

# AN INSCRIPTION FROM AL-BĀLŪ' (ARḌ AL-KARAK)

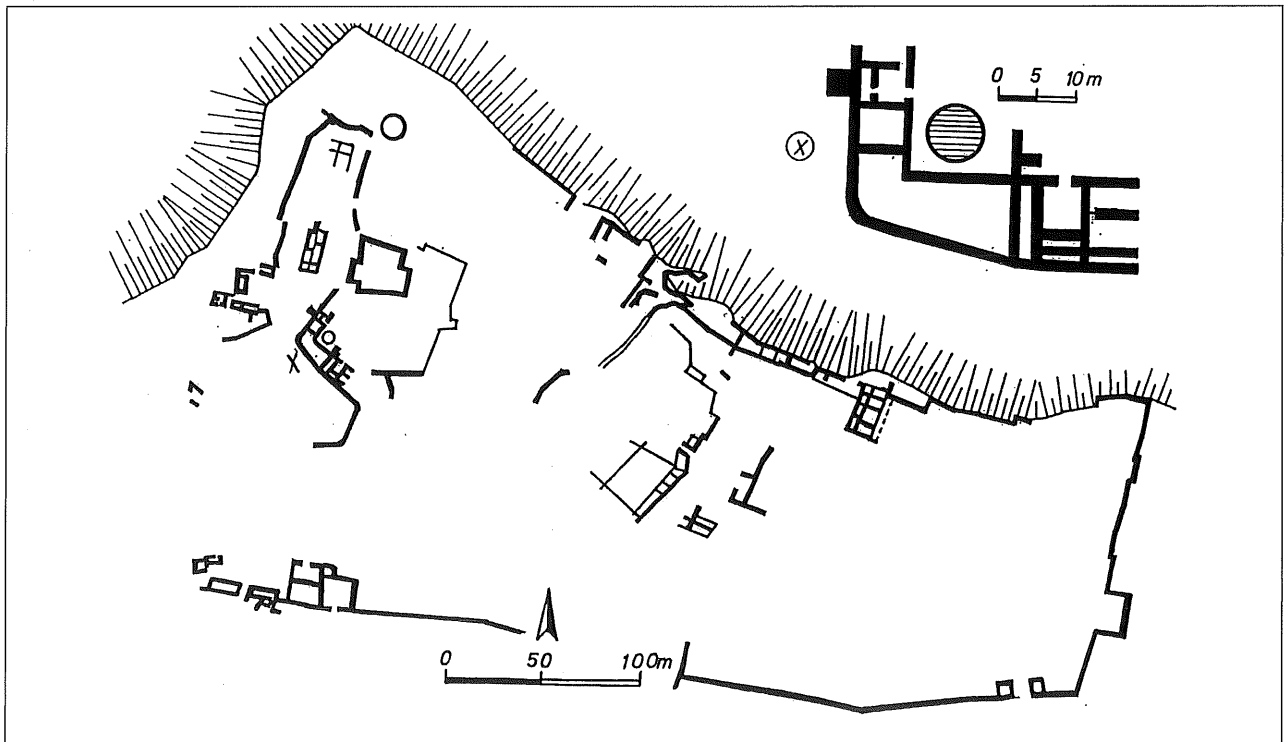
*Udo Worschech*

The excavation campaign in al-Bālū' in the summer of 2003 concentrated on an area covered with many wall lines and stone heaps south of the impressive Qaṣr al-Bālū'. This area had caught my attention before during the surveys of the vast ruin. Here a wall-line can be traced, running about 50m from the south side of the qaṣr from east to west. In its western section it suddenly turns to the north where it continues until it meets the southwestern corner of the qaṣr. From this circumferential wall smaller wall-lines of about 0.80-1.00m in width can be traced at nearly right angles from the main wall inwards, i.e. in a northerly direction toward the qaṣr. It is therefore clearly apparent in rooms or sections

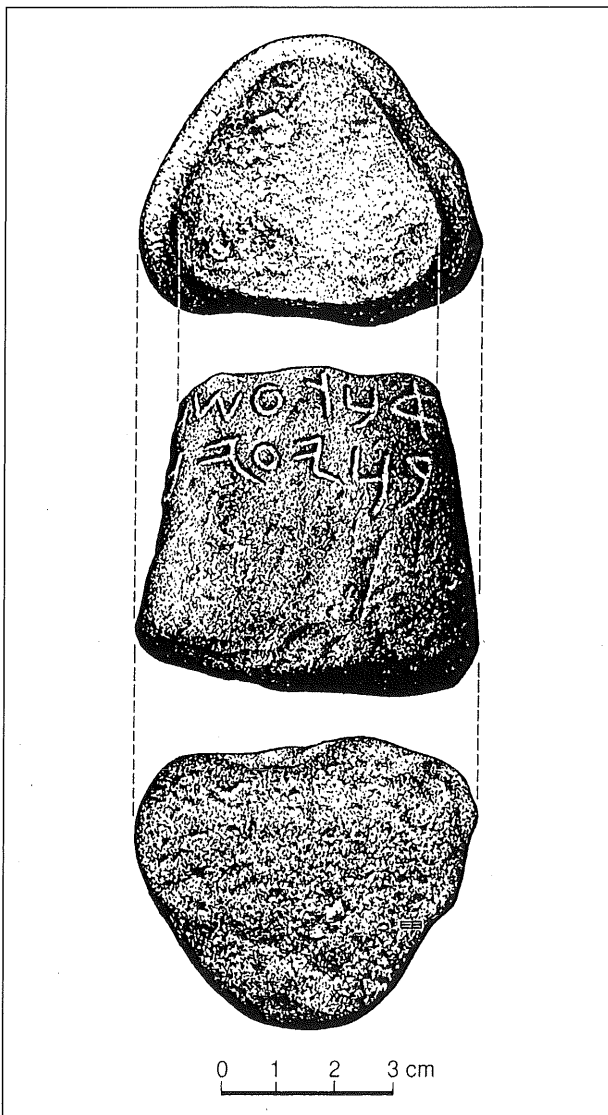
of rooms which are protected by the impressive outer wall (Fig. 1). A room was cleared in the eastern square of this area, from which a pestle of basalt with a two-lined inscription came to light.

## Truncated Pestle: Description and Dimensions (Fig. 2)

The letters of the inscription are all very legible with two exceptions (see below). They were probably incised with a metal pencil into the basalt surface. Whether the truncated pestle was the original piece for the inscription or had its upper part broken off cannot be said with certainty. However, its present form shows a trian-



1. Sketch of Area G in al-Bālū' (2003).



2. Pestle.

gular plan of 6.2 x 5.6 x 5.6cm with rounded corners. The length of the side walls of the pestle totals about 5.8cm. If the slightly inwards in-

clined exterior surfaces were extended upwards the possible entire height of the pestle would be about 22-24cm. It remains unclear whether the original pestle was pointed, rounded or flat at the top. At the current break line there are no indications of incisions from possible letters above the present top line of letters.

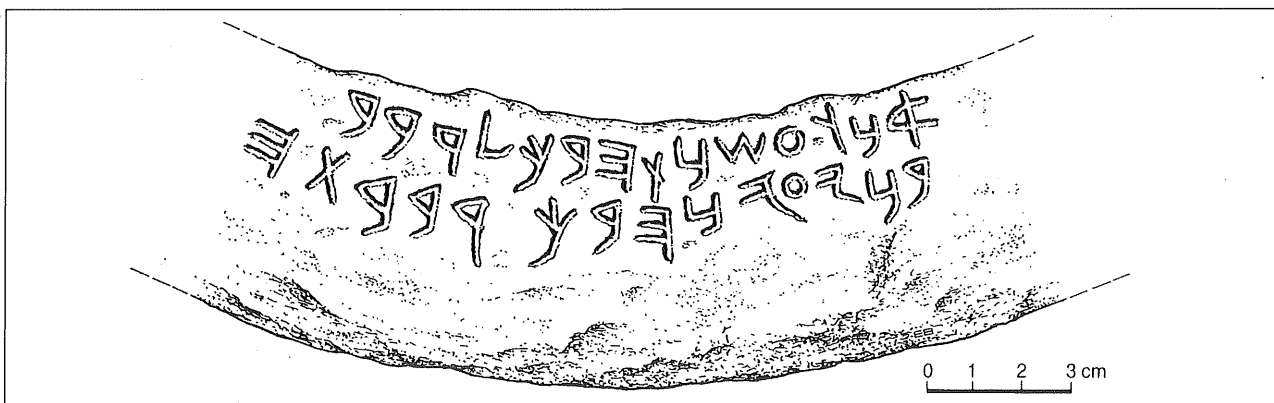
The size of the inscription letters varies from 7 to 12mm. The depth of the incised letters lies between 0.2 and 0.4mm. The coarsely finished and hence rough and porous surface of the basalt stump inhibits a clear reading of the letters in two places. However, this does not seriously compromise the orthography and the reading of the inscription. Since there are no word dividers such as dots or strokes my interpretation of this inscription is still open for discussion.

### Letters of the Two-Lined Pestle-Inscription (Fig. 3)

Of the 22 letters of the Canaanite alphabet and the characters known from Palestinian inscriptions, only 12 are found in our inscription. For a comparison with other Moabite inscriptions see Fig. 4 (see also Kooij 1987: 107-121; Hoftijzer, Jongeling 1995: passim; a new Moabite inscription published by Ahituv 2003: 3-10).

'Aliph corresponds to the classical form, which S. Timm (1989: 277) designated as Type C of the Mesha' inscription (MI). Indeed, the point of the horizontally recumbent corner is slightly rounded. The thighs diverge at what also corresponds to forms of the 'aliph in the MI. The three 'aliph of the Karak fragment also have a pointed corner form (Timm Type C, 1989: 277) which is present in our inscription as well.

The *bet* of the inscription is found several



3. Letters of the pestle inscription.

Pestle Inscription el-Bālū'	Mesha Stone	El-Kerak Fragment	Rim Inscription el-Bālū'	Dibon Fragment	Incense stand Mudeneh eth-Themed
𐤁	𐤁𐤁𐤁	𐤁𐤁𐤁			𐤁𐤁𐤁
𐤂𐤂𐤂	𐤂𐤂𐤂	𐤂 𐤂		𐤂	
𐤃𐤃𐤃	𐤃𐤃𐤃	𐤃𐤃𐤃			
𐤄 𐤄	𐤄𐤄𐤄	𐤄			𐤄
𐤅 𐤅	𐤅𐤅𐤅	𐤅𐤅𐤅			
𐤆𐤆	𐤆𐤆𐤆	𐤆𐤆𐤆	𐤆	𐤆	
𐤇	𐤇𐤇𐤇	𐤇 𐤇	𐤇		𐤇 𐤇
	𐤈𐤈𐤈	𐤈𐤈𐤈	𐤈		𐤈𐤈
𐤉𐤉𐤉	𐤉 𐤉	𐤉			𐤉
𐤊 𐤊	𐤊 𐤊	𐤊 𐤊			𐤊 𐤊
𐤋𐤋	𐤋𐤋𐤋	𐤋			𐤋
𐤌	𐤌 𐤌	𐤌𐤌𐤌			𐤌𐤌𐤌
𐤍	𐤍 𐤍	𐤍𐤍𐤍	𐤍	𐤍	

4. Table of the characters from Moabite inscriptions for comparison.

times. The triangular head has a mostly horizontal upper line which determines the position of the head. In only one case the head of the *bet* is slightly inclined. This type of *bet* is found most often in the MI (Herr 1978: 158, 1980: 26). The downward stroke of the *bet* can begin either directly at the triangular head, or branch off to the left after a short downward stroke. On the

Moabite seal *nhm bn hmn* the downstroke is attached directly to the head (cf. Timm 1989: 211 and 279; Herr 1978: 133; Vattioni II 1971:Nr. 202). The Dhibān fragment (Timm 1989: 266-269) likewise contains a *bet* with an inclined head from which the downstroke branches off to the left. This form is consistent with the MI. On the Karak fragment (Weippert 1964: 169-172;

1966: 328-330; Kooj 1987: 107-121; Timm 1989: 269-277) this type of *bet* can also be found in this form.

The *he* of the pestle inscription appears in three variants which are also found in the MI. In each case three horizontal beams lead away from the vertical downstroke with differing spaces. In one instance the vertical downstroke reaches beyond the upper horizontal beam and in another the upper horizontal beam extends beyond the downstroke. In contrast to the MI the *he* of our inscription always has a vertical stance. The vertical stance of the *he* has been interpreted by M. Abu Taleb (1985: 25) as typical Moabite. The Moabite seals he published show without exception the vertical stance of the *he*. In contrast with Timm (1989: 282 and note 12) one will have to assume from this that the vertically standing *he* is indicative of the typical Moabite *he*. The *he* of the Karak fragment is striking because of its four (!) crossbeams. It stands vertically in one instance; otherwise it is inclined to the left.

The letter *waw* appears twice in the inscription. Instead of the usual 'u' or 'v' type head of the MI on top of the vertical downstroke, a short line is attached here at the left side of the downstroke at an angle (cf. also the Ammonite form of the *waw*; Herr 1980: 26, fig. 1a no. 16). The 'v' form is therefore maintained here. The identification of the other *waw* is less unequivocal, however, and is explained by the word formation (s.u.). The *waw* of the Karak inscription, however, has a 'u' type head on top of the downstroke.

Both instances of the *yod* show a remarkable peculiarity: they do not have at the foot of the downstroke the kicking upstroke to the right which is typical of the MI and the Karak fragment, as well as for other Palestinian inscriptions from the Iron Age. Instead the vertical downstroke runs out in a weak curve down to the right. The two *yod* have an inclined head and show both the typical parallel running crossbeams, which extend from the downstroke to the left.

The two *kaf* of the inscription have as a characteristic the downstroke swinging to the left. Herr (1978: figs. 50 and 70; 1980: 28) calls this characteristic of the lower part of the downstroke swinging to the left "conservative in both Hebrew and Moabite". Both types of *kaf* of in

pestle inscription are also found in the MI. However, the three *kaf* of the Karak inscription have the center line as the main downstroke to which the other two lines are added at an angle. The *kaf* of the Dhibān fragment points to the same execution, although the downstroke is relatively vertical. The *kaf* of the Rim-inscription of al-Bālū' has an elegant swing of the downstroke, which is likewise the right head line to which the other small lines are attached (Zayadine 1986: 303).

The *lamed* is only represented once in our inscription. It bears the so-called "open" form opposite the otherwise more usual, almost closed form resembling a '6' (further differentiations are not relevant here, S. Timm 1989: 289f). The almost vertical downstroke with an angular rather than circular curve is remarkable. However, this "deformity" probably lies with the porous and somewhat rough surface of the basalt stone. The *lamed* of the Rim-inscription of al-Bālū' has the closed form (Zayadine 1986: 302-304).

The *nun* appears in the inscription four times. It resembles the *mem* without the central middle line. Remarkable is the relatively wide rectangular head of which the right downstroke branches off to the left directly at the head or runs out as a branching-off line to the left. The forms of the *nun* of the Moabite seals discussed by Timm also appear in our inscription. Therefore, the differentiations made by Timm between early and late forms of a "rounded" and "breaking off" *nun* must be taken with discretion (1989: cf. discussion of nos. 5, 7, 38 p. 294).

The two 'ayn in our inscription are consistent with the MI and are also represented as a closed circle on the Karak fragment.

The letter *resh* is found in the inscription twice. Both times a slight left inclination is clearly recognizable. Owing to the porous and irregular surface of the basalt pestle, a pointed head of the letter could not be rendered.

The letter *shin/sin* has the typical form of the 'w' as demonstrated in many Canaanite inscriptions. It appears in our inscription only once. The higher right upstroke of the 'w' is typical and common in other inscriptions as well. Four *shin/sin* are also found in identical execution on the Karak fragment, and the lower part of a *shin/sin* is recognizable on the Dhibān fragment.

The *taw* consists of two crossing beams

which do not stand vertically atop each other, but rather have the form of an 'x'. The stroke leading down on the right is longer in our inscription than usual. Different executions of this letter are also known from the MI with the cross beams forming different angles. Clear 'x' form has the *taw* of the Dhībān fragment and the *taw* of the Rim-inscription of al-Bālū' (Zayadine 1986: 302).

The forms of the letters discussed here also vary within the inscription and the parallels cited do not allow for exact dating of the inscription. There are at present not enough Moabite inscriptions from the Central Moabite territory (Arḏ al-Karak) to derive a suitable chronological classification. However, the letters of the pestle inscription described here are close to the known Moabite inscriptions and are probably also within their chronological horizon. The inscription may date no later than the 8th/7th century BC. A cursory comparison, especially of the letters b, h, w, y and k with Hebrew inscriptions, permits a roughly similar date (cf. Renz and Röllig II/1995: 103-177 passim).

### Text of the Pestle Inscription and Comments

The absence of word dividers complicates not only access to this text, but also the question of the function of the inscribed pestle in everyday use or ritual practice. The find context does not allow any conclusions about the use of the pestle. After careful inspection of the written lines, I suggest reading the inscription beginning after the widest gap between letters (18 mm) and the beginning of the possible subject: 'nw. The sequence of the letters would hereby be as follows:

'nw'snw hbk lrb bny'yn hkr w bth

According to this arrangement of letters I suggest the following separation of words and reading:

'nw 'snw hbk lrb b  
bny 'yn hkr b bth

we made the pestle for the chief [of]  
[the] sons of the spring, the firstborn with his house

['nw 'snw – we made]

The verb 'sh with the prefixed personal pro-

noun is emphatic. The pronoun 'nw was formed after the first person singular (otherwise it should be 'nhnw, cf. Bauer, Leander 1965: 249). This form of 'nw is found once in the MI where it is marked as Ketib (Jer. 42.6).

[hbk[n] – mortar club; pestle]

In Aramaic and late Hebrew it is known as *buk(ā)nā* mortar club, bobbin, handle or pestle, as well as in the Akkadian-Babylonian *bukannu*. The word appears here without *n* (writer error or abbreviation?). Our object and its inscription are reminiscent of the mortar clubs or cones made from clay which have been found in the area of the obelisk temple at Byblos, where neither the find context nor the writings on the cones indicate any function of these objects. A ritual use cannot be excluded there as well as here. For another possible parallel, although from faraway Persepolis, see also Bowman 1970: passim, where about 70 pestles or cones with inscriptions are published.

[lrb — for (the) chiefs]

With preposition *l* and West Semitic *rb*: “to be great/many/big”. In Ugaritic, *rb* designates the “chiefs of the leaders” as in the Akkadian-Babylonian *ra-bu-ú-um*: “commander about areas, inspector (of craftsmen, priests, officials etc.)”. The doubling of the *b* is probably meant as an intensive (cf. Bauer, Leander 1965: 481), which can be compared with the Arabic *rb* as an epithet for Allah. A similar meaning is given by the Aramaic *rb*, which designates the “chief, chairman, president” and the “teacher” (Jastrow 1967: 1439).

[bny – [the] sons of ...]

Common Semitic root of *bn* in the status constructus pluralis.

['yn – spring or eye]

Common Semitic root whose meaning in this context may be “spring”. Hence, the sons of the spring for whose leader/chief the pestle was made were probably responsible for the supervision of the springs, wells and cisterns which are so numerous at al-Bālū'. The expression “the sons of the spring” may even be the name of a responsible family or clan in al-Bālū'. Our archaeological work at al-Bālū' has uncovered

two large water basins in the town vicinity, as well as more than 20 cisterns and two upways from Wādī al-Bālū‘ into the town. It is therefore likely that the sons of the spring were designated as overseers of the water supply for al-Bālū‘.

[*hbkr* – firstborn]

Common Semitic root of *bkr* with article.

[*bbth* – with his house]

Preposition *b* before *bt* with suffix third person masculine, which corresponds to the use in the MI. The *h* as 3rd person masculine shall be regarded as an early Canaanite suffix which was later replaced in Hebrew by *waw*. Indeed, there are also occasions of older forms of writing of this ending in the MI (Gen. 9, 21; 2Kgs. 19,23; cf. KAI II: 173; Dearman 1989: 107).

### Type or Genre of the Pestle Inscription

Given the absence of comparative Moabite texts of this kind, not much can be said about the genre of this inscription. However, in the following discussion I suggest that this inscription is closely related to the genre of dedicatory inscriptions. The basic elements of this genre are: object — relative pronoun — verb — subject (manufacturer) — indirect object (owner). Although the pestle inscription contains all the elements except the relative pronoun, direct identification is not possible because complementary elements, such as family allocation, position and “house” are absent in our inscription. Nevertheless, the basic elements of dedicatory inscriptions are also often found on so-called labelling inscriptions which do not follow an obvious pattern, but have the following elements: object — owner and purpose — verb and manufacturer — purpose. For the pestle inscription a combination of the elements of dedicatory and labelling inscriptions can be assumed:

In affiliation or dedicatory formulae the title

(*rbb*) of the relevant person can stand, instead of the name, for the person for whom the object was produced, but it can also be complemented with a patronymicon such as *bny* ‘*yn*. It is also possible that our text is a simple dedication formula (Renz/Röllig call this form an affiliation formula) which dedicates the object to somebody. An example of this is found in Kuntillat ‘Ajrūd (Renz/Röllig 1995 II/1: 26), but there is no blessing formula in the pestle inscription. However, this is not compelling. From the formula elements quoted here I would understand the pestle inscription as a combination of affiliation and dedication formulae. The absence of both the name of the god as well as the dedicatory and blessing formulae assigns this inscription to the profane realm.

### Conclusion

The unexpected find of an unusual inscription from al-Bālū‘ leaves open the question of the use and meaning of this object. The particular feature of this find is the fact that it concerns a non-religious matter and therefore allows a brief insight into the social context of al-Bālū‘ of the 8th/7th century BC. It appears that organized supervision of important water resources existed at al-Bālū‘ in the Iron Age with responsibilities laid in the hands of the “sons of the spring”. The “commander” or “chief” of this clan was probably, as the “firstborn”, the receiver of the pestle whose meaning or use cannot be determined exactly. While the study of this object has not yet concluded at the time of this publication, the importance of this object compelled me to discuss and publish it quickly.

Udo Worschech  
 Friedensau Adventist University  
 An der Ihle 5a  
 39291 Friedensau  
 Germany

Subject	Predicate	Object	Indirect Object	Complementary title/label
' <i>nw</i>	' <i>snw</i>	<i>hbkr[n]</i>	<i>lrbb</i>	<i>bny</i> ‘ <i>yn</i> <i>hbkr</i> <i>bbth</i>

## Bibliography

- Abu Taleb, M.M.  
 1985 The Seal of *ply bn m's* the Mazkir. *ZDPV* 101: 21-29.
- Ahituv, S.  
 2003 A New Moabite Inscription. *Israel Museum Studies in Archaeology* 2: 3-10.
- Aistleitner, J.  
 1963 Wörterbuch der Ugaritischen Sprache. Berichte der Verhandlungen der Sächsischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Leipzig. Philologisch-historische Klasse, Bd. 106, Heft 3. Berlin.
- Bauer, H. and Leander, P.  
 1965 Historische Grammatik der hebräischen Sprache des Alten Testaments: Einführung. Halle 1922. Olms: Hildesheim.
- Bowman, R.A.  
 1970 Aramaic Ritual Texts from Persepolis. Chicago: The University of Chicago Oriental Institute Publications XCI.
- Daviau, M. (ed.)  
 2000 An Inscribed Incense Altar of Iron Age II at Hirbet el- Mudeyine (Jordan). *ZDPV* 116: 1-13.
- Dearman, A. (ed.)  
 1989 *Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab*. Atlanta: Scholars Press.
- Drinkard, J.F.  
 1989 The Literary Genre of the Mesha Inscription. Pp. 132-154 in A. Dearman, (ed.), *Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab*. Atlanta: Scholars Press.
- Herr, L.  
 1980 The Formal Scripts of Iron Age Transjordan. *BASOR* 238: 21-34.  
 1989 The Palaeography of West Semitic Stamp Seals. *BASOR* 312: 45-77.
- Hoftijzer, J. and Jongeling, K. (ed.)  
 1995 *Dictionary of North-West Semitic Inscriptions*. Leiden.
- KAI II  
 1973 H. Donner, W. Röllig, Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften, Vol. II: Kommentar. Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden.
- Kooj, A. van der  
 1986 The Assyrian Army before the Walls of Jerusalem in the Year 701 v. Chr. *ZDPV* 102: 93-106.  
 1987 The Identity of Trans-Jordanian Alphabetic Writing in the Iron Age. *SHAJ* 3: 107-121.
- Renz, J. and Röllig, W.  
 1995 *Handbuch der hebräischen Epigraphik*. Vol. I and II/ 1: die althebräischen Inschriften: Erörterungen, Paläogeographie und Glossar. Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft: Darmstadt.
- Sass, B.  
 1988 The Genesis of the Alphabet and its Development in the Second Millennium BC. *ÄAT* 13. Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden.
- Soden von, W.  
 1965 *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch*, Vol. 1. Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden.
- Timm, S.  
 1989 Moab zwischen den Mächten. *ÄAT* 17. Harrassowitz: Wiesbaden.
- Vattioni, F.  
 1971 I sigilli, le moneti e gli avori aramaici. *Augustianum* 11: 47-69.
- Weippert, M.  
 1964 Archäologischer Jahresbericht. *ZDPV* 80: 150-193.  
 1966 Archäologischer Jahresbericht. *ZDPV* 82: 274-330.
- Zayadine, F.  
 1986 The Moabite Inscription. *ADAJ* 30: 302-304.