# THE ARAMAIC DIVINATION TEXTS

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## Introduction

The southern foothills of Maresha have yielded more than 1,200 Greek and Semitic — mainly Aramaic — inscriptions dated to the Hellenistic period (see Eshel 2010, 2014). Among them, 360 are from SC169. According to a preliminary survey, most of these ostraca and inscriptions bear names or tags. However, a group of ca. 127 Aramaic ostraca, paleographically dated to the third or second century BCE, stands out as a different literary genre. These inscriptions share a similar textual structure, characterized by two main elements.

One element is the frequent beginning of sentences with a conditional clause introduced by the Aramaic הן, sometimes preceded by a conjunction ו. In preliminary publications we translated it "(and) if" but, after further study, it appears that these הן often function together as alternatives and sometimes as opposites with the addition of a negation לא. They may therefore be more adequately translated as "either … or"; while the הן לא means: "alternatively," as suggested orally by Theodore Kwasman.

Another element is one of the more popular conditional clauses among these ostraca: the formula הן מן אלהין, which may be translated "either/or (it is) from ‹the› gods/Elahin."

Most of the inscriptions in this group are fragmentary; some of them bear only a few words and have been identified on the sole basis of the occurrence of הן. It is thus likely that more fragments may be added to this group, while some of the fragments that are now treated as individual units may actually belong to the same inscription judging by the similarity of their script. As a result, the exact number of inscriptions in this group remains unknown.

Only a few of these ostraca are complete or almost complete; indeed, the pottery sherds chosen by the scribes were not always the most durable ones. At least one inscription was written on the upper part of a jar, including the rim. In another instance, the letters were inscribed on a bowl fragment, extending over the black stripe that decorated its upper part. In yet another case, several inscriptions seem to have been written in scattered columns across a single bowl. The study of this collection was first done by Esther Eshel jointly with Rivka Eltizur-Leiman. A series of multispectral photographs, with further computer-assisted enhancement, was taken by Michael Langlois. The corpus is now being prepared for publication by Esther Eshel and Michael Langlois.[1] All the technical equipment, including the camera, filters and computer and students' assistance were sponsored by the Jeselsohn Epigraphic Center for Jewish History, to which we are very grateful. The future study of this corpus will mainly be supported by the Maïmonide-Israel Research Program, 2018–2020.

The group of הן inscriptions from Maresha is a very distinctive and peculiar cluster of ostraca. Early attempts at reading some of them were confronted with numerous problems at all levels, from paleography to syntax. As often in such cases, these issues

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1 Thanks are also due to Ada Yardeni and Shaul Shaked for their assistance in our first steps with some of these ostraca, and to Mark Geller and Theodore Kwasman for their great help reading some ostraca and helping to interpret them. The responsibility of this chapter is ours alone.

| Final | Medial | Initial |
|-------|--------|---------|

Fig. 12.1. Paleographic chart based on multispectral imaging of ostracon Reg. No. 169-94-1532-S9 (side A, 830 nm).

may be resolved by studying the corpus as a whole, rather than reading each inscription individually, and by beginning with the edition of complete inscriptions first. This is the case of ostracon No. 94–1532-S9, which is almost complete, and will serve as basis for the study of the script, vocabulary, syntax and genre of these ostraca.

## Script

Ostraca are usually meant to be read by a small number of people — sometimes by a single person — and thus employ a careless, cursive script. Their decipherment often requires a broader understanding of their content. In the present case, both their script and their content challenge our ability to decipher them based on our experience with Aramaic inscriptions from the Persian and Hellenistic periods.

Some letters were easy to recognize, especially ש, ט, ל, and final ן. But others were much more difficult to identify, especially since the words themselves were unidentified (and sometimes, as we later found out, not attested in Aramaic). Our work on one of the largest and most complete inscriptions has nonetheless enabled us to prepare the following paleographical chart (see Fig. 12.1).

This chart was not hand-drawn but prepared from multispectral imaging of the ostracon: a series of photographs was taken at various wavelengths, and the photograph showing the best contrast between ink and clay was selected. Our experiments have shown that no single wavelength works best for all ostraca; photographs must be selected on a case-by-case basis. In the present case, the best wavelength was 830 nm, an infrared wavelength invisible to the naked eye. Each letter was extracted using professional image editing software and enhanced in order to obtain a black-and-white image. Ligatures were intentionally left so that the chart better reflects the environment's influence on the ductus. Likewise, the table systematically distinguishes between initial, medial and final positions; the influence of such positions (or lack thereof) is reflected in the chart and will be discussed below. Letters that were too degraded or that were superfluous were removed from the chart, while those whose reading remains uncertain are indicated by a question mark. Indeed, several letters of the alphabet may easily be confused, as we will see now in the discussion of each letter:

- There are various types of initial א: (1) the first ductus features a straight diagonal preceded by a right arm that crosses the diagonal and becomes a concave left leg; (2) In the second ductus, the left leg is straight and oblique, but still seems to follow the right arm; (3) In a third ductus, the left leg is almost flat and seems to follow the bottom of the diagonal rather than the right arm; (4) In a fourth ductus, the left leg still follows the bottom of the diagonal but is rounded, almost looped. When we turn to medial א, yet another ductus is attested: the diagonal is followed by a straight vertical right arm and by a straight (or slightly concave) vertical left leg; each stroke is thus penned after lifting the pen. In final position, all of these types are attested, which seems to indicate that there is no typical final form. The width likewise varies significantly.
- ב is quite simple, with a vertical stroke followed by a horizontal base, perhaps wider in final position. The base sometimes protrudes to the right, which may indicate that it was penned from left to right.
- ג is more angled than ב, and the horizontal base joins the shaft at mid-height.
- There are few occurrences of ד and their reading is uncertain; they seem to be composed of a simple shaft, whose head tends to disappear.
- ה, on the other hand, is well attested and quite easy to recognize with its protruding traverse. Some occurrences are more angular, while others are more cursive and reveal a tendency to simplify the ductus. By comparison, final ה tends to be less cursive, with straight legs and a thick traverse.
- ו is a simple shaft, with no head, and of varying height. It is thus difficult to distinguish from ד (see above) or from ז (see below).
- ח is quite easy to recognize, as is ט.
- י sometimes uses a triangular shape, which makes it easier to recognize, but more often, it is a simple

stroke, sometimes convex, sometimes straight, usually shorter than ו, but not always.

- A single possible occurrence of כ was found on the ostracon, and like other letters it lacks a head or other features that might help distinguish it from ד, ו, or ז.
- ל is easy to recognize with its ascender, but it sometimes loses its hook.
- מ is likewise quite easy to recognize, but note the tendency to replace the horned-head by a simple angular head.
- נ is a simple vertical stroke, sometimes a bit curved at the bottom, other times rounded to join the following letter. In final position, it features a descender of varying length, rarely curved at the bottom.
- A single possible occurrence of ס was found on this ostracon; its ductus seems indeed more rounded than that of מ or ק.
- ע is difficult to distinguish from י, as it appears to be a simple concave stroke, sometimes thickened at the top or slightly angular.
- פ has a hooked head and a horizontal base, except in final position, where it features a tall descender.
- ק has almost no descender and could thus be confused with ס, except that its ductus seems more angular and its head tends to protrude to the left.
- ר is a simple vertical stroke, which makes it difficult to distinguish from ד, ו, ז, or נ.

- ש is easy to recognize and features a simple, angular, V-shaped ductus.
- There are two ways in which ת is drawn: The first ductus features a left leg slightly curved at its foot but drawn independently; according to the second ductus, the left leg is looped and followed, without lifting the pen, by the traverse and right leg. In any case, ת is quite easy to recognize.

In conclusion, this short paleographic description reveals that many letters may easily be confused, notably ד, ו, ז, י, כ, נ and ר. This feature is not unique to this ostracon; a number of inscriptions in this corpus exhibit a similar, and perhaps identical, script. Indeed, the variety of forms attested for a single letter (e. g. א) complicates the identification of scribal hands on these often fragmentary ostraca, but it is possible that several or many of them were penned by the same scribe.

On a wider geographical and chronological scale, similar confusions can be found in later Aramaic scripts, especially Nabataean and Syriac, as well as the classical Arabic scripts that derive from these cursive scripts. Given the contacts between Idumeans and Nabateans, one might say that the peculiar script attested on this corpus of ostraca from Maresha constitutes a missing link in the evolution of the Aramaic script in the third and second centuries BCE.

## Content

The vocabulary and recurring themes found in the הן inscriptions stand out in comparison with the other Aramaic ostraca found at Maresha. A



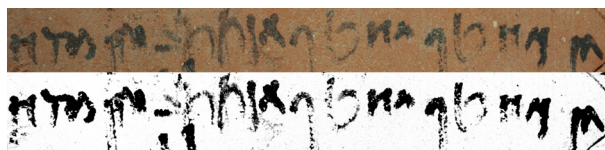**Fig. 12.2.** Line 5. Above: color photograph; below: enhanced multispectral imaging (830 nm).

few examples will illustrate their peculiar content. Several of these ostraca are concerned with physical health and mention disease or death. Thus, one reads והן מותא והן מחלא "and either death and either illness" (Fig. 12.2) (Reg. No. 169-114-1749-S1, line 5) where מחלא which, if taken from the root חלי√ means: "to be weak, soft, sick." Likewise, another ostracon features the plural חמטיא "pustules, sepses" (cp. Syriac ܚܡܛܐ, Sokoloff 2009: 462) and the plural שחנ'א "inflammations, ulcers" (Fig. 12.3, line 7) (Reg. No. 169-114-1720-S1; שחן√ "to be warm"; compare שחין "a boil, sore," see e. g. Sokoloff 2017: 626–627).

Beyond personal welfare, these ostraca also deal with family issues, especially marriage and divorce. This context may account for such laconic expressions
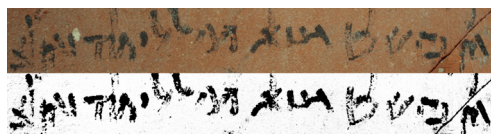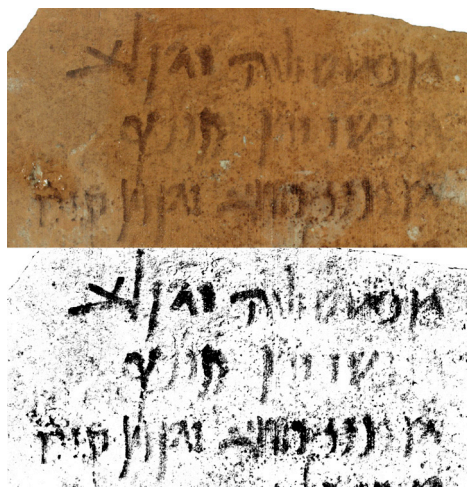
**Fig. 12.3.** Lines 6–7. Above: color photograph; below: enhanced multispectral imaging (880 nm).



**Fig. 12.4.** Line 5. Above: color photograph; below: enhanced multispectral imaging (830 nm).



**Fig. 12.5.** Line 6. Above: color photograph; below: enhanced multispectral imaging (830 nm).



**Fig. 12.6.** Lines 1–3. Above: color photograph; below: enhanced multispectral imaging (590 nm).

as the one used in ostracon, which reads (obverse, line 5) הן מקח יחטף אנתתא והן: מקח and may be translated "either to elope — he will elope ‹with› the woman; or to take ‹in marriage›" (Fig. 12.4) (Reg. No. 169-94-1532-S9). In Hebrew and Aramaic, the verb חטף means "to seize, take away," usually by violence (cf. Ps 10:9; Targum to Isa 60:18). In the context of marriage, it refers to kidnapping or eloping. Kidnapping, for instance, is referred to in the biblical story of the Outrage of Gibeah (Judges 19–21), and marriage by forced eloping is later discussed in the Tosephta (Ketubbot 4:9). The same practice is attested later in the Jewish sources and outside of Judaism (Schremer 2003: 116–117, esp. notes 43–44). By contrast, the second option: והן מקח, from the verb לקח, simply means "to take" in marriage, as attested in Hebrew, while the common Aramaic verb "to marry" is נסב, but לקח can also be found, as attested for instance in a marriage contract from Elephantine: "Moreover, [ל]א יכהל עניה י]לקח אנתה אחר[ה בר מן יהוישמע], [Annaniah shall] n[ot be able to] take anoth[er] woman [besides Jehoishma]" (TAD B3 8:36, Recto; Porten and Yardeni 1989: 78–83). This ostracon thus considers two options for marriage: eloping or acquiring. The second is the more common, but the first is also attested for centuries from various sources and communities as a means of resolving issues within or between families.

On the same ostracon, the following line reads הן בקשט גברא ממלל עמה והן לא "Either in truth the man speaks with her, or ‹he is› not" (Fig. 12.5, line 7). Whether this line deals with the same case as line 5 or moves to a new case, it does pertain to male-female relations, perhaps a marital conflict that may lead to a divorce. It may be compared with another ostraca, cf. הן באיש עליה "Either (someone) something bad against her/him" (Fig. 12.6, line 1) (Reg. No. 169-93-1483-S4).

Various types of locations, settlements and buildings are mentioned on these ostraca, which may indicate a concern for travel or the acquisition of property, perhaps in connection to marriage and family. For instance, the above-mentioned ostracon mentions such terms as ביתא "the house" and מדינתא "the province" (line 1), as well as מתא "the region" (line 2) and קריה "city" (line 3; Reg. No. 169-94-1532-S9). Some of these words may also have been used as technical astronomical and/or divinatory terms in connection to the following observations.

**Fig. 12.7.** Line 4. .Above: color photograph; below: enhanced multispectral imaging (590 nm).
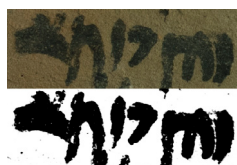


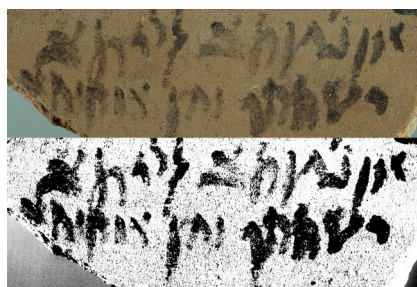**Fig. 12.8.** Line 2. Above: color photograph; below: enhanced multispectral imaging (880 nm).



**Fig. 12.9.** Lines 6-7. Above: color photograph; below: enhanced multispectral imaging (785 nm).



**Fig. 12.10.** Line 5. Above: color photograph; below: enhanced multispectral imaging (590 nm).

Some of the הן inscriptions show an interest in cosmology and astrology. For instance, a reference to Halley's comet might be seen in the expression וניזך חזוא הן מן אלהין "And a comet ‹in› sight, either from the gods/Elahin" (Reg. No. 169-94-1392-S1, Eshel 2011: 181–186) (Fig. 12.7). Such astronomical observations are, as usual, interpreted in connection to divine manifestations and regarded as signs in the context of divination.

Last but not least, these ostraca often refer to spirits, demons and deities, either by generic appellatives or specific names, some of which are well known in the Ancient Near East. One of the more common appellatives is רוחא "spirit, demon" (either emphatic masculine or absolute feminine; see e. g. Sokoloff 2017: 594), found several times in the syntagm והן רוחא "either a/the spirit" (Fig. 12.8) (Reg. No. 169-94-1532-S1) and once in the expression הן חזי רוחא, "either a seer of a/the spirit" (Fig. 12.6, line 3) (Reg. No. 169-93-1483-S4). Another term well known from the Hebrew Bible, שד, also appears on these ostraca (Fig. 12.6, line 2) (Reg. No. 169-93-1483-S4); it is related to Akkadian *šedu* and designates a (good or evil) spirit (see e. g. CAD Vol. 17/2; 1992: 256–259).

Mesopotamian influence is evidenced by the use of the loan-word אותוקא (Fig. 12.9, line 7) (Reg. No. 169-9-4-1392-S1), from Akkadian *utukku(m)*, which refers to an evil demon (Black, George and Postgate 2000: 430). Likewise, לילית (Fig. 12.3) (Reg. No. 169-114-1720-S1), corresponds to Akkadian *lilû* and feminine *lilītu*, a famous demon for which Mesopotamian evidence reaches as far back as the third millennium BCE Sumerian Gilgamesh Epic. This demon is well known throughout Akkadian literature, including omens and rituals (CAD 1973, vol. 9:190; DDD: 520–521). Interestingly for our context of mainly Idumean habitants of Maresha is לילית, known as a night demon who haunts the desolate places of Edom — as we read in Isa 34:14 אַךְ-שָׁם הִרְגִּיעָה לִּילִית וּמָצְאָה לָהּ מָנוֹחַ "There too lilith shall repose and find herself a resting place."

One of the Maresha inscriptions even reads הן בגרתא לליתא (Reg. No. 169-94-1392-S1) (Fig. 12.9, line 6) which, as suggested to us by Mark Geller, might refer to the female demon *ardat lilî*, of which we read: "In Akkadian texts *lilû, lilītu* and *ardat lilî* often occur together as three closely related demons whose dominion are the stormy winds" (CAD 1968, vol. I A, Part II: 241–242). Finally, the less known demon סיניף (Fig. 12.6, line 2) (Reg. No. 169-93-1483-S4), which also appears on another ostraca, was unknown in early sources but later appears with the spelling סניף on two Jewish Babylonian Aramaic bowls (Shaked, Ford and Bhayro 2013: 92, JBA 11:16; 95, JBA 12:16).

Which gods did they worship? Our preliminary decipherment has revealed six occurrences of the theonym קוס, Qos, within the divination texts under discussion. For instance, an ostracon bears

**Fig. 12.11.** Line 3. Above: color photograph; below: enhanced multispectral imaging (940 nm).



**Fig. 12.12.** Line 3. Above: color photograph; below: enhanced multispectral imaging (590 nm).



**Fig. 12.13.** Beginning of line 1. Above: color photograph; below: enhanced multispectral imaging (940 nm).

the clause תקלתא הן מן קוס, which may be translated "the stumbling, either ‹it is› from Qos (Fig. 12.10) (Reg. No. 169-68-1316-S3). Qos was the principal god of the Idumeans, worshiped by the Nabataeans as late as the second or third century CE (DDD: 674–677). Besides Qos, we found a mention of בעל (Baal), in the clause הן מן בעל אדיר "either from mighty Baal" (Fig. 12.11) (Reg. No. 169-68-1331-S2). The name of this storm god comes from the eponymous Semitic noun *bʿl* "lord, owner." This common noun is used as a theonym as early as the fifteenth and fourteenth centuries BCE in Egyptian texts, Akkadian documents such as the Tell el-Amarna letters, the Alalakh tablets, Ugaritic texts and, later, in Phoenician and Punic inscriptions (DDD: 132–139).

The הן inscriptions also mention a female deity named נני, Nanay or Nanaya (Fig. 12.12) (Reg. No. 169-94-1533-S6), a Mesopotamian goddess of love who shares many of the same characteristics as Ishtar (cf. Inanna), identified by the Greeks with Artemis. The cult of Nanaya is documented for a period covering at least three millennia, beginning in Sumerian Uruk, at the end of the third millennium BCE. Her cult developed throughout the Persian Empire and is attested until ca. 1000 CE (DDD: 612–614). Around the time of these ostraca, there was a "temple of Nanaia" in Elymis (biblical Elam), whose priests killed Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 164 BCE (2 Macc 1:13; see Goldstein 1983: 154, 170)[2]. Nanay or Nananya also seems to appear in Papyrus Amherst 63, an Aramaic document from Egypt written in the Demotic script and perhaps dated the fourth century BCE (Column xvii of P. Amh. 63; see Holm 2017).

In this context, the frequent use in ostraca of the plural אלהין in such clauses as הן מן אלהין "either/or (it is) from gods/Elahin" on the SC169 ostraca probably points to a polytheistic environment. The lack of definite article also allows for a reading of Elahin as a theonym, but in any case this usage stands in sharp contrast to the emphatic singular אלהא, God attested in contemporary Jewish Aramaic documents. Added to the fact that no occurrence of the Tetragrammaton has been found so far, the evidence points to a non-Jewish origin for these documents.

The recurrence of syntagms of the type הן מן + theonym, translated "Either/or ‹it is› from DN (e. g. Qos, Baal)," strongly suggests that these ostraca were divinatory in nature and used to inquire about such issues as health, marriage and property. To substantiate this interpretation, we considered possible parallels in the Mesopotamian world, where conditional omens are common forms of divination. There are, indeed, general similarities between the הן inscriptions from Maresha and Akkadian omen texts. Thus, for example, the fragmentary

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2  The verse here says that the temple was in "Persia," but based on 1 Macc 6:1 and other sources it is clear that it refers to the temple in Elam, where a wealthy temple of Artemis was known, see Schwartz 2008: 148.

phrase: הן תפתח תרעא "if a gate will be opened," may be compared, as suggested by Rivka Elitzur-Leiman, to a series of omens which deals with the direction of a house's doorways: "If a house's doorways open towards the south, the inhabitant of that house will be happy; If a houses doorways open towards the north, the inhabitant of that house will not be happy" (Freedman 1998: 95, Tab. 5:71–72). On the other hand, Mesopotamian omens feature a clearer structure, as their protasis and apodosis are usually complete; by comparison, the Maresha ostraca exhibit an elliptical syntax so that their meaning often remains obscure. In many cases, a component of the condition is lacking, sentences are short, and sometimes lack a verb. Such inscriptions, written on recycled pottery sherds, are obviously not canonical omens like their Mesopotamian counterparts. They are, more probably, short versions or abbreviated reminders of local oracles which, we suppose, were used during some sort of divination ceremony on site.

The elliptical and confusing character of these texts led to their early interpretation as scribal exercises, based on the study of parallel texts found nearby, in Maresha Area 61 (Eshel, Puech and Kloner 2007). Such exercises were thought to have been used for the training of diviners; as they were written in short sentences and were incomplete, they appeared more like notations than complete copies of texts (see below for a discussion of the *Sitz im Leben* of this corpus).

Back to the interpretation of these ostraca as divinations, the identity of these diviners or their customers is uncertain, as there are no personal names indicative of nationality or religion. Overall, apart from the divination texts, the other epigraphic material from Maresha reveals a very mixed population in the late Persian period, with 31% Arab, 24% Idumean, 28% Western Semitic, 9% Judahite, 5% Phoenician, and 3% others (Stern 2007: 213).

Two titles found in this collection might shed light on this question, as they might be referring to diviners. The title ענני found at the beginning of an ostracon (Fig. 12.13) (Reg. No. 169-114-1749-S1) relates to the root √ענן, which means in Aramaic "to practice sorcery"; see the Hebrew מְעוֹנֵן, מְעֹנְנִים (HALOT s. v. ענן, *polel*), cf. 4Q513 frg. 3–4:5 אשר הר[א]ֹה ענני[...]ולא מתורת משה "that he showed omen […] and not form the law of Moses." Another connection is the title גזרא, "a diviner"; see Dan 2:27; 4Q242 fr. 1–3:4 וחטאי שבק לה גזר והוא  יהודי…, "and He forgave my sins. An exorcist — a Jew."

## *Sitz im Leben*

As suggested above, these are divination texts. Such an interpretation is reinforced by the presence, in SC169, of other archaeological finds which are cultic in nature, and might be related to divination. Indeed, excavations have unearthed more than 385 aniconic *kernos* lamps attached to vessels like those used in various rituals throughout the Hellenistic world; these *kernos* lamps represent ca. 50% of the total number of lamps found in SC169 (See Chapter 10). Likewise, 17 chalk models of phalli were found; they were probably used for cultic purposes, connected to fertility rites or perhaps used as votive objects (see Chapter 5).

Last but not least, 63 astragals were found and may have been used for divination (see discussion below). This rich cultic assemblage may be connected to a monumental building located ca. 30m away, in Area 800, which Amos Kloner and Nili Graicer identified as a shrine (Graicer 2012: 183–193; Kloner 2001). These archaeological finds thus offer us a unique insight into the nature and practice of divination and cult at Maresha.

There is more: SC169 is only ca. 10m away from SC57, where the famous Heliodorus Stele was discovered.[3] This stele refers to the appointment, by Seleucid King Seleucus IV, of a certain Olympiodoros to a position of religious power in Coele-Syria and Phoenicia.

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3 In 2007, Hannah Cotton and Michael Würrle published the first fragments (A+B) of an inscription found in a private collection. In 2009 three more fragments (C, D, E) of the same inscription, found *in situ* at Maresha, were published. For the preliminary report see Stern, 2009: 60–61. The inscription was studied by Gera 2009: 25–155; Jones 2009: 100–104.

The proximity of SC57 to SC169 and Area 800 is probably no coincidence, as a stele such as this one would have been expected to stand near or inside a temple.

Let us now have a closer look at the 63 modified astragals excavated in SC169 (see Chapter 11). As pointed out by Geller, these knucklebones may very well have been used for divination. Most of them came from ovine bones, others from bovine bones, while some are models made of lead or glass. One bears a Greek inscription νίκη "victory." The mention of victory suggests a use for game or divination (LSJ: 1176), but νίκη may also refer to the eponymous goddess.

In Greek and Roman culture, astragals were associated with luck and used in games of chance as well as divination rituals. But parallels are not restricted to the Mediterranean world, as Mesopotamian texts also document the use of astragals for divination. Geller drew our attention to a Babylonian cuneiform tablet dated to 177/6 BCE and published by Irving Finkel (2008). This and another tablet feature "rules for a board game which is to be identified as employing the later version of the board used for the so-called Royal Game of Ur" dated to 2600 BCE. In addition to the game instructions, "both tablets record a separate tradition according to which part of the playing grid is used for fortune-telling" (Finkel 2007: 16–17). This game was played on a board split into 20 squares

and required two types of astragals — from ovine and bovine — used as dice. As mentioned above, those two types of astragals were indeed found in SC169. It is therefore possible that they may have been used in conjunction with board games; a subsequent survey of excavated material in SC169 has indeed yielded five possible game-board candidates, where what might be a grid was incised on the surface of a stone (see Chapter 9).

The use of astragals fits the "either/or" syntax attested by the ostraca, while cases of multiple answers might fit the use of grids. It is even possible that terms denoting locations, such as "the house," may actually refer to various squares on the grid, as they are also found in the Babylonian parallels. Likewise, the mention of Nike on one of the astragals might be paralleled by the mention of the goddess of good fortune in the Babylonian tablets. Such comparisons, as well as the identification of game boards or grids, are uncertain and remain hypothetical at this stage. But a connection between the astragals and the divination texts is at least quite probable.

As we continue to decipher these ostraca, we will be able to test and refine our hypotheses. At the end of this process, we will be able to offer a global interpretation and a better understanding of the content and context of these fascinating ostraca from Hellenistic Maresha.

## Summary

A corpus of ca. 127 Aramaic ostraca from SC169 in Maresha presents unusual features and remains quite enigmatic. Most of these inscriptions are fragmentary and difficult to read; fortunately, some of them preserve a few lines whose reading is clear enough to allow for a tentative interpretation. We suggest that these ostraca are divination texts, with the added possibility that they may be scribal exercises for divination within a school for practitioners. Further, we tentatively suggest that these divination texts may have been used together with the astragals found in the same loci and perhaps with board games or grids, should the identification of the latter be confirmed. Such divinatory practices may have been associated with what appears to be a temple located nearby.

The issues dealt with by these ostraca pertain to daily life in the ancient world, especially health, marriage, property and death. These matters are closely related to divine intervention or will, hence the numerous mentions of deities and demons. The purpose of divination is thus to reveal such divine intervention or will and to predict the future. The various divine names and titles attested in these inscriptions do not point to a unique ethnic group but are rather consistent with the presence of a mixed population in Maresha.

We are currently working on deciphering these inscriptions, some of which were written on both sides of an ostracon and hopefully will be read, interpreted and published soon, in a separate volume.

## Appendix

As mentioned in the introduction, this group of divination text is part of a larger group of 360 ostraca found in SC169. The decipherment of this group is in progress and so is its interpretation. As for now, only 57 are readable and understood, more or less, with yet some difficulties. It is expected to be published in the near future by Esther Eshel and Alex Kamensky. As for now, we can tentatively summarize their content as follows:

1. A group of seven ostraca with parts of undated dockets (or commodity chits);

2. A group of 25 inscriptions with a personal names. Since no product is cited next to the names, it is likely that they signify ownership of the jars. Inscriptions that were not preserved in their entirety might have contained a date and the quantity of an agricultural product. In that case, they should be included in the previous group of dockets.

3. A group of 25 inscriptions with more than one name, sometimes a list of names. These lists could have served various purposes. Included is a unique list of names, each followed by a name of a month.

The names that appears in the above groups are of various origins, such as Idumean, (e. g. קוסיד, קוסנתן, קוסגבר, and קוסמלך); Arabian or Nabatean (e. g. זבדא), Jewish (e. g. עזריה and שמעיה), Greek (e. g. אפלוניס), Babylonian (e. g. שמשאל) and Egyptian (e. g. פטובסתי).

## Abbreviations

| | |
|---|---|
| א אֿ א֯ | Certain letter, probable letter, possible letter, respectively. |
| ○ | A letter that has ink traces remaining but cannot be confidently identified. |
| [א] | Reconstructed letters. |
| <> | In the translation — word(s) added for the sake of clarity or for what is assumed to be in the original text. |
| CAD | M. Civil, I. J. Gelb, B. Landberger, A. L. Oppenheim and E. Reiner (eds.). The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. Chicago 1968; 1973; 1992. |
| DDD | van der Toorn, K., Becking, B. and van der Horst, P. W. (eds.). Dictionary *of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (2nd edition). 1999. |
| HALOT | L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Leiden 1995. Volume 2. |
| LSJ | Liddell, H. G., Scott, R. and Jones, H. S. *A Greek-English Lexicon* (9th edition). Oxford 1996. |
| TAD | Porten, B. and Yardeni, A. *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt, 2: Contracts*. Jerusalem 1989. |

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