

The «Philistine» Documents from the Hebron Area: A Supplementary Note

by
Dr. George E. Mendenhall

Since the announcement of December 1, 1970, concerning the leather documents that were supposed to have come from the Hebron district, there have been a number of developments in the analysis and study of the very curious and puzzling inscriptions. In addition to the Carbon 14 test and chemical investigation of the tanning procedure, a whole battery of further tests has been used, but with inconclusive results. The Carbon 14 test yielded a modern date, but this is meaningless in view of the fact that we have no information concerning the documents prior to November 1965 and know that months of handling, exposure to fall-out and contamination took place before the test. Parts of the leather that had blackened with age to such an extent that the letters were invisible yielded in most satisfactory manner to Infra-Red photography. Ultra-violet examination (both short-wave and long -wave) yielded absolutely no evidence of inauthenticity. Exhaustive examination of the documents under the microscope and analysis of the ink and leather with a scanning electron microscope brought a number of surprises for which there is no known published parallel, but no evidence against their authenticity. The report on the scientific testing is not yet finished, but at last information available to me, it seems clear that no real evidence for modern origin has been found, and the problem of the date and origin of the documents will have to be solved by means of internal evidence.

That evidence is by no means lacking. A tentative transcription of the texts using over 40 signs was run through the computer, and the results pointed out so many parallel phrases that the number of signs could be reduced. Forms that had not been suspected to be mere graphic variants were vividly proven to be such by the computer print-out. A second and third transcription and print-out was carried out during the winter and early spring of 1970 - 71 before study of the documents had to be suspended in order to complete the work on the Syllabic Inscriptions from Byblos, and the University of Michigan - Dumbarton Oaks survey of the archaeological sites within the area to be inundated by the dam under construction at Tabqa, Syria on the Euphrates River.

The result of the three computer print-outs is therefore by no means evaluated, but the number of signs in the alphabet has been drastically reduced so that the last transcription used only 31 signs plus several that were indicated merely with a question mark. Mr. Stanley Mendenhall has however, continued the work on the documents, and recently carried out a 'morpheme scanning' program using the most recent transliteration of the documents. The computer identified 131 different morphemes; and a cursory examination of the list convinces me that the program identified both grammatical affixes and recurrent

noun and verb roots. As test of the program's efficiency, he gave the computer an 'easy German text', and it identified accurately about 42 out of 67 morphemes in the passage under analysis.

What seems to be true of all early non-professional writing systems is also applicable to these documents, namely, that rigidity of alphabetic forms and rules of spelling had not yet taken place. The spelling of particular words is naive, based upon pronunciation, and therefore the same word is written in different ways in different hands. It is such spelling and graphic variations that yield extremely important information. For example it is now possible to cite one of the most frequent words in all of the documents that I transcribe as *gorugor* - . It is also spelled *xorugor*, *xgorugor*, and *goruFor*. In view of Lydian *voru* and Latin *puer* that are traced by Indo-European comparative grammar to an original *g^w* initial phoneme, it is very probable that we have the ancient Philistine form of the Indo-European word for 'son's son' - - 'grandson'.

If the observations concerning etymological connections should prove, as they so often do, to be illusory, nevertheless the spellings prove that the *X* sign does not represent the Phoenician *taw*, but a back, velar, fricative that corresponds to the Greek *chi* and the Thamudic and Safaitic *ha*. This is merely one of many observed phenomena that fully justify the conclusion that the alphabet of the documents in question represents a fairly recent adaptation of the Phoenician alphabet to a non-Semitic language that is quite possibly an Indo-European dialect. The alphabet is still very closely related to the Phoenician forms, but already has its own evolutionary history and other inscriptions from Palestine and Syria illustrate, I believe, its subsequent development until its demise. Consequently, purely formal comparisons with later Aramaic and Canaanite scripts

are completely irrelevant to both the identification of the etymological phonemic value of particular signs, and to the problem of dating the documents. The changes that took place in the Phoenician alphabet after the end of the ninth century B. C. are not reflected in the signary, illustrated if not proven by the *mim* that never has a separate center stroke. No alphabetic form connected with the Phoenician alphabet can be derived from those attested after about 750 B. C. The alphabetic borrowing must have taken place before 800 B. C. and could very well have been done in the Late Bronze Age. There is no ground for dating the documents themselves after about 800 B. C. though it could well be argued that archaic forms were preserved for a time in an isolated tribal enclave that preserved its own language and writing system in a hostile environment. The historical process is entirely analogous to that demonstrated not long ago by A. Goetze to be true of southern Anatolia where Bronze Age languages and names survived until the beginning of the Christian era and probably even later, though of course with radical linguistic change.

What R. Young says about the origin and structure of the Phrygian alphabet (*Hesperia*, 1969) applies with uncanny accuracy to the writing system of the Hebron documents, even including its North Syrian origin. The similarity of many signs to the Zenjirli-Karatepe system is remarkable, and a recent examination of the Karatepe inscriptions at the site convinced me that the Hebron documents are perceptibly more archaic, and also that some Karatepe variations of form are also discernable in the Hebron documents. In the Hebron documents the five-vowel system of the Greco-Etruscan alphabet is already present, and it is quite clear from formal contrasts, that, as Young points out, several of the Phoenician characters split into two forms, one becoming a vowel while the other became or remained a con-

sonant. Thus the Phoenician *he* in our documents is the vowel *E* in most cases, but it is preserved as a consonant *h* and differentiated from the vowel by two graphic techniques in the various handwritings: stance, and ligature.

The *waw* becomes the vowel *u* and probably another sign for a labial consonant *w?/v?* Whether or not it gave rise to the *digamma* is not at all clear from the evidence given in these texts, and I am inclined at present to doubt it. The *alif* of Phoenician seems most probably to be used to represent the *Kappa* of Greek, but a much evolved form became the vowel *a* that is very similar to the Messapian form lying on its side, and sometimes written without the reptal cross stroke. In at least one case it is represented merely by two parallel lines. If the Phoenician *alif* is used to represent the IE *kappa*, one can only cite as an explanation the contrast between Hittite *kessera* 'hand' and Luwian *issera*, and note in passing the modern colloquial Arabic pronunciation of the etymological *qoph* as an *alif*.

To the present time, late November 1971, I have either seen or been informed of at least nine inscriptions that seem certainly to belong to this same alphabetic tradition. Four have been known since the latter half of the 19th century, and three have been excavated since 1966. To complicate matters further, an inscribed sherd found by Mr. Thomas McClell and at Tell Jisr in the Beqa^c of Lebanon near Kamid el-Loz can now be dated with considerable confidence to the Middle Bronze Age. The incised inscription of perhaps 18 characters includes in the signary the Sabeian sign representing Arabic *ta*, the Lycian sign for the vowel *E*, and the Lydian sign that represents a second *L (H) ?*, in addition to a number of standard archaic Canaanite forms such as the *dal*, *alif/kappa*, and *lam*. It seems increasingly likely that a continuous writing tradition existed not only in the Syro-Palestinian region from the Bronze Age

until the systematization of scribal traditions that gave rise to what we call the alphabets of Phoenician, Aramaic, and Hebrew, but also a writing tradition existed for non-Semitic languages in the region that is firmly attested so far only in the "Hieroglyphic Luwian" system and in Cypriot Syllabic.

There can be no question that the history of writing in the Near East is infinitely more complex than can be accounted for by present theories and empirical observations. Since April of this year I have seen more than twenty unpublished inscriptions in unknown or radically aberrant writing systems. Some are indubitably magical gobbledygook of the kind that is still being produced in the mountain villages of Lebanon today, and doubtless elsewhere as well. Of the rest there can be little doubt, ranging in date from the Bronze Age to the Middle Ages, and in origin from North Syria and Cyprus to Yemen.

The question of authenticity of the documents has of course been raised concerning these as well as every other new discovery from the Stone Age cave paintings of France and Spain to the Qumran scrolls. Allegations of forgery seem to be a predictable defense mechanism of those elements of the scholarly world that have made up their minds about what the ancient world was supposed to produce, and do not want to be confused with new facts. It is curious that the only scholars who are convinced of their authenticity are those who have worked seriously with the original documents, including the extremely productive computer analysis.

In view of the enormous information output of the documents and their uniqueness in every respect, there could be absolutely no question about their authenticity and antiquity were it not for persistent rumors that learned scholars in the Near East have themselves concocted

fakes. It is very difficult to believe that scholars capable of putting such an enormous range of information into these documents would also be capable of such irresponsible misuse of learning. Those who perpetuate the rumors

have the obligation of common decency to produce the evidence concerning those alleged forgeries if in fact they do exist. so that they may be compared with these documents under examination.

George E. Mandenhall