

THE BIR-HADAD STELE AND THE BIBLICAL KINGS OF ARAM*

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The Aramaic text from a stele that was found just north of Aleppo in Syria was first published by M. Dunand in 1939.¹ The rather standard dedicatory contents of this text refer to the fact that the stele was erected by a king named Bir-Hadad in honor of the god Melqart who heard and answered his petition. The main point about this text which has not been clear is the identity of this Bir-Hadad. His name was incised at the end of the first line and the beginning of the second line and it can be read quite clearly. It is also the direct equivalent of Hebrew Ben Hadad. Problems arise at this point, however, because there are at least three and possibly four different Aramean kings mentioned in 1 and 2 Kings who bore this name. The question then is, Which one of these Ben Hadads erected this stele?

If this text was whole and relatively undamaged, the making of such an identification probably would not have been very difficult. The rest of the second line went on to give some of the king's identifying characteristics or titles, but at this crucial juncture, however, the stone is badly damaged and the text is extremely difficult to read. As a result, a large number of different readings have been offered for the rest of this line, and thus the identifications made for the king mentioned here have varied considerably.

*The original study in German from which this article has been abstracted (by William H. Shea), entitled "Die Birhadad-Stele—'Ein halbes Jahrhunderträtsel'. Eine neue Untersuchung der aramäischen Könige bis zum Niedergang von Aram-Damaskus im Jahre 732 v. Chr.," was submitted by the author in its revised form in June, 1985. It remains on file in the AUSS office for future reference. The translation into English from which this present article has been abstracted was made by Ellen S. Erbes.

¹M. Dunand, "Stèle araméenne dédiée à Melqart," *Bulletin du Musée de Beyrouth* 3 (1939): 70, 73 (cited hereinafter as *BMB*).



a.



b.

Plate I. Two Photographs Showing the Inscription on the Bir-Hadad Stele.
(Courtesy of Jean Starckey)

Through the kind consideration of Jean Starcky of Paris and Wahid Khayata of Aleppo, I have been given access to new and unpublished photographs of the stele. The discussion of epigraphy which follows is based upon a close examination of these new photos and it is presented in the interest of clearing up the controversy which has revolved around the second line of this text and the identity of the king whom it describes. Basically, this new study confirms the results obtained by Frank M. Cross in his earlier study.² Beyond that confirmation, however, further conclusions can be drawn concerning events related to the stele.

1. *Epigraphy*

From his study of this text based upon the photographs of S. A. Birnbaum and J. B. Pritchard, Cross read its crucial passage as follows:³

2) *dd. br ʿzr [.]mšʿqʿy ʿʾ b [r] 3) mlk ʾrm*

Translation: "(Bir Ha) 2. -dad, son of ʿEzer, the Damascene, son of 3. the king of Aram."

From my examination of the new photographs now available (see Plate Ia and b for two of Starcky's photographs), I now read this passage of the text as follows:

2) *dd. br ʿzr. dmsqy ʿʾ br 3) mlk ʾrm*

(This translates the same way as the original treatment does in the study of Cross just quoted.)

While readings for the last half of the second line still vary considerably among different interpreters, most interpreters, since the study of Cross was published in 1972, have accepted the reading of ʿzr or ʿEzer following the word for "son" in the first half of that line. Because of the fact that there are three circular letters—*ʿayin*, *ʿteth*, and *qoph*—in the alphabet of the script in which this text was incised, the first letter of this word had been in dispute until that

²Frank M. Cross, Jr., "The Stele Dedicated to Melcarth by Ben-Hadad of Damascus," *BASOR* no. 205 (1972), pp. 36-42. For my own work on the Melqart Stele Inscription which follows I have been supplied with four photographs by Jean Starcky of Paris in his letter of May 5, 1977, and with three more photographs by Wahid Khayata of Aleppo in his letter of July 2, 1979. I want to express my sincere thanks to both of these scholars for their kindness.

³*Ibid.*, p. 37.

time. These three letters can be distinguished from the fact that the *qoph* has a line down through its circle, the *ṭeth* contains two crossing bars within its circle, and the *ʿayin* contains only a dot or no other marks at all within its circle.

When Dunand published his first study of this text, he noted what looked to him like a very short bar in the center of this circular letter. Thinking that this was all that was left of the rest of the two crossing bars, he identified this letter as a form of the *ṭeth*.⁴ In his second study of this text, however, he decided that the center of this circle was hollowed out and thus it was not incised with the crossing bars of a *ṭeth*.⁵ This we now know is the dot within the *ʿayin*. The dot is dark in Starcky's photo, and it is lighter but still discernible in Khayata's photo. This reading of the *ʿayin*, and with it the name of *ʿzr*, is now secure here. In the newly discovered bilingual inscription from Tell Fekheriyeh in Syria, the *ʿayin* also appears as a circle with a dot in its center. The Fekheriyeh inscription is usually dated to the mid-ninth century B.C.,⁶ or as essentially contemporary with the Bir-Hadad Stele.

In the 1972 study of this text by Cross, he was not quite certain about which letter followed *ʿzr*. He suggested that it could be either a *dalet* or an *ʾaleph*.⁷ In the hand copy of this inscription by William H. Shea, this letter was drawn as a *dalet* with its tail extending downwards to the right from its triangular head.⁸ I now read this as an unambiguous example of the *dalet*, but would suggest that its tail is shorter than has been copied by Shea. The top of the triangular head of the *dalet* is partially missing due to damage. The incision which makes up the bottom line of the head

⁴Dunand, "Stèle araméenne," pp. 69-70.

⁵M. Dunand, "A propos de la stèle de Melqart du Musée d'Alep," *BMB* 6 (1942-1943): 42.

⁶Alan R. Millard and Pierre Bordreuil, "A Statue from Syria with Assyrian and Aramaic Inscriptions," *BA* 45 (1982): 135-141, especially p. 140; Ali Abou Assaf, "Die Statue des HDYSʿY, König von Guzana," *Mitteilungen der Deutschen Orientgesellschaft* 113 (1981): 3-22. G. van der Kooij of the Archeologisch Centrum, Rijksuniversiteit Leiden, gives another interpretation in his letter of April 29, 1986, to the author. He writes that the *ʿayin* has no dot inside in the Melqart Stele (line 2) and that the hole is merely a "quartz pock," like so many other holes in the surface, and too small to have been made intentionally.

⁷Cross, pp. 37, 40-41.

⁸W. H. Shea, "The Kings of the Melqart Stela," *Maarav* 1 (1979): 166.

of this letter extends across the downstroke to its right. Just to the right of the tip of this crossbar there appears another very short downstroke. This should be taken as a word divider placed between the name ^czr and the word which follows it. The word divider shows up to some extent in the photo by Starcky, but it is more clear in the photo by Khayata. The combination of this *dalet* with its cross stroke and the word divider located nearby makes this letter look something like the *šin*, with which Lipiński identified it.⁹ Closer inspection and context, however, indicate that the word divider and a *dalet* following it are to be preferred here.

The *mem* and the *šin* which follow the *dalet* are clear in almost all photographs of the inscription. The main question here is, What letter follows the *šin*? Once it is noted that the top half of the circular head of a *qoph* and part of its downstroke are missing due to damage, this letter can be reconstructed here quite readily.¹⁰ The semicircle forming the bottom of the head and the two short interrupted segments of its downstroke can be seen in most photographs of the text and even in some photos which include the depiction of the god above the text. This letter shows up especially well in a new photograph by Khayata (not available for publication here).

The end of this line is the most difficult portion of it to read. There I find a *beth* followed by a *reš*. They both have circular heads located quite close together. The tail of the *beth* curves around towards the *reš*, but the tail of the *reš* is straight and slants to the left, away from the *beth*. The *beth* is located directly under the *he* of Hadad with which the first line ends. These two letters appear as dark scratches in the stone in the photographs of Starcky (see Plate I), with which I have been able to identify them best. These two letters make up the word *bir* or "son," and this designation belongs with the phrase "king of Aram" at the beginning of the next line in making up another title of the king of this stele. Cross proposed just such a restoration here, but he was unable to read these letters directly from the photos at his disposal. With the new photographs of this inscription these letters may be regarded as more definite.

⁹E. Lipiński, *Studies in Aramaic Inscriptions and Onomastics* (Leuven, 1975), p. 16.

¹⁰For a good comparison of this form of the *qoph*, see H. Klengel, *Geschichte und Kultur Altsyriens*, 2d ed. (Leipzig, 1979), fig. 55.

TRANSLITERATION:

Line 1: nsb' .zy .śm br'.' h

Line 2: dd.br'zr.dmsqy 'lbr

Line 3: mlk 'rm 'l'mr'h lmlqr

Line 4: t. zy nqr 'l' lh wśm' .lql

Line 5: h

TRANSLATION:

The stele which Bir-Hadad, son of 'Ezer,
the Damascene, son of the king of Aram,
erected to his Lord Melqart, to whom he
made a vow and who heard his voice.

There is enough space for approximately two letters between the *qoph* and the *beth* in this line. The photographs of Khayata suggest that a *yod* may follow the *qoph*, and the photographs of Starcky suggest that an ²*aleph* should be identified immediately preceding the *beth*. These two letters are the most difficult of all in this line to read, but there are traces which favor such readings. Moreover, these letters fit well here as a gentilic ending and an article on the word for Damascus which precedes them. On the basis of these new photographs these new readings may be taken together as making up the following reading and translation of this line of the text:

dd. br ʿzr. dmsqy 𐤁𐤓 br

“(Bir-Ha)dad, son of Ezer, [the] Damascene, son (of the king of Aram).”

2. *Paleography*

According to its script the Bir-Hadad text comes close to the Amman Citadel Inscription.¹¹ (For my transcription of the text, see Plate II.) Both of these inscriptions, however, are specifically less developed than the inscription of the Zakkur Stele,¹² which belongs to the period between 800 and 770 B.C. A characteristic of the Bir-Hadad stele is that it represents, along with the Amman Citadel Inscription, a mixture of both archaic and developed forms of letters.¹³ The following examples demonstrate this:

dalet: the short tail is typical for early Aramaic forms.

he: The *he* in line 5, for example, is round-shouldered like the form that appears in line 5 of the Amman Citadel Inscription.¹⁴ This is quite different from the form of the *he* which appears in the

¹¹S. H. Horn, “The Amman Citadel Inscription,” *BASOR* no. 193 (1969), pp. 5, 7, and figs. 2, 3; and Frank M. Cross, Jr., “Epigraphic Notes on the Amman Citadel Inscription,” *BASOR* no. 193 (1969), p. 15, fig. 1. Cross dates the Citadel Inscription to ca. 875-825 B.C., or more specifically to the mid-ninth century B.C., contemporary with the Bir-Hadad Inscription and only slightly earlier than the Moabite Stone. See also Kent P. Jackson, *The Ammonite Language of the Iron Age*, HSM 27 (Chico, Calif., 1983), pp. 9-33, for a good survey of the Amman Citadel Inscription.

¹²Cross, “Epigraphic Notes,” p. 15, fig. 1; Alan R. Millard, “Alphabetic Inscriptions and Ivories from Nimrud,” *Iraq* 24 (1962): 46, fig. 1, col. 11 (see here especially Millard’s chart of the Hebrew and Aramaic letters of the eighth century B.C.).

¹³Cross, “Stele Dedicated to Melcarth,” p. 40.

¹⁴*Ibid.*



Plate III. The Bir-Hadad Stele. From James B. Pritchard, ed., *The Ancient Near East in Pictures: Relating to the Old Testament*. Copyright © 1954 by Princeton University Press. Illustration 499 reprinted with permission of Princeton University Press.

Deir ʿAllā Plaster Text from the mid-eighth century B.C. and the Assur Ostrakon from the mid-seventh century B.C.¹⁵

zayin: The fully developed z-form is found in the Zakkur Inscription from the early eighth century B.C. Here, however, we find the more archaic form in two or three of the four *zayins* in the inscription.¹⁶

kaph: This letter is identical with the forms of the Amman Citadel Inscription, but appears primitive over against the form of the Zakkur Inscription.

ʿ*ayin*: The ʿ*ayin* with the dot in its circle is the earlier form and that is the form which appears possibly in this inscription.

Taken together, these paleographical factors suggest a date between 850 and 840 B.C., or, in any event, some time after the middle of the ninth century but well before the end of that century. The discovery of further epigraphic material may assist in refining this date.

3. *Iconography*

Melqart, the main god of Tyre, is depicted on the relief above the inscription. (See Plate III.) He is shown striding barefoot from right to left. He holds an axe with a crescentic blade in his left hand, and it extends over his left shoulder.¹⁷ This type of axe is known mostly from Syrian and Palestinian sites from the early Middle Bronze Age until the second half of the first millennium B.C.¹⁸

¹⁵See the chart of Aramaic cursive characters in J. Naveh, "The Date of the Deir ʿAllā Inscription in Aramaic Script," *IEJ* 17 (1967): 257, fig. 1, lines 1 and 5. G. van der Kooij, "The Identity of Trans-Jordanian Alphabetic Writing in the Iron Age," a paper presented at the Third International Conference on the History and Archaeology of Jordan in Tübingen, 7-11 April 1986, also includes a chart of the Trans-Jordanian scripts of the Northern and Southern regions.

¹⁶The archaic z-form is also found in the Jezebel seal on quartzite stone. This has been compared to the form of the *zayins* in Mesha's Inscription on the Moabite Stone that is dated here to ca. 850 B.C. See N. Avigad, "The Seal of Jezebel," *IEJ* 14 (1964): 275.

¹⁷K. Galling, "Archäologisch-historische Ergebnisse einer Reise in Syrien und Liban im Spätherbst 1952," *ZDPV* 69 (1953): 185.

¹⁸W. Culican, "Melqart Representations on Phoenician Seals," *Abr-Nahrain* 2 (1960-1961): 41-44. See also Pl. I, figs. 1a and b.

Melqart carries another object in his right hand, but its nature is not entirely recognizable. It may possibly represent the Egyptian *ankh*-sign.¹⁹ A useful comparison can be made here with the ninth-century-B.C. ivory relief from Zenjirli.²⁰ On it the god carries an Egyptian *was*-scepter in one hand and the *ankh*-sign in the other. Melqart's head is adorned with a low dome-shaped hat.²¹ The head shows contours of the eye, nose, mouth, a broad beard with rounded-off lower point (incised with short parallel lines of irregular length), a small ear (two parallel curved lines), a tuft of hair above the eye (four curved furrows) and in the neck (with evenly parallel lines).²²

While the torso is uncovered, the loins are draped in a skirt which flows down in a long tail along the left leg. The skirt is gathered by a belt, but the right front part of the garment remains open. Parallels for the gathering of the garment in this way are known from ʿAmrīt (Marathus), Nimrud, and Arslan Tash.²³ The skirt is decorated in the striking form of two tassels which take the form of cobras. These run almost vertically down the legs but raise their heads in opposing fashion just above the hem.²⁴ A seventh-century-B.C. statue of a priest with a *uraeus*-skirt from ʿAmrīt may be cited for a parallel.²⁵

4. History

The following historical conclusions may be suggested on the basis of comparisons of the epigraphy, paleography, and iconography of this stele with biblical data and with other extra-biblical sources:

¹⁹Dunand, "Stèle araméenne," p. 67. See also Culican, p. 41.

²⁰Galling, p. 185, n. 24.

²¹Dunand, "Stèle araméenne," p. 66; R. de Vaux, "Les prophètes de Baal sur le Mont Carmel," *BMB* 5 (1941): 9.

²²Dunand, "Stèle araméenne," p. 66. Cf. also the head of the weather god with an axe and bundle of lightning bolts on the relief from Zenjirli (Samʿal), which, however, is directed to the left. G. R. Meyer, *Durch vier Jahrtausende altvorderasiatischer Kultur*, enl. ed., vol. 2 (Berlin, 1962), p. 35 and fig. 4.

²³Galling, p. 185, with reference to his *Biblisches Reallexikon* (Tübingen, 1937), cols. 211-212, no. 1 (stele of ʿAmrīt), and *Iraq* 2 (1935): Pl. 23, no. 4 (ivory from Nimrud).

²⁴Dunand, "Stèle araméenne," p. 67.

²⁵M. Dunand, "Les sculptures de la Favissa du temple d'Amrit," *BMB* 7 (1944-1945): 99-107, and Pl. XVI, 9.

1. The text of the Bir-Hadad Inscription belongs to a time that is post-850 B.C. The political situation in this period suggests a date around 845.

2. The second line of this text identifies its Bir-Hadad as a son of the Aramaean king Adad-²Idri. This king is known here only by his second name ⁶Ezer. Given the appropriate phonetic shifts, ²Idri in Akkadian equals ⁶Ezer in Aramaic and Hebrew. This king, Adad-²Idri or ⁶Ezer, was the Aramaean king who led the western coalition of kings and armies in battle against Shalmaneser III of Assyria at Qarqar in Syria in 853 B.C.

3. In the period after the battle of Qarqar, this father-and-son pair must have shared power on the throne of Damascus. Bir-Hadad the son may possibly have taken over the leadership of the army at that time. He was probably crown prince of the royal house of Damascus before he was raised to the status of coregent and king, ca. 845 B.C. or slightly earlier. Adad-²Idri is commonly identified as Ben Hadad II in the series of kings of Damascus known by that name from the Bible. Since we are now inserting his son in that line of kings as another Ben Hadad, the Bir/Ben Hadad who inscribed this stele should be indentified as Ben Hadad III. The later Ben Hadad of the Bible, the son of Hazael, should now be moved from Ben Hadad III to Ben Hadad IV.

4. It is possible to interpret a statement in the annals of Shalmaneser III of Assyria in such a way as to indicate that Adad-²Idri/Ben Hadad II (if they are identical), against whom the Assyrians fought so frequently, died in battle in 845 B.C. and therefore did not live on as late as 842/841, as previously held.²⁶ If that was the case, then it

²⁶M. Noth, *Geschichte Israels*, 6th ed. (Berlin, 1966) p. 226. E. Lipiński, "An Assyro-Israelite Alliance in 842/841 B.C.E.?", *Proceedings of the Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies*, 1 (Jerusalem, 1977): p. 273 and passim, speaks here of a violent death of Adad-²Idri in 842 B.C. according to his dating, which would have severed the alliance between Damascus, Hamath, and Israel. See also E. Lipiński, "Aramäer und Israel," *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* (Berlin, 1978), 3:590-599, esp. 594-597, and "Aram et Israël du X^e au VIII^e siècle av. n. è.," *Acta antiqua Academiae scientiarum Hungaricae* 27 (1979): 49-102, esp. 75-76. On the translation of the relevant Akkadian phrase from the annals, *šadašu ēmid*, see W. von Soden, *Akkadisches Wörterbuch* 1 (Wiesbaden, 1965): 211, and *CAD* (Chicago, 1958) 4:140, and esp. the proposal by J. Alberto Soggin, "Amos VI:13-14 und I:3 auf dem Hintergrund der Beziehungen zwischen Israel und Damaskus im 9. und 8. Jahrhundert," in Hans Goedicke, ed., *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William Foxwell Albright* (Baltimore, 1971), p. 438. Soggin thought that this translation was possible.

would have been natural for his son, the Bir-Hadad of the stele, to have accompanied his father into that battle. If Adad-³Idri was killed at that time, it is possible that Bir-Hadad may have been wounded. This Bir-Hadad of the stele, then, would be the Ben Hadad that we encounter in 2 Kgs 8 as lying sick, or still convalescing, from his wounds on the occasion when the usurper Hazael entered and murdered him (in 842/841 B.C.). The national and personal reverses experienced by Bir-Hadad (Ben Hadad III) played into the hands of Hazael.

5. On the other hand, if the Ben Hadad of 2 Kgs 8 is to be identified with Adad-³Idri/Ben Hadad II, as the king whom Hazael murdered (vs. 15), then one might also expect that his son, the Bir-Hadad of the stele, met a similar fate at the hands of Hazael.

6. The Bir-Hadad Stele provides unique historical evidence that the god Melqart was worshiped in the royal court of Damascus following 850 B.C. Since Melqart was the god of Tyre in particular, this stele gives evidence of contacts between Tyre and Damascus.