

BRIEF NOTE

OSTRACON II FROM HESHBON

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The second ostracon from Heshbon written in Aramaic script was recovered during the excavations there in the summer of 1971.¹ It was recovered from a late Iron II context (7th-6th century) in Area B, and it has been dated palaeographically to ca. 525 B.C. Only three lines of text are legible on the sherd, and F. M. Cross who published the text reconstructed and translated these lines as follows:

סכח פדן] נא	2.	plou[gh] tip(s)[
תמכאל]	3.	Tamak'el[
בני גבלא'²	4.	men of Gubla'²

For his translation of line 2 as “plough tips” Cross cited *sekkat paddānā'*, an idiom with such a significance in some Aramaic dialects. The personal name Tamak'el in line 3 is attested by several Ammonite seals. Cross connected the men of Gubla' in line 4 with a Gebal in southern Transjordan on the basis of Ps 83:8, and he thus found this text to provide the earliest extra-biblical reference to that site. As far as the overall significance of this text is concerned, too little of it has survived to permit precise conclusions about its contents, but Cross suggested that “the ostracon may be a docket recording the distribution of tools, or a letter giving instructions to agricultural workers.”³

G. Garbini has also discussed this ostracon in his treatment of Ammonite inscriptions.⁴ The first point he raised about it was to propose that its language was Ammonite, not Aramaic as Cross originally suggested. In Garbini's favor on this point is the fact that the only distinctively Aramaic linguistic feature that Cross found in this text, the occurrence of *paddānā'* in the emphatic state, rested upon a reconstruction. Script should be distinguished

¹ F. M. Cross, “Heshbon Ostracon II,” *AUSS* 11 (1973): 126-131.

² *Ibid.*, p. 126.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁴ G. Garbini, “Ammonite Inscriptions,” *JSS* 19 (1974): 163-164.

from language in this case. The script of this text is Aramaic, as Cross observed, but its language probably is Ammonite, as Garbini has proposed. With more examples of Ammonite available now, Cross seems to agree that the language of Ostrakon II may be Ammonite.⁵ If the language of this text is Ammonite and not Aramaic then it becomes less likely that *skt pd*[] of the second line should be translated "plough tips," since such a parallel belongs to a more remote linguistic horizon.

Instead of restoring *n'* at the end of the second line after *pd* as Cross did, Garbini has taken it as *pd(y)*, relating it to South Arabic *fdy* and Hebrew *pādāh*, "to redeem, free," and he has extended that meaning to "pay."⁶ He interpreted *skt* in this text as related to *skt* in South Arabic where it has to do with working in the fields. On the basis of these suggestions Garbini has translated this text, "*tmk'l* paid the *bny gbl* for (their) work in the fields."⁷ The syntax is rather awkward for this translation, however, and such an interpretation also provides an uninterrupted translation for a text which obviously has been interrupted at several places.

Since some problems with the interpretation of this brief text remain, a new translation and interpretation of it is proposed here. I would suggest that there is a simpler solution to the problem posed by the first word of this text than either "tip" or "payment," and that is to take it as the place name Succoth. *Skt* in this text corresponds directly to the spelling of that place name in the Hebrew Bible with the exception of the absence of the *wāw* as a vowel letter, but an orthographic expression of that vowel is not expected here.⁸

Succoth was located east of the Jordan River near its con-

⁵ "By 525 B.C. at latest, Ammonite came to be written in the cursive Aramaic of the Persian chancellery, to judge from Ostraca I and II from Heshbon." F. M. Cross, "Heshbon Ostrakon XI," *AUSS* 14 (1976): 148.

⁶ Garbini, "Ammonite Inscriptions," p. 163.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

⁸ Etymologically the place name of Succoth originated from the plural of the feminine noun for "booth." The Ammonite inscription on the bronze bottle from Tell Siran which has been dated palaeographically as about a century older than Heshbon Ostrakon II contains five feminine plural words, but the vowel letter of the feminine plural ending was not written with any of them. See H. Thompson and F. Zayadine, "The Tell Siran Inscription,"

fluence with the Zerqā/Jabbok, approximately midway between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea.⁹ In this location, Succoth lay near the northwestern corner of the territory of Ammon at the time this text was written.¹⁰ The identification of Succoth with Tell Deir ʿAllā still is debated,¹¹ but it is of interest to note in this connection that a lengthy Aramaic text discovered there, dated to the middle of the eighth century, indicates that that site was a prominent religious center of some kind or other in the latter half of Iron II.¹² The building in which the inscription was found was destroyed by an earthquake, but the site continued in

BASOR 212 (1973): 9; F. M. Cross, "Notes on the Ammonite Inscription from Tell Siran," *BASOR* 212 (1973): 14.

⁹ For the biblical references to Succoth and a discussion of the location of that site that can be inferred from those references, see N. Glueck, *Explorations in Eastern Palestine IV*, *AASOR* 25-28 (New Haven, Conn., 1945-1949), pp. 347-350.

¹⁰ This is the general viewpoint of the historical geographies of Palestine that have commented on or mapped this point. For examples see L. H. Grolenberg, *Atlas of the Bible*, ed. H. H. Rowley, trans. J. M. H. Reid (London, 1956), p. 96; J. H. Negeman, *New Atlas of the Bible*, ed. H. H. Rowley, trans. H. Hoskins and R. Beckley (Garden City, N.Y., 1969), p. 94; and *The Westminster Historical Atlas to the Bible*, rev. ed., ed. G. E. Wright and F. V. Filson (Philadelphia, 1956), p. 51.

¹¹ The identification of Succoth with Tell Deir ʿAllā received N. Glueck's tentative endorsement in his topographical survey cited above in n. 9, and in several other studies. The excavator of Tell Deir ʿAllā has rejected its identification with Succoth. H. J. Franken, *Excavations at Tell Deir ʿAllā I*, *Documenta et Monumenta Orientis Antiqui*, vol. 16, ed. W. F. Albright and J. Vandier (Leiden, 1969), pp. 4-8. Other sites suggested for Succoth include Tell el-Ekhsas, Tell Qa'adan, and Tell Umm Hamad, 2½ km. west-southwest, ½ km. northeast, and 7 km. south-southwest of Tell Deir ʿAllā, respectively. On the basis of 1 Sam 11:15 Franken suggests that Tell Deir ʿAllā may be Transjordanian Gilgal. This interpretation appears to rest upon a misunderstanding of the text. When the Transjordanian tribes came to crown Saul at Gilgal, they crossed the Jordan River to do so. T. L. Thompson has reacted against Franken's rejection of the identification of Succoth with Tell Deir ʿAllā in *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, *BZAW*, vol. 133 (Berlin, 1974), p. 183, n. 65. Franken has subsequently responded to those who have accepted the equation of Succoth with Tell Deir ʿAllā in his study, "The Problem of Identification in Biblical Archaeology," *PEQ*, 1976, pp. 8-9.

¹² The discovery of these texts was announced by H. J. Franken, "Texts from the Persian Period from Tell Deir ʿAllā," *VT* 17 (1967): 480-481. Their date was subsequently raised to the middle of the eighth century on the basis of their palaeography by J. Naveh, "The Date of the Deir ʿAllā Inscriptions in Aramaic Script," *IEJ* 17 (1967): 256-258. Franken has recently provided a sum-

use into the Persian period, according to the excavator.¹³

If this *skt* was Succoth on the Ammonite side of the Jordan Valley, what is the meaning of *pd[]* which follows it? Although Cross restored a *nún* after the *dalet* in this word for a different reason than the one proposed here, that restoration still makes good sense in this new context. That restoration yields *padan*, which is connected with Aram a dozen times in the patriarchal narratives of the Bible as the name for a region around the Upper Euphrates.¹⁴ Although Padan serves as part of a compound place name there, it appears to originate from Akkadian *padānu*, "way, route."¹⁵ Thus it has been proposed that Padan Aram might be translated "the route of Aram," and some support for this suggestion has been found in the fact that the name of Haran in the same area had a similar meaning in Akkadian.¹⁶

When Jacob returned from Padan Aram he encamped for a time at Succoth (Gen 33:15). Thus one could say that Jacob's *padānu* or "route" led to Succoth when he returned from the north. From this discussion of these parallels it is suggested here that "Succoth of the route" would fit well with *skt pd[n]* found in the second line of Heshbon Ostrakon II. For the next line the evidence from the seals cited by Cross certainly indicates that Tamak'el is best taken as an Ammonite personal name.

That brings us to the question of where the *gbl* was located

mary of the contents of these texts. They have to do with a night vision or dream in which an unnamed goddess came to Balaam the son of Beor (cf. Num 22:5) and threatened to destroy something by fire. Upon arising in the morning Balaam started crying and the priests sent to ask him what had happened. In response Balaam related his experience in the form of a prophecy to which he added a call to repentance to the populace. There follows a description of a meeting of the gods who attempted to persuade the goddess to abandon her plans. "The Problem of Identification," p. 9. The *editio princeps* of these texts is J. Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij, *Aramaic Texts from Deir eAllā* (Leiden, 1976). Hoftijzer's preliminary announcement of the contents of this text appeared in "The Prophet Balaam in a 6th Century Aramaic Inscription," *BA* 39 (1976): 11-17.

¹³ Franken, "Texts from the Persian Period," pp. 480-481. Id., *The Excavations at Tell Deir eAllā I*, p. 22.

¹⁴ All of these references occur in Genesis: 25:20; 28:2, 5, 6, 7; 31:18; 33:18; 35:9, 26; and 46:15. Padan occurs once in Gen 48:7, without Aram.

¹⁵ For the references to *padānu* in Akkadian, see W. von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*, 2 (Wiesbaden, 1972): 807-808.

¹⁶ R. T. O'Callaghan, *Aram Naharaim* (Rome, 1948), p. 96.

from which the men (literally, "sons") mentioned in this text came. I doubt that they came from a Gebal in southern Transjordan, as has been proposed on the basis of Ps 83:8. If *skt* in the second line is Succoth in the central Jordan Valley, then we probably should look for their place of origin in a more northerly direction. As far as the Gebal of Ps 83:8 is concerned, I concur with M. Dahood's interpretation of that verse as referring to the better known *gbl* of Byblos in Phoenicia.

Customarily conjectured to be an Arab tribe residing in the environs of Petra, the MT hapax legomenon *g'ebāl* should rather be identified with the famous Phoenician city. With *šōr*, Tyre, another Phoenician city, it forms the rhetorical figure known as inclusion. In this verse, the poet moves from north to south, and then back from south to north. In Ezek xxvii 8-9, Tyre and Byblos occur in parallelism.¹⁷

If one looks for the *gbl* of this ostracon north of Succoth, rather than south, then there is no better candidate for it than the same Byblos of Phoenicia. Perhaps because of its northern location, or because of the similarity of its name with the word for "border," there has been some reluctance to identify *gbl* in the Bible with Byblos. Aside from Dahood's citations of *gbl* as Byblos in Ps 83:8 and Ezek 27:9, *gbl*/Byblos also appears in Josh 13:5 as a location on the northern border of the Promised Land and in 1 Ki 5:18 as a place from whence men came to work on Solomon's temple along with Hiram's workmen from Tyre. While it is consonantly correct to translate all four of these references as Gebal, as the RSV does, geographically this site was what is more commonly referred to historically as Byblos. It appears to me that the same reticence to translate *gbl* as Byblos has occurred in the case of this ostracon when that site is more likely the one in question if the search for it starts from Succoth.

Putting these suggestions together, the revised translation of Heshbon Ostracon II proposed here is:

ןן סכח פדן	2. Succoth of the route
ן תמכאל	3. Tamak'el
ןבני גבל	4. the men of Byblos ¹⁸

¹⁷ M. Dahood, *Psalms II*, The Anchor Bible, 17 (Garden City, 1968): 274.

¹⁸ Cross has restored an *'alep* after the *lamed* in *gbl*. "Heshbon Ostracon II," p. 126. Only a small portion of this letter remains, however, so that it is uncertain as to which letter was originally written there. *Ibid.*, Pl. XVI, A.

According to this translation, there are three basic elements in the portion of this text that has survived: men from Byblos in Phoenicia, Succoth in the central Jordan Valley, and the Ammonite personal name of Tamak'el. There probably are several ways these bits of information from this text could be put together. The one I would tentatively suggest is as follows: A mission from Byblos had arrived in the territory of Ammon by travelling the route down the Jordan Valley as far as Succoth. At Succoth they encountered Tamak'el, probably the ranking Ammonite official in residence there, and he reported their arrival to Heshbon by way of this text.

While a political mission would not have been impossible in this case, a contact of a commercial nature would seem to have been more likely. In the latter case, Tamak'el may have reported the arrival of some goods. Or in the former case, he may have sought authorization to permit the Byblites to pass on further into Ammon.

It is suggested here, therefore, that this ostrakon represents the remnants of a report or letter originally written by a scribe in the service of Tamak'el at Succoth and that by it he relayed the information to Heshbon that an embassy of some type or another from Byblos had arrived there.