

THE TELL EL-^UUMEIRI INSCRIPTION

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During the course of the Tell Hesban survey, Robert Ibach discovered "fragmentary inscriptions" on the south-southwest base of Tell el-^Umeiri.¹ An on-site examination of this discovery has led me to conclude that these fragments form one inscription composed of several words.² This article contains a first attempt at deciphering the Tell el-^Umeiri inscription.

The southern slope of Tell el-^Umeiri is composed of two shelves.³ Around most of the tell the base rises steeply from the surrounding wadi. The lower shelf, where the inscription is located, is such that as one walks around the base of the tell the inscription is near eye level.

The two stones that make up the "panels" of the Tell el-^Umeiri inscription lie side by side and are located in proximity to a tomb.⁴ As can be seen from **Plate 1**, both stones are natural

¹Robert D. Ibach, Jr., *Archaeological Survey of the Hesban Region: Catalogue of Sites and Characterization of Periods*, ed. Øystein Sakala LaBianca, Hesban 5 (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1987), 31.

²Appreciation is given to Robert Ibach for providing a map and written directions to locate the inscription, which is not easily discovered. Appreciation is also given to Lawrence T. Geraty, director of the Madaba Plains Project, and to the other project directors, for permission to publish this inscription.

³For a description of Tell el-^Umeiri and the 1984 excavation season, see Lawrence T. Geraty and others, "Madaba Plains Project: A Preliminary Report of the 1984 Season at Tell el-^Umeiri and Vicinity," *BASOR Supplement*, no. 24 (1986): 117-144; and Lawrence T. Geraty and others, *Madaba Plains Project: The 1984 Season at Tell el-^Umeiri and Vicinity and Subsequent Studies* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1989).

⁴The tomb has been robbed, possibly some time after the 1987 winter rains and before June 1987 when I made my visit. The evidence for this conclusion was the lack of erosion visible on the dirt the robbers had left at the tomb entrance.

outcroppings which have been adapted for inscriptional use. The somewhat irregular panel created for the inscription on the left is approximately 80 cm by 20 cm. The right panel is slightly larger at 90 cm by 25 cm.

The inscription consists of three lines. On the left stone there are two lines (Plate 2), and on the right stone there is one line (Plate 3). As Ibach noted, the inscription is in Greek.

Transcribing and translating the Greek letters on the right stone is straightforward because the letters are generally legible, although two letters are incomplete. Reading from left to right the letters are: Ι Γ Ι Δ Ι Ρ Π (see Plate 4). Since the style of script is a common form of Greek lapidary writing called "square" letters,⁵ reconstruction of this word is not difficult. The fifth "letter" from the left I reconstruct as an omega. The center stroke of the omega is omitted, giving it the appearance of square "U." However, since ancient Greek inscriptions employed only capital letters, and since the only other Greek capital that could be made from the same base as a square "U" is an *omicron*, also having the "O" sound like the *omega*, my suggestion that this letter is, at the least, an "O" sounding letter seems reasonable. The last readable letter looks like the Greek letter *pi*, but it is, I believe, incomplete or perhaps worn. Instead of a *pi*, I believe it was intended for this letter to be an *omicron*. The bottom line, for whatever reason, is missing. This suggested reconstruction produces a proper name minus the final letter which is no longer readable. It was probably a *sigma*.⁶

The proposed letters spell the name Isidoro(s).⁷ The presence of an inscribed personal name near the entrance of a tomb leads to the conclusion that this is the name of the person who is, or once was, buried in the tomb.⁸

⁵Cf. C. B. Welles, "The Inscriptions," in *Gerasa: City of the Decapolis* (New Haven, CT: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1938), 358-369, especially figure 8.

⁶If this inscription came from a slightly later period, it could more easily be argued that the final letter might be either a *sigma* or an *upsilon*. When Christianity became a more dominant force within the Roman Empire, Christians commonly had their names written in the genitive case, while pagan names were recorded in the nominative (John S. Creaghan and A. E. Raubitschek, *Early Christian Epitaphs from Athens* [Woodstock, MD: Theological Studies, 1947], 7).

⁷See *ibid.*, 31, for another example of an "Isidoros" tomb.

⁸Since no excavation of this tomb has been conducted by the Tell el-^cUmeiri team, we do not know how much damage, if any, has been done in the tomb.

The inscription on the facing rock, that is, the inscription on the left, is more complicated. The letters are legible enough, but their translation is not so obvious. The top row of letters I transcribe as ETOYIP, while the bottom line I read as ΣΕΥΛ (see Plates 2 and 4).

The first observation is that while the inscription on the right is produced with evenly spaced and clearly incised letters, the letters of the left inscription are unevenly spaced and give the impression of having been carved by an unskilled hand. The letters are irregularly spaced left to right, as though spacing was not considered until several letters needed to be bunched together.

The first four letters spell most of the letters of the Greek word *etous* (acc. pl. of *etos*). This word means "year" and is a word frequently found in inscriptions.⁹ As is known, Greek inscriptions often used abbreviations. One abbreviation used for *etous* is the four letters *etou*.¹⁰ Since these are the first four letters of the left top line of this portion of the ^cUmeiri inscription, I propose that the first word of the left inscription is the word "year,"¹¹ although, as described below, I do not think this is a purposeful abbreviation. One would expect to find immediately following the word "year" the letters (representing numbers) that would give the date of Isidoros' burial. The usual formula is for letters representing hundreds, tens, and ones, respectively, to immediately follow the word for "year."

This more typical dating formula is not followed in this inscription; rather, like inscriptions discovered at Jerash, the

⁹For examples of inscriptions using the word *etos* in various forms, including *etous*, see René Dussaud, *Mélanges Syriens*, vol. 2 (Paris: Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geunthner, 1939), 563-565, 567-570, 572-576; Paul Figueras, *Byzantine Inscriptions from Beer-Sheva and the Negev*, ed. Yehuda Govrin, trans. Thomas Levy (Beersheba: Neger Museum, 1985), 22-25; Avraham Negev, *The Greek Inscriptions from the Negev*, *Studium Biblicum Franciscanum*, no. 25 (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1981), 29-33, as well as many examples elsewhere.

¹⁰M. Avi-Yonah, "Abbreviations in Greek Inscriptions," in *Abbreviations in Greek Inscriptions: Papyri, Manuscripts, and Early Printed Books*, compiled by Al. N. Oikonomides (Chicago: , 1974), 65.

¹¹It would be only fair to note that several other abbreviations for *etous* were also used; Avi-Yonah lists these additional known abbreviations: *E* (p. 61), *ET* (p. 65), *ETO* (p. 65).

dating pattern is ones, tens, and hundreds.¹² The evidence for this conclusion is simply that the letter that immediately follows the word "year" is *iota*, the equivalent of the number 10, while the next letter is *rho*, that is, the number 100. The date, then, given in this inscription is "110." If we again follow the lead of Jerash, which used the Pompeian era for dating,¹³ the inscription reads "year 110," that is, A.D. 47.¹⁴

The second line of this panel is the most difficult to reconstruct. It is peculiar, because the letters are unevenly composed and are not inscribed beginning from the left margin, but rather, begin near the middle of the panel, and even then, are unevenly produced. As stated above, I read the letters as ΣΕΥΛ. The *sigma* is not the beginning of a new word, but is rather, I believe, a crude addition to the letters ΕΤΟΥ above it. Note that the sigma on this second line is immediately below the *upsilon* in the first line. I suggest that the inscriber realized the omission of the sigma in the top line and, therefore, placed it below the final letter of the word. I admit that additions are often inscribed above the insertion spot, but, given the crudeness of the writing style, I do not believe it is impossible for this writer to have placed it below its correct place.¹⁵ Thus, I do not believe that *etous* is abbreviated, but that the inscriber erred in the original attempt and placed the final *sigma* of *etous* in the most convenient space available, below the *upsilon*.

The final word is abbreviated in the three letters EUL. The *upsilon* and the *lambda* are joined together, which makes them

¹²Jones describes the dating formula of Jerash inscriptions, "The numerals are also peculiar; contrary to the usual practice both of the papyri and of the inscriptions the unit is placed before the ten, and the ten before the hundred; occasionally the order is ten, unit, hundred" (*Journal of Roman Studies* 18 [1928]: 144).

¹³Welles, 358.

¹⁴The Pompeian era began 63 B.C. (year 1=63 B.C.) and that date was widely used in Coele Syria for dating (Jones, 144; Welles, 358; Carl H. Kraeling, "The Mosaic Inscriptions," in *A Byzantine Church at Khirbat Al-Karak*, eds. Pinhas Delougaz and Richard C. Haines, University of Chicago Oriental Institute Publications, vol. 85 [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1960], 54; G. W. Bowersock, *Roman Arabia* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983], 30).

¹⁵In a personal communication (March 26, 1991) W. H. Shea mentioned the possibility that the *sigma* on line 2 of the left-hand stone may be the final letter of the word on the right-hand stone. It seems to me, however, that this letter on the left-hand stone is too far removed from the word on the right-hand stone (ca. 2.5 m) to be directly connected with it.

look, at first, like a diamond with a tail.¹⁶ The reason, I believe, is the attempt of the writer to use an abbreviation for *eulabestatos*, the superlative of *eulabes*.¹⁷ Although this is not an exact reproduction of a common abbreviation, I think it is the most plausible explanation of the letters present.¹⁸ The meaning of *eulabestatos* is "most pious." The entire ^oUmeiri inscription reads: "Year 110, most pious Isidoros."

According to Ibach, two of the three sites known as ^oUmeiri show evidence of Roman occupation.¹⁹ Only one of those two had evidence of Early Roman occupation—site 147, commonly referred to as ^oUmeiri/East.²⁰ It seems possible that Isidoros was the owner of an estate centered on the natural hill of site 147.²¹ Above I stated that the panel that bears Isidoros' name was remarkably uniform and well cut. The evidence suggests that Isidoros planned well for his eventual death by preparing a tomb, including two panels arranged for burial information. Isidoros' name was sure, and so, most likely, he procured the help of an expert stone-cutter who carefully chiseled Isidoros' name into the appropriate panel. However, upon Isidoros' death, someone, evidently a non-professional, finished the inscription by adding the date and the complimentary statement about Isidoros, the most pious.

In summary, the ^oUmeiri inscription appears to be the tomb inscription of the moderately wealthy, pious landowner, Isidoros, who was buried A.D. 47. Additional information on where and how he lived may come with further investigation.

¹⁶Avi-Yonah notes that "the most common method of indicating abbreviation [is] by a change in the position of the letters" (p. 30). He also points out that it is the last letter that is written over the next to the last and provides an example of a *lambda* written over the *upsilon*, just as we have in this inscription (p. 31).

¹⁷Thanks to Tom Shepherd for help with the Greek superlative endings. See H. G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 1968 ed., s.v. "eulabes" and Robert W. Funk, *A Beginning-Intermediate Grammar of Hellenistic Greek*, vol. 1, *Sight and Sound, Nominal System, Verbal System*, 2nd ed. (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1973), 183-184, for comparative adjectives, including superlatives.

¹⁸Avi-Yonah lists abbreviations found for *eulabestatos*: *euls*, *eula*, *eulab*, etc. (66).

¹⁹Ibach, 170-174. For a discussion of the "three" ^oUmeiri sites, see David Merling, "Charles Warren's Exploration between Na^cur and Khirbet as-Suq," in *Madaba Plains Project: The 1984 Season at Tell el ^oUmeiri and Vicinity and Subsequent Studies* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1989), 26-29.

²⁰Ibach, fig. 3.9, "The Early Roman Period," 175.

²¹During the Early Roman period occupation in this region had moved from the wadis to the natural hills or plateau (*ibid.*, 174).

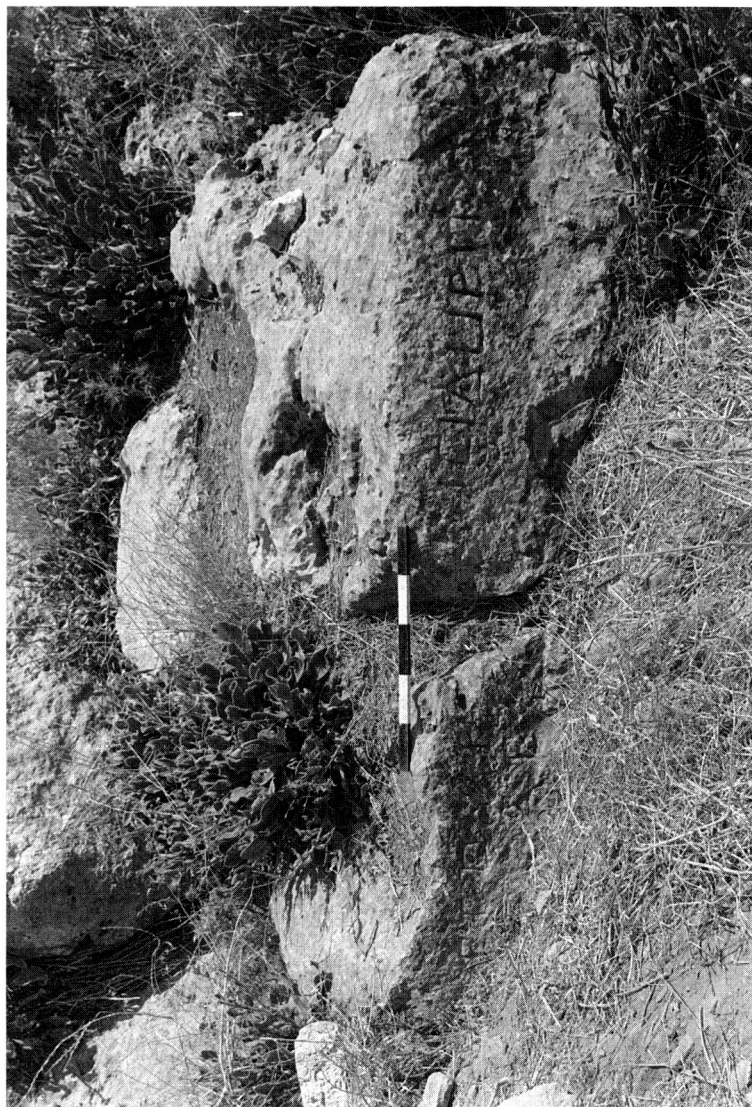


Plate No. 1. A general view of the 'Umeiri inscription



Plate No. 2. The left stone of the ʿUmeiri inscription



Plate No. 3. The right stone of the Umeiri inscription



Plate No. 4. A Drawing of the ^Umeiri inscription