, with a new reading of the three lines observed by Cross, is one way to handle the difficult text without special examination of the ostrakon itself. By contrast, Shea's reconstruction is a striking example of far-reaching speculations which try to substantiate the biblical history during the time of the Judges. However, the ostrakon itself cannot support Shea's assumptions, and his imaginative reconstruction should not be the basis for further speculation.

---

22 See Kienast (2001:421). According to Lipiński (2001:504), in those cases "the head of the attribute is semantically unimportant or functions as an apposition."

23 See Gass (2005:61-65).

24 For biblical evidence see Shea (2003:85-86). If there was such a custom on the part of the Philistines and Israelites, one cannot prove that the head of Samson was stored like a relic or a fetish.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Cross, F M 1996. A Philistine Ostrakon from Ashkelon. *BAR* 22/1, 64-65.
- DNWSI* 1995. Hoftijzer, J & Jongeling, K, *Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions*, 2 vols. (Handbuch der Orientalistik I/21). Leiden: Brill.
- Gass, E 2005. *Die Ortsnamen des Richterbuches in historischer und redaktioneller Perspektive* (Abhandlungen des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins 35). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- KAI*<sup>5</sup>2002. Donner, H & Röllig, W, *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften*, vol. 1. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Kienast, B 2001. *Historische Semitische Sprachwissenschaft*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Lehmann, R G 1999. Studien zur Formgeschichte der 'Eqron-Inschrift des 'KYŠ, und den phönizischen Dedikationstexten aus Byblos. *UF* 31, 256-306.
- Lipiński, E 2001. *Semitic Languages: Outline of a Comparative Grammar* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 80). Leuven: Peeters.
- Naveh, J 1998. Achish-Ikausu in the Light of the Ekron Dedication. *BASOR* 310, 35-37.
- PGG*<sup>3</sup>1999. Friedrich, J, Röllig, W & Amadasi Guzzo, M G, *Phönizisch-Punische Grammatik* (Analecta Orientalia 55). Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico.
- Renz, J 1995. Die althebräischen Inschriften: Teil 2. Zusammenfassende Erörterungen, Paläographie und Glossar, in: Renz, J & Röllig, W (eds.). *Handbuch der althebräischen Epigraphik*, vol. II/1. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.
- Sasson, V 1997. The Inscription of Achish, Governor of Eqron, and Philistine Dialect, Cult and Culture. *UF* 29, 627-639.
- Segert, S 1997. Phoenician and the Eastern Canaanite Languages, in: Hetzron, R (ed.). *The Semitic Languages* (Routledge Language Family Descriptions). London: Routledge, 174-186.
- Shea, W H 2003. Samson and Delilah in a Philistine Text from Ashkelon. *DavarLogos* 2/1, 73-86.
- Stager, L E 1996. The Fury of Babylon: Ashkelon and the Archaeology of Destruction. *BAR* 22/1, 56-69, 76-77.
- Steiner, R C 1997. Ancient Hebrew, in: Hetzron, R (ed.). *The Semitic Languages* (Routledge Language Family Descriptions). London: Routledge, 145-173.

Stempel, R 1999. *Abriß einer historischen Grammatik der semitischen Sprachen* (Nordostafrikanisch/Westasiatische Studien 3). Frankfurt: Lang.