About Edom and Idumea in the Persian Period

*Recent Research and Approaches from Archaeology,
Hebrew Bible Studies, and Ancient Near Eastern Studies*

Edited by Benedikt Hensel,
Ehud Ben Zvi, and Diana V. Edelman

equinox

EDOM AND IDUMEA FROM EPIGRAPHIC AND LITERARY SOURCES

—13—

THE ARAMAIC DIVINATION TEXTS*

Esther Eshel, Bar Ilan University, Michael Langlois, University of Strasbourg, and Mark Geller, University College London

1. Introduction

The southern foothills of Maresha have yielded more than 1,200 Greek and Semitic – mainly Aramaic – inscriptions dated to the Hellenistic period.[1] Among them, 360 are from Subterranean Complex No. 169. 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 the conjunction ו. In preliminary publications we translated it "(and) if" and sometimes as opposites with the addition of a negation לא.

Another element is one of the more popular conditional clauses among these ostraca: the formula הן מן אלהין, which may be translated "luckily" (lit. "[it is] from ‹the› gods).") This translation is based on Akkadian parallels in which "having a god" (*ila išû*) in omens means to be "lucky," since the Aramaic and

[1]   See Eshel, "Inscriptions in Hebrew"; Eshel, "Iron Age, Phoenician and Aramaic Inscriptions."

Akkadian phrases function in a corresponding way. The opposite is frequently known from incantations, describing the poor client as someone who "has no god" (*ila ul išû*), meaning that he is luckless. Furthermore, Akkadian *ilānû* (meaning have a god, *ilu*) means "lucky."[2]

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.[3]

The group of הן inscriptions from Maresha comprise a very distinctive and peculiar cluster of ostraca. Early attempts at reading some of them encountered numerous problems at all levels, from paleography to syntax. As frequently is the case, the issues 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.[4]

2. 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 are easy to recognize, especially ש, ט, ל, and final ן. But others are much more difficult to identify, especially since the words themselves are 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 paleographic chart (Figure 13.1).

This chart is 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
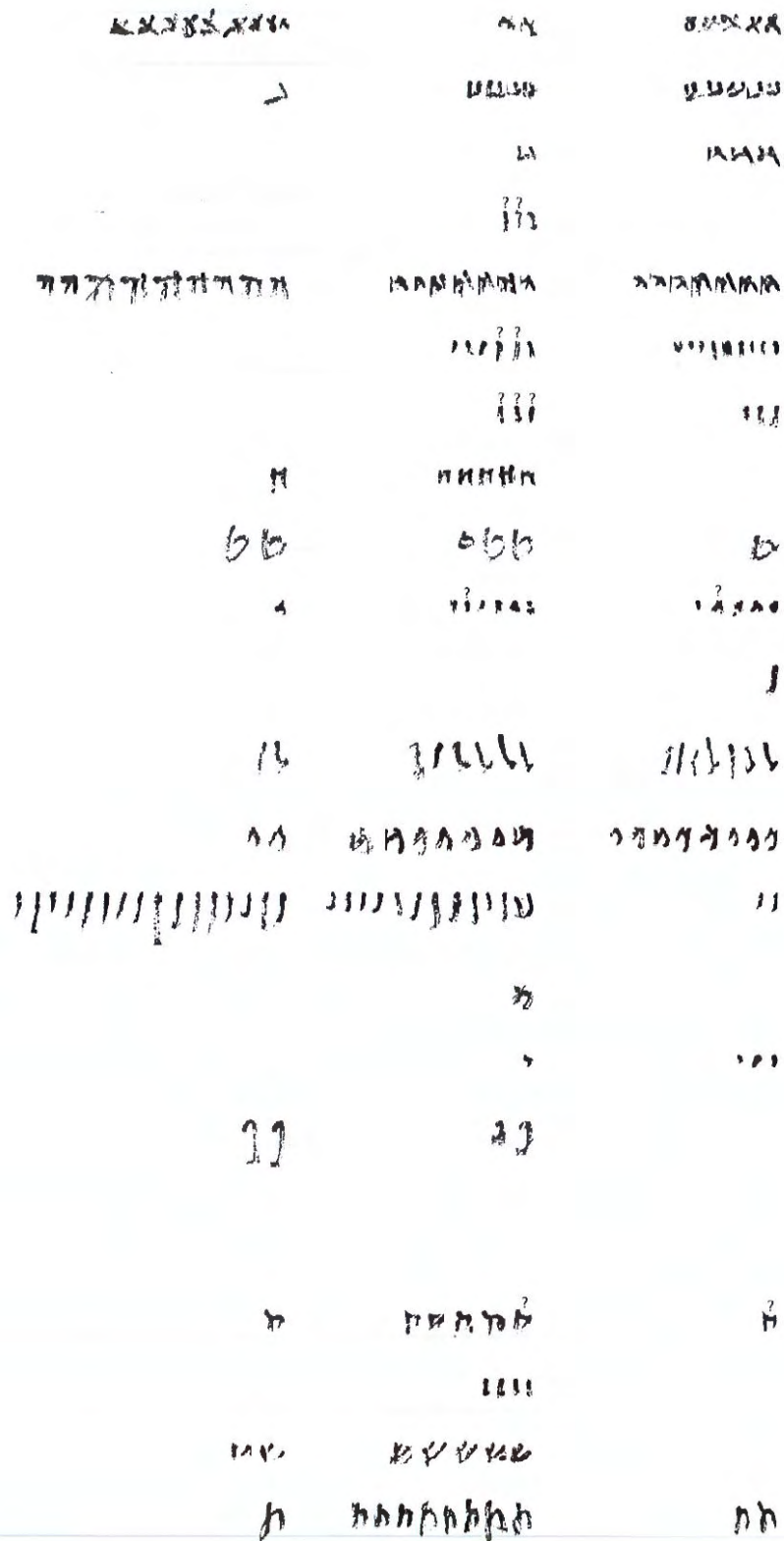
Figure 13.1. Paleographic chart based on multispectral imaging of ostracon (side A, 830 nm).

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.

3. Content

The vocabulary and recurring themes found in the הן inscriptions stand out in comparison with the other Aramaic ostraca found at Maresha. A few examples will illustrate their peculiar content. Several of these ostraca are concerned with physical health and mention disease or death. Because the sherds are fragmentary, the context must be reconstructed or even imagined, since the phrases look like omen protases without accompanying apodoses. Thus, one reads והן מותא והן מחלא "and if death or illness" (see Figure 13.2), where מחלא from the root חלי√ means: "to be sick." Likewise, another ostracon features the plural חמטיא "pustules, sepsis"[5] and the plural שחנ̇א "inflammation, ulcers, lesions"; שחן√ "to be warm"; compare שחין "a boil, sore" (see Figure 13.3).[6] The thematic motif of these ostraca deal with death and disease.

Beyond personal welfare, ostraca also deal with family issues, especially marriage and divorce. This context may account for such laconic expressions as the one used in the ostracon, which reads והן מקח הן מחטף יחטף אנתתא and may be translated, "If a suitor will snatch a woman or wooer will [take her]

---

[5] Akkadian *ḫimṭu* occurs regularly in medical recipes, also as *ḫimiṭ ṣēti*, "sunlight fever."
[6] See, e.g., Sokoloff, *Dictionary*, 626–27.

Figure 13.2.   Line 5. Above: color photograph; below: enhanced multispectral imaging (830 nm).

Figure 13.3.   Lines 6–7. Above: color photograph; below: enhanced multispectral imaging (880 nm).

Figure 13.4.   Line 5. Above: color photograph; below: enhanced multispectral imaging (830 nm).

(legally)" (Figure 13.4, l. 5). In Hebrew and Aramaic, the verb חטף means "to seize, take away," usually by force.[7] The same practice is attested later in the Jewish sources and outside of Judaism.[8] 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: [לקח אנתה אחר]ה בר מן יהוישמע] "Moreover, [Ana-niah shall] n[ot be able to] take anoth[er] woman [besides Jehoishma]."[9] This ostracon thus considers

7 Cf. Ps 10:9; Targum to Isa 60:18.

8 Schremer, *Male and Female*, 116–117, esp. n. 43–44.

9 Porten and Yardeni, *Textbook*, B3 8:36, Recto, 78–83.

Figure 13.5. Line 6. Above: color photograph; below: enhanced multispectral imaging (830 nm).
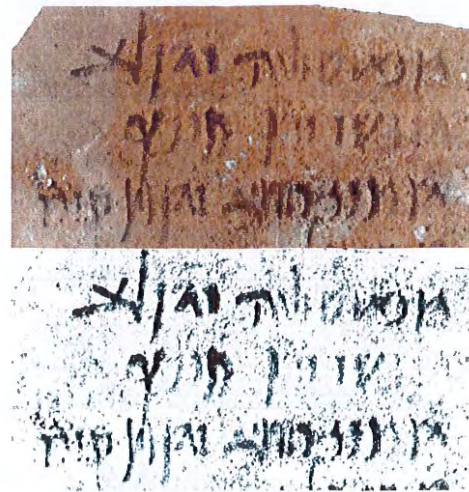

Figure 13.6. Lines 1–3. Above: color photograph; below: enhanced multispectral imaging (590 nm).

two options; acquiring legally or by force. 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 "if a man speaks with her truthfully or if not" (Figure 13.5, l. 6). Whether this line deals with the same case as line 5 or moves to a new case, it pertains 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 "If there is evil concerning him" (Figure 13.6, l. 10).

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 with marriage and family. For instance, the above-mentioned ostracon mentions such terms as ביתא "the house" and מדינ־ תא "the province" (l. 1), as well as מתא "the region" (l. 2) and קריה "city" (l. 3). Some of these words may also have been used as technical astronomical and/or divinatory terms in connection with the following observations.

Some of the הן inscriptions show an interest in astrology. For instance, a reference to a comet might be seen in the expression וניזך חזוא הן מן אלהין "and a falling star appearance – if it is lucky."[10]

Such astrological observations are, as usual, interpreted in connection with 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

---

[10] Which could also be unlucky. See Eshel "Aramaic Texts from Qumran," 181–86.

Figure 13.7. Line 4. Above: color and regarded as signs in the context of divination. photograph; below: enhanced multispectral imaging (590 nm).

Figure 13.8. Line 2. Above: color photograph; below: enhanced multispectral imaging (880 nm).

Figure 13.9. Lines 6–7. Above: color photograph; below: enhanced multispectral imaging (785 nm).

appellatives is רוחא "spirit, demon," either emphatic masculine or absolute feminine,[11] found several times in the syntagm והן רוחא "If a/the demon" and once in the expression הן חזי רוחא, "If a demon is seen" (Figure 13.6, l. 3). Another term, שד, also appears on these ostraca (Figure 13.6, l. 2); it is related to Akkadian *šedu* and designates a (good or evil) spirit.[12]

Mesopotamian influence is evidenced by the use of the loanword אותוקא (Figure 13.9, l. 7), from Akkadian *utukku(m)*, which refers to an evil demon.[13] Likewise, לילית (Figure 13.3), corresponds to Akkadian *lilû* and feminine *lilītu*, originally a Sumerian wind-demon LÍL, and numerous attestations of *lilith* in Aramaic magic bowls. Interesting for our context of mainly Idumean habitants of Maresha is לילית (misinterpreted in rabbinic texts as a night demon). She haunts the desolate places of Edom – as we read in Isaiah 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 (Figure 13.9, l. 6), which might refer

---

[11] See, e.g., Sokoloff, *Dictionary*, 594.

[12] See, e.g., Civil et al., *CAD*, 4:256, citing omens from abnormal births (*šumma izbu*) which gives the expression *šēda bašû* to be positive (lit. "acquiring a protective spirit").

[13] Geller, *Evil Demons*.

to the female demon *ardat lilî*. Finally, the lesser known demon סיניף (Figure 13.6, l. 2), which also appears on another ostracon, was unknown in early sources but later appears with the spelling סניף on two Jewish Babylonian Aramaic bowls.[14]

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 the clause תקלתא הן מן קוס, which may be translated "obstacles, if from Qos" (Figure 13.10). Qos was the principal god of the Idumeans, worshiped by the Nabataeans as late as the second or third century CE.[15] Besides Qos, we found a mention of בעל, Baal, in the clause הן מן בעל אדיר "if from mighty Baal" (Figure 13.11). The name of this storm god comes from the eponymous Semitic noun *b'l* "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.[16]

The הן inscriptions also mention a female deity named נני, Nanay or Nanaya (Figure 13.12), 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.[17]

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.[18] 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.[19]

"If ‹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 phrase: הן תפתח תרעא "if a gate will be opened," may be compared, as suggested by Rivka Elitzur-Leiman, to a series of *Šumma alu* omens that 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 (*libbišu ṭābu*); If a house's doorways open towards the north, the inhabitant of that house will not be happy."[20] Similarly in the same series,[21] the omen specifies that if, in a specific month, the client's complaint is realized, "that man will be lucky" (*amēlu šuatu ila ibašši*).

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

---

[14] Shaked, Ford, and Bhayro, *Aramaic Bowl Spells*, 92; JBA, 11:16, 95; JBA, 12:16.

[15] Van der Toorn, Becking, and van der Horst, *Dictionary*, 674–77.

[16] Van der Toorn, Becking, and van der Horst, 132–39.

[17] Van der Toorn, Becking, and van der Horst, 612–14.

[18] 2 Macc 1:13; see Goldstein, *II Maccabees*, 154, 170. 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, *2 Maccabees*, 148.

[19] Column xvii of P. Amh. 63; see Holm, "Nanay and Her Lover."

[20] Freedman, *If a City is Set*, 1:95, table 5:71–72.

[21] Freedman, 3:189, untranslated.

Figure 13.10.   Line 5. Above: color photograph; below: enhanced multispectral imaging (590 nm).

Figure 13.11.   Line 3. Above: color photograph; below: enhanced multispectral imaging (940 nm).

Figure 13.12.   Line 3. Above: color photograph; below: enhanced multispectral imaging (590 nm).

Figure 13.13.   Beginning of line 1. Above: color photograph; below: enhanced multispectral imaging (940 nm).

often remains obscure. In many cases, a component of the condition is lacking and 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 that, 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.[22] Such exercises were thought to have been used for the training of diviners; as they were written in short sentences and were incomplete,

---

[22]   Eshel, Puech, and Kloner, "Aramaic Scribal Exercises," 2007.

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.[23]

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 (Figure 13.13) relates to the root ענן√, which in Aramaic means "to practice sorcery" and in Hebrew "to interpret signs";[24] 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 Daniel 2:27; 4Q242 frg. 1–3:4:

וחטאי שבק לה גזר והוא יהודי
and He forgave my sins. An exorcist – a Jew.

The key to solving our riddle, identifying our texts, is found in the term הן מן אלהין. It finds its closest parallel in Akkadian omen texts. The word אלהין can be compared with the Akkadian words *ilu* and *ilānû*. One meaning of *ilu* is "good fortune, luck."[25] In other words, *ilu*, meaning "having a god," is another term for "having luck," to be compared with the adjective *ilānû*, meaning "blessed by a god, prosperous, lucky." Such a term is what one expects in an omen context and, indeed, is frequently found in omen apodoses; for example, in the Akkadian omen series collection of *Šumma Alu*. The span of these texts covers more than 1500 years; the earliest is dated to the twelfth century BCE and the latest to 228 BCE.[26] They were found at sites all over Mesopotamia (mainly Nineveh and Assur) and some in peripheral regions (e.g. Boghazkoi, Susa).

Among the collections of omens known to us, some relate to the welfare of the state or the king, but many belong to private persons. Some omens were organized into series, including specific content, sometimes with titles. As noted by Sally Freedman, these omens "developed over the course of several hundreds of years. Around the middle of the seventh century B.C., [they were] standardized into a series that consisted of as many as 107 tablets, some of which contained more than 200 lines. The total number of omens included in the standard series *Šumma Alu* was probably near 10,000."[27]

These are series of omens that deals with "almost the scope of encyclopedia of the physical surroundings and common occurrences of daily life in ancient Mesopotamia."[28] Some examples related to our texts are:

1. Examination of the ominous aspects of cities.
2. Various aspects of houses.
3. Ominous significance of the appearance of demons and supernatural entities.

23 Stern, "Population," 213.
24 Koehler and Baumgartner, *HALOT* 2, s. v. ענן, *polel*.
25 Gelb et al., *CAD*, 7:101–2.
26 For introduction to these texts, see Freedman, *If a City is Set*, 1:1–14.
27 Freedman, 1:2.
28 Freedman, 1:2.

4. Miscellaneous sorts of human behavior
5. Various happenings in the country
6. Human sexual behavior and family relations.

Back to the parallel of הן מן אלהין with the omen texts. Following are some examples:

1. Table 45 includes omen taken from cats and wildcats. It reads (l. 70):[29]

   DIŠ SA.A.RI ina E2 NA IGI-ir E2 BI DINGIR TUK-ši
   If a wildcat is seen in a man's house, that house will be lucky.

   This parallel our reading of הן מן אלהין, literally: "if lucky," probably "if (a person is) lucky."

2. Table 58 concerns omens from Date palms. It reads (l. 51):[30]

   [DIŠ …] ra zu LU2 DINGIR NU [TUK],
   [If …] the man [will have] no luck,

   It might be compared with (ו)הן לא, literally: "(and) if not," probably meaning: "(and) if (the person is) not lucky."

4. Sitz im Leben

As suggested above, these are divination texts, which are omens, such as are known from the ancient Near East. There are dozens of different kinds of omen texts, and the problem here is that we have no basis for deciding what the omens are drawing from. Here we go to the place where there were found, searching for a possible context in which they functioned.

In SC169, other archaeological finds are cultic in nature and might be related to divination. Indeed, excavations have unearthed more than 385 aniconic *kernos* lamps alongside 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 Subterranean Complex No. 169.[31] 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.[32]

Last but not least, 63 astragali 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. 30 m away, in Area 800, which Amos Kloner and Nili Graicer identified as a shrine.[33] These archaeological finds thus offer us unique insight into the nature and practice of divination and cult at Maresha.

---

[29] Freedman, 3:45. Cf. Table 54, which deals with planting in a city field. It reads: DIŠ ina ITI.APIN KIMIN ta-zi-im-ta-šu2 KUR NA BI DINGIR TUK-ši, "If in Araḫšamnu ditto, he will attain his desire; that man will be lucky" (l. 6). See Freedman, 96.

[30] Freedman, 118.

[31] See Ambar-Armon, "Oil Lamps."

[32] See Stern, "Chalk Phalli."

[33] Graicer, "Urban Planning, 183–93; Kloner, "Economy of Hellenistic Maresha."

There is more: SC169 is only ca. 10 m away from Subterranean Complex No. 57 at Maresha, where the famous Heliodorus Stele was discovered.[34] 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.

The proximity of Subterranean Complex No. 57 to Subterranean Complex No. 169 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 astragali excavated in Subterranean Complex No. 169. These knucklebones may very well have been used for divination. Most of them came from sheep or goats, others from cattle, while some are models made of lead or glass. One bears a Greek inscription νίκη "victory." The mention of victory suggests a use in gaming or divination,[35] but νίκη may also refer to the eponymous goddess.

In Greek and Roman culture, astragali 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 astragali for divination. Mark J. Geller drew our attention to a Babylonian cuneiform tablet dated to 177/6 BCE and published by Irving Finkel.[36] 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.[37] 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."[38]

This game was played on a board split into 20 squares and required two types of astragali – from both ovids and bovids – used as dice. As mentioned above, those two types of astragali were indeed found in subterranean complex 169. It is therefore possible that they may have been used in conjunction with board games. A subsequent survey of excavated material in subterranean complex 169 and complex 57, which is close to it and might be connected, has yielded nine possible game-board candidates, where what might be a grid was incised on the surface of a stone.[39]

The use of astragali fits the "if"-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 in the Babylonian parallels. Likewise, the mention of Nike on one of the astragali 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. Notwithstanding, a connection between the astragali and the divination texts is quite possible.

The type of motifs represented in these ostraca have an unusual parallel in the rules to the Royal Game of Ur, which was probably played by Jews as well, since it is alluded to in the Talmud. The idea is that astragali were used to advance pieces on a game board, several of which were found in the vicinity of the ostraca. The type of situations described in the Ur game of Twenty Squares are reminiscent of the terse

---

[34] 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, "Maresha Inscriptions," 60–61. The inscription was studied by Gera, "Olympiodoros," 25–155; Jones, "Inscription from Tel Maresha," 100–4.

[35] Liddell, Scott, and Jones, *Lexicon*, 1176.

[36] Finkel, "On the Rules."

[37] Finkel, 16–17.

[38] Finkel, 16–17.

[39] Stern, "Games Boards."

baroque statements of the Maresha ostraca, and the game situation provides a frame of reference for what otherwise mistakenly looks like omens, beginning with "if" or "if not" clauses. The rules of the Ur game, published by Irving Finkel, give the following scenario:[40]

> If the astragali score 2, the Swallow sits at the head of a rosette (or: at the first rosette). Should it (then) land on a rosette, a woman will love those who linger in a tavern; regarding their pack, well-being falls to them. If it does not land on a rosette, a woman will reject those who linger in a tavern; regarding their pack, as a group well-being will not fall to them.

Or another scenario:

> If the astragali score 6, the Raven sits in the sixth house. Should it (then) land on a rosette, there will be enough food for the pack. If it does not land on a rosette, starvation for the pack.

Other themes in the Finkel-text rules reflect having an abundance of beer (presumably visiting a tavern on the gaming board) or having meat or facing starvation. These kinds of opposites reflect the lucky or unlucky throws of the dice of a board game, and the situations described in the rules of a game are, of course, imaginary rather than reflecting reality, which can also be applied to the short phrases on the Maresha ostraca, representing sickness or death (if unlucky), or either marriage or forcefully taking a woman (if lucky), or even the presence of demons, reflecting the fortunes of the players. This scenario provides a reasonable context for the cryptic and puzzling inscriptions on the Maresha ostraca.

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.

5. Summary

A corpus of ca. 127 Aramaic ostraca from subterranean complex 169 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 a tentative interpretation. We suggest that these ostraca are divination texts, more specifically, omens. Further, we tentatively suggest that these divination texts may have been used together with the astragali 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 various divine names and titles attested in these inscriptions do not point to a unique ethnic group but, instead, are consistent with the presence of a mixed population in Maresha.

There are parallels between the *Šumma Alu* omen and the Maresha divination text. Examples include the names of some Akkadian demons, *šedu*, *lilītu*, and *ardat lilî*; the shared formula, "If (someone) is lucky" or not lucky; and the similar topics dealt with, such as family issues, astrology, demons, as well as buildings and settlement. This topic needs further study and will await the final decipherment and interpretation of the Maresha divination texts, which might point to closer connections between the cultures.

---

40   Finkel, "On the Rules for the Royal Game of Ur," 20.

Abbreviations

אׄאׄאׄ Certain letter, probable letter, possible letter, respectively.

o   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.

Bibliography

Ambar-Armon, Anat. "Chapter 10: Oil Lamps." In *Excavations at Maresha Subterranean Complex 169, Final Report, Seasons 2000-2016*, edited by Ian Stern, 132–96. Annual of the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology 11. Jerusalem: Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology, 2019.

Eshel, Esther. "Aramaic Texts from Qumran in Light of New Epigraphical Finds." In vol. 1 of *The Dead Sea Scrolls in Context*, edited by Armin Lange, Emmanuel Tov, and Matthias Weigold, 177–97. Vetus Testamentum Supplements 140. Leiden: Brill, 2011.

———. "Inscriptions in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Phoenician Script." In *Maresha Excavations Final Report III: Epigraphic Finds from the 1989-2000 Seasons*, edited by Amos Kloner, Esther Eshel, Hava Brocha Korzakova, and Gérald Finkielsztejn, 35–88, 227–36. Israel Antiquities Authority Reports 45. Jerusalem: Israel Antiquities Authorities, 2010.

———. "Iron Age, Phoenician and Aramaic Inscriptions." In *The Excavations of Maresha Subterranean Complex 57: The 'Heliodorus' Cave*, edited by Ian Stern, 77–94. Biblical Archaeological Reports International Series 2652. Oxford: Archaeopress, 2014.

Eshel, Esther, and Michael Langlois. "Chapter 12: The Aramaic Divination Texts." In *Excavations at Maresha Subterranean Complex 169, Final Report, Seasons 2000-2016*, edited by Ian Stern, 213–23. Annual of the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology 11. Jerusalem: Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology. 2019.

Eshel, Esther, Emile Puech, and Amos Kloner. "Aramaic Scribal Exercises of the Hellenistic Period from Maresha: Bowls A and B." *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 345 (2007): 39–62.

Finkel, Irving L. "On the Rules for the Royal Game of Ur." In *Ancient Board Games in Perspective*, edited by Irving L. Finkel, 16–32. London: British Museum Press, 2007.

Freedman, Sally M. *If a City is Set on a Height: The Akkadian Omen Series – Šumma Alu ina mele Šakin*. 3 vols. Occasional Publications of the Samuel Noah Kramer Fund 17. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1998–2017.

Gelb, Ignace J., et al. *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago*. 21 vols. Chicago: The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 1956–2010.

Geller, Mark J. *Evil Demons: Canonical Utukkū Lemnutū Incantations*. State Archives of Assyria Cuneiform Texts Series 5. Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project. Helsinki: Eisenbrauns, 2007.

Gera, Dov. "Olympiodoros, Heliodoros, and the Temples of Koile Syria and Phoinike." *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 169 (2009): 125–55.

Goldstein, Jonathan A. *II Maccabees*. Anchor Bible 41A. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983.

Graicer, Nili, "Urban Planning and Building at the City of Maresha in Idumea during the Hellenistic Period." PhD diss., Bar-Ilan University, 2012 (Hebrew).

Holm, Tawny L. "Nanay and Her Lover: An Aramaic Sacred Marriage Text from Egypt." *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 76 (2017): 1–37.

Jones, Cristopher P. "The Inscription from Tel Maresha for Olympiodoros." *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 171 (2009): 100–4.

Kloner, Amos, "The Economy of Hellenistic Maresha." In *Hellenistic Economies*, edited by Zofia H. Archibald, John Davies, Vincent Gabrielsen, and Graham Oliver, 103–31. London: Routledge, 2001.

Koehler, Ludwig, and Walter Baumgartner. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, Vol. 2. Leiden: Brill, 1995. [= *HALOT*]

Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones. *A Greek-English Lexicon*. 9th edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996.

Porten, Bezalel and Ada Yardeni. *Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt, volume 2: Contracts*. Jerusalem: Hebrew University, Department of the History of the Jewish People, 1989.

Schremer, Adiel. *Male and Female He Created Them: Jewish Marriage in the Late Second Temple, Mishnah and Talmud Periods*. Jerusalem: The Zalman Shazar Center, 2003 (Hebrew).

Schwartz, Daniel R. *2 Maccabees*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008.

Shaked, Shaul, James Nathan Ford, and Siam Bhayro. *Aramaic Bowl Spells: Jewish Babylonian Aramaic Bowls*, Vol. 1. Manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection 20. Leiden: Brill, 2013.

Sokoloff, Michael. *A Syriac Lexicon: A Translation from the Latin, Correction, Expansion, and Update of C. Brockelmann's Lexicon Syriacum*. Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2009.

———. *Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic*. 3rd revised and expanded edition. Ramat Gan: Bar Ilan University, 2017.

Stern, Ian. "Chapter 5: Chalk Phalli." In *Excavations at Maresha Subterranean Complex 169, Final Report, Seasons 2000-2016*, edited by Ian Stern, 101-6. Annual of The Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology 11. Jerusalem: Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology, 2019.

———. "Games Boards from Hellenistic Period Maresha: Predicting the Future or Simply Passing the Time?" Forthcoming#.

———. "Maresha Inscriptions Provide Context for a Royal Stele in the Israel Museum." *Near Eastern Archaeology* 72 (2009): 60-61.

———. "The Population of Persian-Period Idumea According to the Ostraca: A Study of Ethnic Boundaries and Ethnogenesis." In *A Time of Change: Judah and its Neighbours in the Persian and Early Hellenistic Periods*, edited by Yigal Levin, 205-38. London: T&T Clark, 2007.

van der Toorn, Karel, Bob Becking, and Pieter W. van der Horst, eds. *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*. 2nd edition. Leiden: Brill, 1999.

About the Authors

Esther Eshel is an Associate Professor in the Bible Department at Bar Ilan University. She also teaches two courses in the Martin (Szusz) Department of Land of Israel Studies and Archaeology. She is a member of the Minerva Center for the Relations between Israel and Aram in Biblical Times.

Michael Langlois holds a PhD and Habilitation in Historical and Philological Sciences from the Sorbonne. He teaches as Associate Professor at the University of Strasbourg and is an IUF and HCAS fellow.

Mark Geller is Professor at UCL, a former Professor für Wissensgeschichte at the Freie Univ. Berlin, and a Fellow at the Paris Institute for Advanced Study (IEA) for 2020-2021.