

On the Potential Significance of the Linear A Inscriptions Recently Excavated In Israel

Gary A. Rendsburg — Cornell University

Two Linear A inscriptions have been found in recent excavations in Israel. The first was found at Tel Lachish Level VI in 1987, though published only in 1996.¹ It dates to “the earlier part of the 12th century B.C.E.,” unless the find is “a stray from an earlier level.”² It consists of five signs, a numeral, and two word dividers, “incised on the shoulder of a large limestone vessel, probably a large, deep bowl or krater”, of which only this one large fragment was found.³ Applying the values of Linear A/B to this short inscription yields the following:⁴

-m]i(?) ri-da-u SE JE[

1. M. Finkelberg, A. Uchitel, and D. Ussishkin, “A Linear A Inscription from Tel Lachish (LACH Za 1)”, *Tel-Aviv* 23 (1996) 195-207.

2. *Ibid.*, 195.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 197.

Without suggesting any linguistic identification for Linear A in general or for this text in particular, M. Finkelberg and A. Uchitel tentatively translate the inscription “(container) for the *ridau* commodity of 3/4 SE capacity.”⁵ Analysis of the material suggests “that the rock from which the bowl was made was taken from the surrounding area and not brought from afar.”⁶

The second inscription was found at Tel Haror Area K sometime during the years 1986-1992 (it is not clear exactly when) and also was published in 1996.⁷ The inscription appears on a potsherd, clearly “incised *before* firing.”⁸ It is attributed to MB III, approximately the late 17th century or early 16th century B.C.E. The inscription has three signs: the “figs” logogram, the “cloth + *te*” logogram, and the “bull’s head” logogram. All three signs fit equally well to the Linear A script or the Hieroglyphic script. The pattern of signs suggests to J.-P. Olivier that the inscription is a graffito yielding no real sense, though “it was engraved by a literate person, knowing *at least* the logographic system of Hieroglyphic and/or Linear A.”⁹ Unfortunately, analysis of the material yields no conclusive evidence as to origin. Only negative results can be presented: “(a) The Tel Haror piece does not match the composition of any ceramics analyzed from Crete; (b) The Tel Haror piece does not match in composition any pottery that can be said to be local in Israel.”¹⁰

The comments that follow are sparked mainly by the latter find. The identification of Tel Haror is still unsure, but by far the most likely candidate for the site is ancient Gerar.¹¹ (Even if Tel Haror is not Gerar, the latter clearly is in the general vicinity of the former.) The city of Gerar is mentioned in the Bible first in conjunction with the patriarchs Abraham and Isaac. In the first reference, Genesis 20, we gain the name of the ruler of Gerar, namely, Abimelech, but the local population is not labeled. In the second reference, however, Genesis 26, the people of Gerar are identified as Philistines.

The mention of Philistines in Genesis has elicited much discussion in biblical scholarship. The usual approach is to consider their presence in these stories as anachronistic.¹² As is well known, the Philistines were part of the Sea Peoples movement that did not reach the Levant from the Aegean until c. 1200 B.C.E. If there is any historicity to the characters mentioned in Genesis, individuals such as Abraham and Isaac would have lived at an earlier period (Late Bronze Age according to my reconstruction,¹³ Middle Bronze Age according to most scholars), centuries before the arrival of the Philistines in the land of Canaan.

However, the picture is more complicated. As Y.M. Grintz noted, the Philistines of Genesis are unlike the Philistines known from later biblical sources.¹⁴ The well-known group, appearing mainly in Judges and Samuel, are organized around the pentapolis of Gath, Gaza, Ekron, Ashdod, and Ashkelon, and

5. *Ibid.*, 203.

6. Y. Eshet, “Micropaleontological Examination of a Chalky Bowl from Lachish”, *Tel-Aviv* 23 (1996) 208.

7. E. D. Oren, J.-P. Olivier, Y. Goren, P. P. Betancourt, G. H. Myer, and J. Yellin, “A Minoan Graffito from Tel Haror (Negev, Israel)”, *Cretan Studies* 5 (1996) 91-117.

8. *Ibid.*, 95.

9. *Ibid.*, 109.

10. *Ibid.*, 117.

11. E. D. Oren, “Tel Haror”, in E. Stern, ed., *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, vol. 2, Jerusalem 1993, 580.

12. Thus, for example, J. C. Greenfield, “Philistines”, *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 13 (1971) 399; and S. Ahituv, “Peleshet, Pelishtim”, *ʔEnsiqlopediya Miqraʔit* 6 (1971) 492.

13. G. A. Rendsburg, “The Internal Consistency and Historical Reliability of the Biblical Genealogies”, *VT* 40 (1990) 204, n. 39, and the bibliography cited there.

14. Y. M. Grintz, “Ha-Pelishtim bi-Gerar ve-ha-Pelishtim she-le-ḥof ha-Yam,” in *Qoveš Madaʔi le-Zekher Moshe Schorr 1874-1941*, New York 1944, 96-112. I have not been able to consult this work, though I have seen the author’s follow-up discussion: Y. M. Grintz, “ʔAliyat ha-Pelishtim ha-Rishonim ba-Ketuvot”, *Tarbiz* 17 (1945-46) 32-42 (with an additional note in *Tarbiz* 19 [1947-48] 64).

are ruled by five *šērānīm* “rulers” (or however one wishes to translate this term). By contrast, the Philistines in Genesis live in Gerar and are ruled by a *melek* “king”. If a later author were to place the Philistines in the patriarchal narratives anachronistically, one would expect them to conform to the picture of the known Philistines of the author’s period (whenever that might have been, the 10th century B.C.E. according to my view¹⁵). Grintz concluded, accordingly, that the Philistines in Genesis must reflect an earlier wave of Aegean folk who migrated to the land of Canaan.

We now have before us two Linear A inscriptions excavated in Israel, the more important of which for our present concerns is the Tel Haror piece from c. 1600 B.C.E. It may be premature to make such connections, but the following scenario suggests itself. If Tel Haror is indeed Gerar (or if not, as stated above, Gerar must be very close to Tel Haror), and if there is any historicity to the Philistines of Gerar in Genesis 26, then I suggest that the Tel Haror Linear A inscription affords us the evidence to substantiate the general picture reconstructed by Grintz. This small find presents evidence for contact with Aegean folk (if not the settlement of Aegean folk) in the region of Gerar (if not in Gerar itself) during the Middle Bronze Age, in general conformity with Grintz’s hypothesized early Philistines.¹⁶ I fully recognize the speculative nature of this conclusion, hanging on rather slim evidence. On the other hand, it is remarkably striking that of all places, ancient Gerar (the city itself or the general region), about which the Israelites transmitted a tradition of Philistine settlement from patriarchal times, should yield a Minoan Linear A inscription.¹⁷

The second inscription, from the 12th century B.C.E., is most likely the result of the attested Sea Peoples wave, even though the location of Lachish is somewhat inland.

Finally, we take the opportunity to note the following. In the debate over the identification of the language of the Minoan Linear A texts, two main schools compete. Cyrus Gordon holds that the language is Semitic,¹⁸ while others, including Finkelberg and Uchitel, claim that it is Anatolian.¹⁹ While neither of these very short inscriptions allows one to decide this issue, it is noteworthy that two Linear A texts have been found in the heart of Semitic-speaking territory. Obviously, this is not decisive (compare, for example, the inclusion of two Hittite texts among the Amarna letters), but it is a point to keep in mind as scholars continue to grapple with this crucial issue.

15. G. A. Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis*, Winona Lake, Ind. 1986, 107-120; and G. A. Rendsburg, “Biblical Literature as Politics: The Case of Genesis,” in A. Berlin, ed., *Religion and Politics in the Ancient Near East*, Bethesda, Md. 1996, 47-70. These studies build on the seminal article of B. Mazar, “The Historical Background of the Book of Genesis,” *JNES* 28 (1969) 73-83.

16. For a parallel to how one small archaeological find can affect the scholarly judgment of legendary material, including the historicity of individual figures and events, see E. H. Clines, “Achilles in Anatolia: Myth, History and the Aššuwa Rebellion”, in G. D. Young, M. W. Chavalas, and R. E. Averbeck, eds., *Crossing Boundaries and Linking Horizons: Studies in Honor of Michael C. Astour on His 80th Birthday*, Bethesda, Md. 1997, 189-210.

17. In addition, note that both MB and LB Tel Haror have yielded “a large quantity of Cypriot pottery”; thus Oren, “Tel Haror,” 582 (the quotation refers to LB; see p. 581 for a discussion of MB). While this is true of other Canaanite sites as well, I have not been able to determine whether this is “more true” of Tel Haror than of other sites. Cypriot pottery, of course, is not the same as Minoan pottery, but it points to the Aegean nonetheless. According to A. Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible, 10,000 – 586 B.C.E.*, New York 1990, 218, “Meager connections with the Minoan culture of Crete are evidenced by a few sherds of Minoan pottery found in Palestine” from MB IIB- C, but I have not been able to determine at which sites this pottery has been found.

18. C. H. Gordon, *Evidence for the Minoan Language*, Ventnor, N.J. 1966. See my article summarizing Gordon’s work: G. A. Rendsburg, “Someone Will Succeed in Deciphering Minoan’: Cyrus H. Gordon and Minoan Linear A”, *BA* 59 (1996) 36-43.

19. See the remarks in Finkelberg, Uchitel, and Ussishkin, “A Linear A Inscription”, 203, nn. 2-3, and the bibliography cited therein.