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NEW MOABITE INSCRIPTIONS AND THEIR HISTORICAL RELEVANCE¹

ABSTRACT

To elucidate the high quality of the Moabite text corpus two recently found Moabite inscriptions are presented and discussed: the unprovenanced royal inscription and the pestle inscription of el-Bālū'. In spite of regional linguistic differences, the new Moabite texts argue that the Mesha inscription is still a reliable reference text to evaluate other Moabite texts, regardless whether they are official, such as the royal inscription, or colloquial, such as the pestle inscription. Moreover, it seems that there have been (semi-)literate groups in Iron Age Moab. The poetic yet profane pestle inscription underlines the literary skill of its author and his audience suggesting that literacy was at least not an isolated phenomenon. Furthermore, the royal inscription refers to a Moabite expansion to the north after the time of Mesha, thus attesting to the biblical description of the region east of the river Jordan as עֲרַבְתַּ מוֹאָב in the 8th century BCE.

Up to now, nine texts of the Moabite group of inscriptions have been found at four sites,² namely two official documents (the Mesha-Inscription [= MI 34 lines] and the Royal Inscription [7 lines]); two fragments of official documents (the *Dībān*-Fragment [2 lines] and the *el-Kerak*-Fragment [3 lines]); and five fragmentary texts composed in everyday language. The latter texts have been found in regular excavations at *el-Bālū'* (2 items) and at *Hirbet el-Mudēyine* (3 items).

Given that Iron Age Moab is archaeologically largely unknown due to lacking or unpublished excavations, what surprises is not so much the number of Moabite texts, but their scope. They extend over nearly 50 lines – sometimes fragmentary – and about 380 words. Furthermore, the

1 Revised and enlarged version of a paper given at the Chicago Oriental Institute on 8 November 2010. Many thanks to Dennis Pardee and David Schloen for their valuable remarks, to Klaus-Peter Adam for his help during my stay as a visiting scholar at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago and to Anja Stuckenberger of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago for improving the English version of this article.

2 See Gass (2009:5-83). Moreover, there are inscribed weights, many seals, and the dubious Marzeah-Papyrus.

Moabite text corpus which is larger than the Ammonite³ or Edomite⁴ one features a whole range of genres. Thus, the linguistic discussion of Moabite has a relatively solid text basis suggesting that Moab was at least to some degree a literate society.⁵

To elucidate the high quality of the Moabite text corpus two recently found Moabite inscriptions will be presented in the following: the new

3 For Ammonite see Jackson (1983:1-2); Aufrecht (1989); Hübner (1992:15-129); Aufrecht (1999). Most Ammonite texts are inscribed on seals. Aufrecht (1999:164) counts 235 gem stone seals, three clay bullae, two bone seals, and eighteen ostraca. Furthermore, there are four inscriptions on stone and seven on pottery. The stone inscriptions are much smaller than the Moabite ones: CAI 43 (however written in Aramaic); CAI 58 (1 line with 4 words); CAI 59 (8 lines with about 30 words); CAI 73 (only letters), see Aufrecht (1989:151.154.192). Only the *Tell Sirān* Bottle CAI 78 has a longer text (8 lines with 24 words), see Aufrecht (1989:203). Half of the ostraca contains only names, see Aufrecht (1999:165). Seven ostraca display only a list of goods or names (CAI 65; 76; 80; 81; 94; 137; 214). Only CAI 144 (5 lines with 18 words) and CAI 211 (7 words on 5 lines) are letters. For a different Ammonite text corpus see Hübner & Knauf (1994:82-85). Hübner (1992:32) regards the ostraca from Heshbon as Moabite. For an evaluation of Ammonite see Young (1993:43-49).

4 For Edomite see Crowell (2008) who assumes “that the Edomite administration was not interested in major royal inscriptions, written correspondence or elaborate bureaucratic record keeping. There is no indication of scribal exercises in Edom” (2008:413). In fact, epigraphic material apart from the weights and seals stems from *Buṣēyrā* (four ostraca), see Millard (2002:431-432); from *Horvat Qitmit* (seven fragmentary inscriptions), see Beit-Arieh (1995:258-267); from *Umm el-Biyāra* (one ostrakon), see Bennett (1966:398-401, plate 22a); from *Tell el-Ḥeleife* (one ostrakon), see DiVito (1993:55-57, plate 82); from *Horvat ‘Uzza* (one letter), see Beit-Arieh & Cresson (1985); Vanderhooft (1995:142-143). There are only ten Edomite seals or seal impressions and three further small inscriptions on jars. See Vanderhooft (1995:151-154). According to Parker (2002:51), Edomite is “too sparsely attested to be of any importance as yet.” For an evaluation of Edomite see Young (1993:39-43).

5 See also Dearman (2009:114), “the Moabites have exceeded their immediate neighbours in the production of monumental inscriptions.”

Moabite Royal inscription,⁶ published by Shmuel Ahituv in 2003, and the pestle inscription of *el-Bālū*,⁷ published by Udo Worschech in 2006.

1. *THE NEW MOABITE ROYAL INSCRIPTION*

The fragmentary new Moabite Royal Inscription is an unprovenanced artifact. It is currently on display in the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.⁸ This inscription is engraved on three sides of an octagonal basalt pillar⁹ making it easily readable for someone standing in front of the pillar.¹⁰ Only once, in line 3, the last consonant of a word reaches into the fourth side. This rather unusual feature seems to indicate that the scribe sought to avoid the division of words between two lines.

The original length of the text is a matter of debate. Since the original pillar was used secondarily,¹¹ the stone as well as the inscription are heavily damaged and only fragments of seven lines have survived. Given the available space we may estimate that each line counted about 25 letters.

As comparable pillars with inscriptions are lacking and since this fragment was bought at the antiquities market, one can only speculate about the pillar's height, location, function, and usage. It seems likely that the original pillar was about 1.5 m high and may have stood on a podium to facilitate easy readability.¹² This text is assigned to the Moabite text corpus based mainly on content-related and paleographic criteria, since neither the architectural nor the archaeological contexts of the pillar are known.¹³

6 Text and discussion in: Ahituv (2003); Ahituv (2004); Ahituv (2005); Lemaire (2005:95-101); Emerton, (2005:300-302); Kallai (2006); Ahituv (2008:419-423); Becking (2009:3-6); Dearman (2009:98-102); Gass (2009:76-83); Beyer (2010:23).

7 Text and discussion in: Worschech (2006); Gass (2009:70-71); Knauf (2010:2).

8 This inscription is a loan by Michael and Judy Steinhardt, New York, see Ahituv (2003:9 n. 1).

9 This basalt pillar has a maximum height of about 19.5 cm, an original diameter of about 35 cm, a width of about 14.5 cm on each side, and a weight of about 22 kg, see Ahituv (2003:3).

10 Therefore, this inscription was most probably on display for the public.

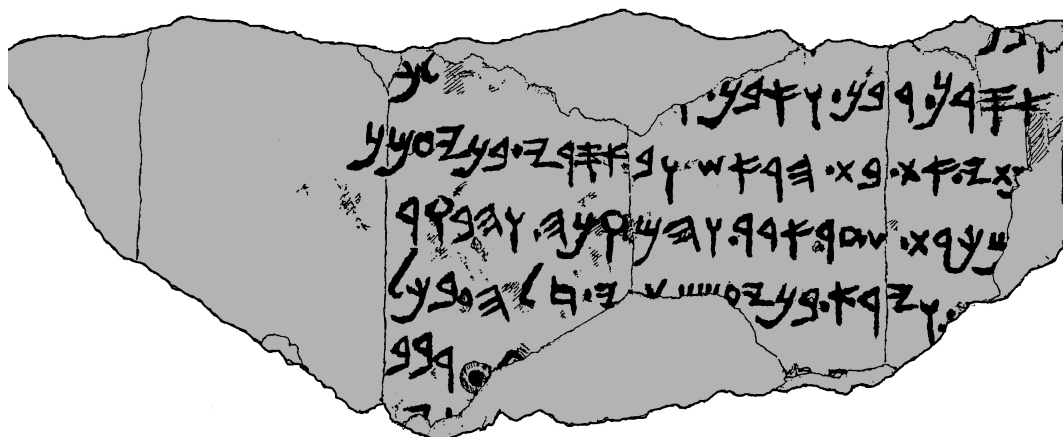
11 Lemaire (2005:98 n. 4) refers to residue of mortar on the bottom of the basalt block and a reworking of its top not regarding the inscription.

12 For a discussion of these problems, see Ahituv (2003:4).

13 See also Shanks (2005).

A commented translation of the royal inscription and a discussion of issues of authenticity will provide both evidence and a critical hermeneutical context of interpretation. Finally some historical conclusions will be drawn.

1.1 Text and Commentary



- | | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1 | [...] ובנ[יעמן...] | [...] And Ammo[nites...] |
| 2 | [ואשב] אסרן רבן ואבן א[ת ארמן בת מ]לך | [And I took] many captives. And I built t[he citadel for/of ¹⁴ the house of the k]ing |
| 3 | [אנד ב]נתי את בת הראש ובאסרי בניעמן | [And I have] built the camp of the elite unit. And with captives of the Ammonites |
| 4 | [כרתי] מכרת שער אדר והמקנה והבקר | [I have dug] the moat of the mighty gate and the livestock and the cattle |
| 5 | [נשאתי שם] וירא בניעמן כי חלה בכל | [I have brought there?] And the Ammonites saw that weakening in everything |
| 6 | [...] ח[...] | ? |
| 7 | [...] אי[...] | ? |

Line 1

The reconstruction of the last two letters suggested by the *editio princeps* as בן is secure due to the visible remains on the stone.¹⁵ The slash of the

14 For these options, see Aḥituv (2003:6).

15 According to Emerton (2005:300), this reading is also not secure.

first letter seems to be too long for an א.¹⁶ Moreover, the letter's bend to the right is less pronounced than is characteristic in other occurrences of the letter א in this inscription. Likewise, a comparison with the writing אבנ in line 2 shows that a reconstruction as א is improbable. Instead the long slash downwards could indicate the conjunction ו. Then, one may have to read the conjunction ו + the group name בנ[יעמן] as the Ammonites are mentioned several times on this fragment (lines 3 and 5).¹⁷

Line 2

It is rather difficult to reconstruct the text of both lacunae in this line. The author seems to refer to both the arrest of Ammonite prisoners of war and to building operations connected to the Ammonite campaign. The *editio princeps* begins in line 2 with the verbal form ואשב, thus considering the root שבה (“to take captive”).¹⁸ This verb fits the context best, though it is not yet securely attested in Moabite. Only the verbal form ואשב in MI 12 might be related to this root. But this is far from certain.¹⁹

The last two letters are plainly visible (לך).²⁰ However, the bow of the letter ל strikes out more pronouncedly than in the other examples found in this inscription. Given that building operations are the main focus of this text fragment, it is highly probable that the king describes the construction of a royal estate. Furthermore, the usage of the first person is typical for royal inscriptions boasting about own accomplishments. Thus, the reconstruction מלך is reasonable. All other reconstructions within the lacuna are speculative.²¹

The noun אסר is also used in the MI (lines 25-26), but in a syntactically difficult construction in which Moab, not Israel, the actual *nomen rectum*, is holder of the captives. One would expect a prepositional construction

16 For the reading ואבנ, see Becking (2009:5).

17 For a similar reconstruction, see Lemaire (2005:98-99). See also the remarks by Ahituv (2003:6); Ahituv (2008:422); Dearman (2009:99).

18 For this verb documented mainly in Aramaic, see HALOT 1286-1287; DNWSI 1100-1101.

19 For this interpretation, see Rainey (2001:304); Gass (2009:26-27). Maybe one has to reckon with שוב-H “to bring back” in MI 12. Thus, Mesha stresses the fact that he reclaimed the annexed region by rights, whereas with שבה the emphasis is on the annexation by force.

20 Becking (2009:4) proposed ב[לם, most probably a typing error.

21 For criticism of the proposed reconstructions, see Lemaire (2005:99); Becking (2009:5).

like אסרן מישראל.²² Moreover, אסרי ישראל could be interpreted as an infinitive + enclitic personal pronoun + object (“my binding of Israel”).²³ The author may have sought to emphasize that after the binding of the enemy, namely Israel, construction work was possible. However, MI already mentions building operations prior to the reference to Israel (lines 21-25). Thus, the conventional but syntactic difficult interpretation as “captives from Israel” is preferable in MI 25-26. Similarly, the construct chain on the Royal Inscription should be read “captives from the Ammonites”.²⁴

Line 3

The above reconstruction [אנג ב]נתי is based on similar passages of the MI.²⁵ The verb בנה usually adds the direct object without *nota objecti*. Only in the syntactic formation ואבן the *nota objecti* את is used in the MI.²⁶ Since toponyms are usually combined with *nota objecti* on the MI, its appearance here is not conspicuous at first sight.²⁷ However, toponyms following the verbal form בנתי never have a *nota objecti*.²⁸ Thus the connection with את is noteworthy.²⁹ Therefore it is questionable whether the direct object is a toponym. Moreover, a toponym בת הראש would be unique in the known Moabite text corpus.

However, the construct chain בת הראש is interpreted as a toponym by the *editio princeps* and thus identified with *Dāt Rās* (2228.0466).³⁰ In that case, the modern Arabic toponym had preserved the original Moabite

22 See Gass (2009:42-43).

23 See Dahood (1986:436-437).

24 For the difficult syntactic construction, see Emerton (2005:299-300). Becking (2009:8-10) considers these people prisoners of war in the context of the *herem*-institution. They were taken into state-slavery and were dedicated to Kemoš.

25 For this reconstruction, see also Lemaire (2005:99). See also MI 21,26,27(*bis*). In MI 22(*bis*),23,29, one could find ואנג בנתי. However, not enough space is left to add the conjunction ו.

26 MI 9(*bis*).

27 See MI 5,6,9,10,11,14,18.

28 See MI 21,26,27(*bis*),29.

29 Only in MI 18 occurs a *qatal*-form of בנה + *nota objecti* + toponym.

30 See Aḥituv (2003:6); Aḥituv (2004:90); Becking (2009:5). Aḥituv (2003:6) compares this toponym with Capitolas in the Golan having an Aramaic name *Bet Reša*’.

name. The use of the article ה within a toponym is not a noteworthy feature as there are many Biblical examples featuring an article.³¹ Yet, there are plenty of modern places in Jordan, especially on the *Arđ el-Kerak*, with the name element *Rās* so that this identification is only tentative. Therefore, *Ĥirbet Medīnet er-Rās* (2059.0511) and *Ruġm er-Rās* (2063.0501), both with settlements dating to the Iron Age,³² are equally possible locations. It is also feasible to locate **בת הראש** in the Moabite heartland north of the Arnon.³³

Perhaps the idiom **בת הראש** is not a toponym, but a construct chain using the noun **ראש**, which is also attested as **רש** in the MI (line 20) – though in defective spelling. The loss of the second consonant is noteworthy because *plene*-writing was still common at that time.³⁴ Most probably the historic orthography was not used in a uniform way. In MI 21, the defectively written noun **רש** refers to a “unit of elite warriors”.³⁵

At first sight the prepositional object preceding the verb seems to be awkward. However, there are at least two clear examples on the MI that testify to the use of this syntactic structure that especially stresses the object of the sentence.³⁶ Maybe the author tried to lift up the fact that his building operations have been carried out by Ammonite captives.

31 See Beth-haJeshimoth, Beth-haArabah, Beth-haEmek; Beth-haShittah, Beth-haGan; Beth-haGilgal; Beth-haKerem; Beth-haEzel; Beth-haMarkaboth. They are used either for describing the location or for stressing an aspect of cultivation. See Gass (2005:69). According to Knauf (1991:284-285) the name *Īāt Rās* (“The One on/of the Hilltop”) derived from an Arabic, pre-Islamic linguistic stratum and cannot point back to an earlier Canaanite linguistic stratum.

32 See Gass (2009:78 n. 385).

33 Therefore, Dearman (2009:111-112) suggests *Ĥirbet el-Mudēyine* (2362.1109) and refers to the temple, the impressive six-chambered gate and the moat that should be found at **בת הראש**.

34 Examples are the demonstrative pronoun **זאת** or the numeral **מאתן**. Whereas **ראש** is spelled as a *plene*-form, the word **בת** is written defectively on the Royal Inscription just like in most cases on the MI, see MI 7,23,27,30(*bis*),³¹ as against **בית** in MI 25.

35 See DNWSI 1044. Lemaire (2005:99-100) discusses different translations of **בת הראש**: “maison du chef”, “maison/palais/temple du sommet”, “maison/palais/temple de Harosh”. Beyer (2010:23) proposes: “Gipfelhaus”.

36 See MI 6: **בן** **בימי אמר כן** (“in my days he said thus”) and MI 17: **כמש חרמתה** **כי לעשתר** (“because for Ashtar-Kemosh I have banned him/her”). Both cases

The group name בניעמן preserves the consonant י contrary to the Ammonite texts.³⁷ This is in accordance with the usual scribal conventions for the masculine plural construct ending as documented by the MI.³⁸ Therefore it is not a noteworthy orthographic feature.

Line 4

Due to lack of space the usual verb formation אנך + *qatal* cannot fill in the lacuna. However, the insertion of this formation is not actually necessary since the sentence starts in line 3 with a syndetically linked prepositional chain leaving no further place for the personal pronoun. In the parallel passage of the MI (line 25), the prepositional object is placed at the end, but here it is placed at the front. The word play with the root כרה could also be present here,³⁹ though building projects mentioned in the MI are usually expressed with the roots עשה⁴⁰ or בנה⁴¹.

The word מכרת can be compared with a similar word on the MI which is spelled מכרתת.⁴² The etymological derivation of מכרת as well as of מכרתת is unclear.⁴³ Due to the context מכרת could derive from the root כרה (“to dig”),⁴⁴ in which case the ending consonant ת would be a typical

show the construction object (temporal/indirect) + *qatal*-form. Thus one would expect a *qatal*-form in the lacuna of line 4 as well.

- 37 In Ammonite, the ethnic name Ammonite is spelled בן עמן cf. KAI 308:1,2,3 or the Amman Theatre Inscription. See Jackson (1983:45). Becking (2009:5) considers that “in Moabite the word Ammonites was pronounced with a diphthong *ay*”. However, the consonant י is the morpheme for the masculine plural construct ending and need not be interpreted phonetically as indication of a diphthong. Ahituv (2003:6) considers this either a diphthong or a historical spelling.
- 38 MI 13,17,18,23,26. See also Jackson (1989:125).
- 39 Lemaire (2005:99). Ahituv (2003:6); Emerton (2005:300); Dearman (2009:99) read ל + בנתי whereas Becking (2009:4) reads ב + בנתי (“I built for the shaft a mighty gate”). For both constructions there are parallels in the Northwest Semitic text corpus. See DNWSI 177 and also MI 10-11. However, ל + בנתי is usually related to persons and the preposition is a ל-*commodi*. See e.g. KAI 7:1-4; 46:7-8; 117:1-3. Thus, this reconstruction is conspicuous.
- 40 See MI 3,9,23,24,26.
- 41 See MI 22(*bis*),23,29.
- 42 See MI 25.
- 43 For this problem, see Gass (2009:42).
- 44 For this etymology, see also Lipiński (2006:336 n. 105).

Moabite feminine morpheme. Therefore, the word *מכרת* would be translated as “moat”. However, the word *מכרתת* on MI 25 can hardly be related to the same root and interpreted as a plural form of *מכרת*, because the forms of feminine singular and plural are spelled without orthographic difference in Moabite and could be kept apart only phonetically (-*at* vs. -*ōt*).⁴⁵ Thus the doubling of the last consonant in *מכרתת* could be explained only as scribal error if one relates both forms to the root *כרה*.

Maybe both words *מכרת* and *מכרתת* are related to the root *כרת* (“to cut”) and thus should be translated with “cutting”.⁴⁶ Since *מכרת* is related to the “mighty gate”, this cutting might be the “moat” in front of the city gate. Therefore, the letter *ת* is not a feminine singular morpheme but is the third consonant of the stem *כרת*. This means that *מכרתת* could be the plural form of *מכרת*.⁴⁷

The following two suggestions for *מכרת* must be abandoned: The interpretation “reservoir”⁴⁸ is improbable because Moabite uses other words for this semantic field, such as *אשוח* (MI 23) or *בר* (MI 24,25). And it is rather doubtful whether *מכרת* is a toponym. Only in 1 Chron 11:36 a certain Hopher is called a *מכרתי*.⁴⁹ But the reading of this verse has text-critical problems, since the parallel text, 2 Sam 23:34, shows the more common reading Maacathite.⁵⁰ All in all, the idiom *מכרת שער אדר* (“moat

45 See MI 3 *habāmat zō't* is clearly a singular form due to the singular definite pronoun and the content, whereas MI 16-17 *gērōt* and *gābārōt* are plural forms due to their relation to obvious masculine forms. For this problem, see also Beyer (2010:29-30).

46 However, in most cases one translates “beams”. This could be compared to Akkadian building inscriptions where prisoners of war were employed as woodcutters, see Hurowitz (1992:100).

47 However, this appears awkward in MI 25; city walls usually were designed with only one moat at the front of. For *מכרת* as a singular form, see Emerton (2005:300); Kallai (2006:552). Dearman (2009:100) supposes a relation both to *כרת* and to *כרה*. However, this must be rejected since the *tertiaie vocalis* stem *כרה* would form a noun *מכרה*, just like *מקנה*. Feminine singular and plural have the same morpheme, only the reading differs (-*at* vs. -*ōt*) so that *מכרתת* can only be a plural form of *מכרת* and the stem is *כרת* and not *כרה*.

48 See Aḥituv (2003:7); Emerton (2005:301-302). According to Kallai (2006:552-553) and Becking (2009:5), *מכרת* is a shaft, a passage or a conduit of a water system, thus an auxiliary element of the reservoir.

49 See also Aḥituv (2003:7).

50 For these problems, see also Aḥituv (2008:423).

of the mighty gate”) might refer to the moat near the main city gate that could be crossed by a drawbridge.

The word *מקנה* – a nominal form of the root *קנה* (“to acquire”) – is not documented for Moabite so far. This noun is usually connected semantically to “livestock” in Biblical Hebrew, which also suits the present context because of its combination with *בקר*. The morpheme *ה* looks like an ending for feminine singular⁵¹ that is not attested in Moabite up to this point except for a doubtful occurrence in the MI.⁵² Typically the suffix *ת* marks a feminine singular. Since in Biblical Hebrew the word *מקנה* is masculine, the letter *ה* could be traced back to the stem and not to a feminine singular morpheme. Furthermore, the word *מקנה* can also be found in Punic as *מקנא*,⁵³ thus attesting to the fact that the ending does not seem to be a feminine morpheme. In Aramaic, *מקני*⁵⁴ could be related to *מקנה*, and therewith be a suffixed form of a masculine noun *מקנה*. Aramaic nouns built from a *tertiaie vocalis* stem could have the morpheme *ה* as ending both for masculine and feminine. However, the *status constructus pronominalis* feminine is built regularly with inserted *ת*.⁵⁵ Therefore, the form *מקני* cannot be feminine with personal suffix 1st singular so that the basic word *מקנה* is clearly masculine and *ה* is not a morpheme for feminine singular.

However, the meaning “livestock”, broadly used in Biblical Hebrew, is only a secondary development of the original sense at best. The primary meaning of *מקנה* might have been “possessions” of all sorts.⁵⁶ Thus, this noun refers to “a wealth of cattle of all sorts.”⁵⁷ It is striking that in Arabic and in Old-South-Arabic this word has the double meaning “possessions/livestock.”⁵⁸ In connection with the following word, *מקנה* seems to be restricted to “livestock”, thus attesting to the fact that Moabite has developed this secondary meaning of *מקנה*.

51 For this reasoning, see still Gass (2009:80).

52 See MI 15: *בללה*. For this form, see Jackson (1989:114).

53 See KAI 69:15; 74,6. In Neo-Punic *מקנת*, see KAI 138:3.

54 See KAI 222 B 27. For this word in the Northwest Semitic languages, see DNWSI 680-681.

55 See Hug (1993:69-70).

56 According to Sawyer (1986:160), the word *מקנה* means “‘possessions’, which may or may not include cattle”. See also Beyer (2010:23): “der mobile Besitz”.

57 Becking (2009:6): “probably captured cattle are brought into a royal realm here”.

58 See GD 731.

The following noun בקר could be found only in Phoenician so far.⁵⁹ Due to its Biblical usage, it is surely a collective noun (“cattle”). It is improbable that המקנה והבקר could be the subject of the sentence. However, the remaining option of the sentence position of direct object fronting the verb is unattested in Moabite so far.⁶⁰

Line 5

The restitution [נשאתי ש]ם is possible due to a parallel in the MI.⁶¹ Contrary to the suggestion made by the *editio princeps*, the last letter of the second word is not plainly visible on the fragment, but still is a probable guess.

The following sentence is syntactically difficult. The verbal form וירא is a prefix conjugation masculine singular either from the root ראה (“to see”) or from the root ירא (“to be afraid”). The incongruence of the singular verb form to the plural subject is not problematic since the construction singular verb fronting plural subject is a widespread phenomenon in the Semitic languages.⁶² The uninflected verb form 3rd person masculine can be used independent of the case or the number following. Therefore, there is neither the need to explain the plural form בניעמן as a singular form,⁶³ nor to postulate a defective writing of a plural prefix conjugation that is unattested in Moabite.

The following subordinate clause is opened by the conjunction כי. This reading is supported by the fragmentarily preserved signs for the letter כ and by syntactic reasons. At least in Biblical Hebrew, the verb ראה can be

59 See KAI 24:12.

60 See Gass (2009:80-81). Note that the letter ר here has a rounded and not a cornered shape which is contrary to the examples in line 2 and 3. Beyer (2010:37) underlines that objects usually follow the verb. MI 17 is an exception with the indirect object fronting the verb and putting special emphasis on the indirect object.

61 See MI 30: ואשא שם. According to Lemaire (2005:100), this reconstruction is doubtful since line 5 could express the sacrifice of the aforementioned animals or the taking away of booty. However, Lipiński (2006:344) restitutes the following [הרבצתי ש]ם. Ahituv (2008:423) thinks of בת הראש as reference for שם.

62 For Hebrew, see GK §145o.

63 Thus Ahituv (2003:7); Ahituv (2008:423) considers this a collective noun.

found in such a syntactic construction.⁶⁴ This is another argument to read **ראה** instead for **ירא**. The restitution to **בניעמן** is possible, but not secure, since the visible remains do not provide clear evidence for such a reading. The verb **חלה** (“to be weak”) is attested only in Biblical Hebrew.⁶⁵ The actual verbal form might be a suffix-conjugation. Such a form of a *tertiaie vocalis* verb could be found also in the MI.⁶⁶ However, the subject of the **כי**-sentence is problematic. Due to the numeric incongruence **בניעמן** is ruled out unless one postulates that the construct chain **בניעמן** is singular. Another option would be that the subject of the **כי**-sentence can be found in the following lacuna of line 6. But such a sentence structure (verb **חלה** + prepositional object **בכל** + subject) would be unique in Moabite as far as we know.

Thus, a nominal form **חלה** (“illness, weakening”) could be the right solution not causing any syntactic problems. This would be another indication that the last consonant **ה** is not a feminine singular morpheme in Moabite, since *tertiaie vocalis* stems have the letter **ה** as third consonant. Thus, like in **מקנה** the letter **ה** is associated with the stem, not with gender.⁶⁷

Lines 6-7

The last two lines are only fragmentarily preserved so that no sentence could be reconstructed.⁶⁸ In front of the last word of line 6 is a round hole, 1 cm deep and of inexplicable function. It might have been drilled already in antiquity as it does not interfere with the text.⁶⁹

As shown above, this new Moabite Royal Inscription provides linguistic difficulties including at least four lexical and syntactical peculiarities:

- (a) The new fragment uses some rather problematic words of the MI (**ראש**, **מכרת**, **אסרן**).

64 The construction **כִּי וִירָא** could be found in Gen 32:26; Exod 2:12; 1 Sam 26:3; Isa 59:16.

65 See HALOT 303-304.

66 See MI 18: **בנה**: 3rd masculine singular *qatal*-form.

67 According to Beyer (2010:23), **חלה** could be a nominal form with enclitic personal pronoun: “seine Stärke/Vormauer”.

68 For different reconstructions, see Aḥituv (2003:7-8); Lemaire (2005:100-101).

69 See Aḥituv (2003:3-4).

- (b) This inscription entails some words and syntactic structures that have been known mainly from Biblical Hebrew but not from Moabite (חלה, ראה כי, בקר, מקנה).
- (c) The text departs from the usual Moabite clause structure and puts the direct or prepositional object in front of the verb and subject. These front positions are difficult to be explained as *casus pendens* since there seems to be no resumption in the main clause.
- (d) This inscription attests to four new Moabite words (בקר, מקנה, אדר, חלה)

Due to these linguistic anomalies, the authenticity of this unprovenanced inscription is doubtful. However, there are also linguistic and other signs arguing for its authenticity:⁷⁰

- (a) The paleographic style of the inscription is similar to the style evidenced in Moabite documents found in regular excavations.
- (b) The morpheme ׀ is the common Moabite plural marker.⁷¹
- (c) The *nota objecti* is used to indicate the direct object just like in the MI.⁷²
- (d) A war with Ammonites could be historically possible, because neighbors were often engaged in warfare.
- (e) A certain Moabite/Ammonite king or a well-known place name is not mentioned which would have increased the value of the document for possible forgers.⁷³

Only a scientific analysis of the basalt stone could cast a more definitive light on the question whether this inscription is authentic or not.⁷⁴ Suffice it to say that other Moabite inscriptions found in regular excavations meet similar problems: The incense altar at *Hirbet el-Mudēyine* features the relative pronoun $\psi\aleph$ unknown to Moabite so far.⁷⁵ Furthermore, the

70 See also Emerton (2005:293): “In any case, I am not aware of any reason to regard this newly-discovered inscription as other than authentic”

71 See MI 4,5(*bis*),16(*bis*), 21,23,27,28,29 and in numerals MI 2,8,16,20.

72 See MI 5,6,7,9,10,11(*bis*),12,13(*bis*),14,17,18,30.

73 See Emerton (2005:293).

74 See Shanks (2005:56).

75 However $\psi\aleph$ – a long form of ψ – is a common relative pronoun in Phoenician and in Ammonite. See especially DNWSI 1089-1094; Garr (1985:85). See PPG

ostrakon of *Hirbet el-Mudēyine* cannot be explained properly due to linguistic, semantic and content-related problems.⁷⁶ Thus, inexplicability is in and of itself not a valid indicator of inauthenticity.

1.2 Historical and Biblical Considerations

The historical background of this inscription is unique and cannot be verified or falsified with the extant inscriptions known so far. This fragment reports about a military combat between Moab and the Ammonites. Due to its fragmentary status and lack of historic documentation, nothing is known about the actual participants of this campaign.

The paleographic forms of the letters used in this inscription are types evidenced only later than the MI and could be dated to the middle of the 8th century BCE. The forms of ד, ו, ה, מ, נ und ק are most probably younger than those of the MI.⁷⁷ Thus, this inscription – if authentic – attests to the expansion of the Moabite kings to the north in the 8th century BCE. The Ammonite campaign could take place only before both Ammon and Moab became Assyrian vassals,⁷⁸ since waging war against an Assyrian ally would be improbable without the support of the overlord.

Whereas Mesha has conquered mainly Israelite territory with Madaba and Nebo as the most northern places,⁷⁹ his successors subjugated even the territory east of the Jordan. Thus the Biblical designation ערבת מואב makes only sense in the 8th century BCE. Since the construct chain ערבת מואב betrays a semantic dominance of the *nomen regens*, the semantic function is that of possession.⁸⁰ Hence this idiom describes the part of the Jordan valley that belongs to Moab according to the Biblical authors. As a consequence the eastern part of the Jordan valley north of the Dead Sea is regarded as belonging to the political dominion of Moab. As this idiom – revealing political, national and ethnic connotations – is only attested in the Hebrew Bible, it might have been invented by the Israelites and is therefore trustworthy because the Israelites actually have claimed this

§291 for Phoenician. See Jackson (1983:103); Young (1993:47); Aufrecht (1999:173) for Ammonite.

76 See Weigl (2006); Gass (2009:65).

77 For a paleographic discussion, see Lemaire (2005:101-102).

78 See Aḥituv (2003:9); Aḥituv (2004:91); Lemaire (2005:102).

79 See MI 14-18 for the annexation of Nebo and MI 8-9,30 for a possible occupation of the land of Madaba.

80 See Gass (2009:164-165).

region for themselves. Therefore, the expression ערבת מואב refers reliably to a Moabite political dominion of the territory east of the Jordan.

We may conclude that this new inscription attests to the northern expansion of the kingdom of Moab in the 8th century BCE that became the trigger for further political conflicts with the Israelites. Only in the second half of the 7th century BCE the political landscape shifted with the Ammonites taking control of this region, using to their advantage the diminishing power of the Assyrian Empire.⁸¹

While any reconstruction of the actual events is hypothetical, attempting the description of the potential scenario may be useful for gleaning further insights into the text. According to Lemaire, the enigmatic Biblical reference Hos 10:14 that mentions the capture of Beth-Arbel by a certain Shalman is attributed to the Moabite king *Salamān*. Together with the Israelite king Jeroboam II, the Moabite king was the first to subdue the Ammonites as is attested by this New Moabite Royal Inscription. Afterwards he fought the Aramaean kingdom of Damascus. This campaign, Lemaire argues, most likely has taken place shortly before 750 BCE.⁸²

However, this solution operates with too many unknown variables and fills the gaps in rather too creative a manner. First, neither biblical nor extrabiblical sources know about an Israelite-Moabite coalition. Rather, Moab is often the enemy of the Israelite king according to the Bible.⁸³ Second, the identification of Shalman as *Salamān*, king of Moab, is dubious. It could also refer to Shalmanasar V.⁸⁴ To fit this theory, the Moabite king *Salamān*, mentioned in Neo-Assyrian sources at about 732 BCE,⁸⁵ must have reigned from about 760-730 BCE and maybe even longer, because the next known king is *Kamūšnadbi*, who reigned at about 702

81 See Gass (2008:45-46).

82 See Lemaire (2005:101-108).

83 See Num 22-24; 25; 31; Judg 3:12-30; 2 Sam 8:2; 2 Kgs 3:4-27; 13:20; 24:2; 2 Chron 20:1-30. According to Dearman (2009:107), this proposal is questionable since it assumes “an alliance between Israel and Moab, in spite of hostilities between the two some decades earlier”.

84 See Jeremias (1983:137): “‘Schalman’ ist entweder Name des in einer Tributliste Tiglat-Pileasers III. genannten Moabiterkönigs Salamanu oder ungewöhnliche Abkürzung für den Assyrerkönig Salmanassar V.” For a discussion of this problem, see also Seidl (2003:481).

85 See Gass (2009:116-118).

BCE.⁸⁶ Moreover, the captured town Beth-Arbel identified with *Irbid* (2298.2182)⁸⁷ lies too far to the north for a Moabite campaign. Therefore, one must be rather cautious reconstructing Moabite history in this way. However, two alternative scenarios present themselves:

- (a) The Moabites helped to subdue the Ammonites during a Neo-Assyrian campaign.⁸⁸ Thus, this inscription might refer to a war in the second half of the 8th century BCE. One might speculate whether the Moabites tried to cozy up to the Neo-Assyrians by a submissive action against their neighbors.
- (b) The Ammonite war took place before Tiglath-pileser III subjugated the Transjordanian states.⁸⁹ Here, Mesha's followers succeeded in their expansionist exploits and could rise to respectable power.

In any case, if the inscription is authentic, it refers to a Moabite expansion to the north after the time of Mesha, thus attesting to the biblical description of the region east of the river Jordan as ערבת מואב in the 8th century BCE.

2. THE PESTLE INSCRIPTION OF EL-BĀLŪ'

During the excavation campaign at *el-Bālū'* under the direction of Udo Worschech from Friedensau Adventist University in the summer of 2003, a truncated pestle of basalt was found in a room south of the impressive *Qaṣr el-Bālū'* and was subsequently published by Worschech in 2006.

The pestle has a triangular shape and is broken at the top and at the bottom.⁹⁰ The pestle is approximately 6 cm high and has round corners. The side walls are about 5.8 cm wide. The possible height of the original stone might have been 22-24 cm if one extends upwards the slightly inclined surface. It is not known whether the pestle was pointed, rounded or flat at the top. Furthermore, it is a debatable point whether part of the basalt stone was broken off before the inscription was incised or whether the inscription was written on an already truncated pestle.

86 See Gass (2009:127-129).

87 See Lemaire (2005:104).

88 For this reconstruction, see Lipiński (2000:406-407); Lipiński (2006:357).

89 Aḥituv (2003:9); Aḥituv (2004:91).

90 For shape and measurements of this pestle, see Worschech (2006:99-100).



Since the basalt stone is coarsely finished, two letters are difficult to decipher. However, this does not really vitiate the reading. The inscription has two clearly legible lines with letters 7 to 12 mm high and about 0.2 to 0.4 mm deep. The letters were most probably incised with a metal pen into the hard basalt surface. At the top of the stone there are no traces of further letters so that the inscription is restricted to only two lines. Unlike the MI, word dividers such as dots or strokes are missing so that the proposed reading remains tentative at best.

As to the shape of the letters: Almost all signs are in angular shape, and thus unlike the presumably official Moabite script known from the MI, which includes both rounded and angular shaped characters. The reason for this variety in the shape of the letters may be due to the disparate surface of the basalt stone.

Although the corpus of Moabite inscriptions is quite large, a suitable chronological classification is not possible. While it is, thus, hardly possible to date this pestle inscription, most letters resemble forms of other known Moabite inscriptions that provide a chronological horizon of the 8th-7th century BCE.⁹¹

The exact stratigraphic context of the pestle is unclear. One could tentatively regard the function of pestle and inscription within the context of everyday life; a specific cultic use does not immediately suggest itself. Word dividers are entirely missing so that the grouping of the letters into certain words is partly based on conjecture. Since the inscription is written in continuous script around the stone, the first word of the text is in question. According to Worschech, the widest gap of about 18 mm between single letters probably marks the beginning of the reading:

91 See the palaeographical remarks by Worschech (2006:100-103).

אנו עשנו הבך לרבב
בני עין הבכר בבתה

Three different transcriptions and translations have been proposed and will be discussed in detail.

2.1 Worschech 2006

UDO WORSCHÉCH read and translated the two lines of the pestle inscription in the following way within his *editio princeps*:⁹²

'anû 'ašīnû ha-bāk[k] li-r³bab “We made the pestle for the chief [of]
banê 'ayīn ha=bakōr bi=bēt-uh sons of the spring, the firstborn with
his house”

Some comments on this proposal are in order since they deepen our understanding of this short text. According to Worschech, אנו עשנו is a personal pronoun + *qatal*-form of the verb עשה. The personal pronoun אנו is still unattested in Moabite, but can be found as *K²tib* in Jer 42:6. The pronoun אנו is a short form of אנחנו that is attested twice in Phoenician, namely in the 'Ešmun'azar-Inscription.⁹³ Moreover, another long form נחנו is attested once in Epigraphic Hebrew (Lachish-Ostrakon 4).⁹⁴

The construction personal pronoun + *qatal*-form is a typical Moabite way to stress the subject of the sentence.⁹⁵ Here, the personal pronoun puts the emphasis on an otherwise unknown “we”-group.

The object of the sentence is בך meaning “mortar club” or “pestle”. This word can be related to the Aramaic/late Hebrew word בוכנא or בוכן⁹⁶ that is most probably a loanword from the Akkadian *bukānu/bukannu* marked by the long vowel *û*.⁹⁷ The Akkadian cognate has a whole range of different meanings, namely “pestle, plant, worm” and could also be

92 See Worschech (2006:103-104).

93 KAI 14:16-17.

94 KAI 194:10-11.

95 See MI 2,21,22(*bis*),23(*bis*),25,26(*bis*),27(*bis*),28,30. According to Lipiński (1994:92), this construction should be rendered as “and it was I who”.

96 See Dalman (1967:55); Sokoloff (2002a:87); Sokoloff (2002b:190).

97 See Kaufman (1974:45).

used as an idiom within contract formulas.⁹⁸ The Moabite word בך has lost the final ך of its cognate בוכן for unknown reasons. Although בך is an otherwise unattested short form, this word makes perfect sense on the pestle.

The indirect object is introduced by the preposition ל. The basic meaning of the Northwest Semitic stem רבב is “to be great, many, big”. In Aramaic and Ugaritic, רב designates the “chief, sheikh, grandee”.⁹⁹ In Akkadian, the noun *rabû(m)* designates “commander, inspector of workers”.¹⁰⁰ The doubling of the second consonant is unusual since the Aramaic prefers to use reduplication of the syllable like רברב.¹⁰¹ Perhaps the duplication of the letter ב gives an intensive import on the noun.¹⁰² Whereas otherwise short forms are common in this inscription, the doubling may lift up the special significance of the indirect object רבב. The form רבב is also attested twice in the Jerusalem Talmud expressing “teacher” or “chief of office”.¹⁰³ Furthermore, one could also find the plural form רבן on the MI,¹⁰⁴ here used, however, as an adjective not as a noun like רבב.

The construct chain בני עין is made up of the word בן “son” in plural and the word עין which Worschech regards as either “spring” or “eye”. The “sons of the spring” can stand either for the people responsible for the wells and cisterns at *el-Bālū*’ or for a certain family or clan in charge of the water supply. At *el-Bālū*’ there are two large water basins in the town vicinity and more than 20 cisterns. Furthermore, two ascents go from the *Wādi el-Bālū*’ into town.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, the “sons of the spring” could be in charge of the multiple sources of water supply of *el-Bālū*’. Worschech considers בני עין רבב a triple construct compound, that is “the chief of the sons of the spring”. Due to the connection with רבב the compound בני עין

98 See AHW 136. There is another word for pestle in Akkadian: *elīt urši*, see AHW 202; CAD-E 99, comparable to Biblical עלי explaining the “upper part” of *uršu(m)* “mortar”.

99 See DULAT 728.

100 See AHW 938; CAD-R 30-32.

101 See Jastrow (2005:1446).

102 See also BL §61cδ for the intensive form *rbb* in Arabic as an epithet for Allah. See Worschech (2006:103).

103 Moed Qaṭan III, 83b. See Jastrow (2005:1439). HALOT 1175 assumes either a plural participle or a by-form of רב “teacher, master”.

104 MI 5.

105 See Worschech (2006:103-104).

cannot be a family name, but only a group name since רבב and the short form רב are hardly used in a family context within the Northwest Semitic languages, but mostly in an official context.¹⁰⁶ The רבב might be used here for the chief of the water workers.

The combination of the next two words is somewhat strange. Although בכר (“first-born”) – here with article – is a well-known Northwest Semitic word, its connection with the following word is unclear. Most probably בבתה is a prepositional chain with an old Canaanite suffix third person. The suffix ה is used for masculine or feminine and is spelled either *-uh* for masculine or *-ah* for feminine. This suffix is common in the MI, like בנה referring to Omri in line 6 or בה referring to ארץ “land” in line 8.¹⁰⁷ According to Worschech, the preposition ב has instrumental force “with his house” like in the MI.¹⁰⁸

Although the genre is hard to define due to the lack of comparable items, Worschech considers this text to be either a dedicatory or a labeling inscription with the elements:¹⁰⁹ subject (“we”) – predicate (“made”) – object (“the pestle”) – indirect object (“for the chief”) – complementary title/label (“the sons of the spring; the firstborn with his house”). The absence of the name of a god and of the blessing formula underlines the relation of this inscription to the profane domain.¹¹⁰

106 See for example in Phoenician or Punic: רב ארץ in KAI 43:2,6; רב חזענם in KAI 34:4; רב כהנם in KAI 59:2; 65:10; 81:8,9; 93:3,4; 95:1; 96:8; רב מאת in KAI 101:2,3; רב מזרח in KAI 145:16; רב מחנת in KAI 120:1; רב ספרם in KAI 37 A 15; רב סרסרם in KAI 34:1,2,3. In Aramaic: רב in KAI 265:1; רב תרבץ in KAI 276:6. For the Biblical use in construct chains, see BDB 913; HALOT 1173.

However, there are exceptions: in Akkadian, the word *rabû* could be used in a family context to designate the senior son, daughter, sibling. See CAD-R 30-31. In TN Num 3:24, there is also the term of רב בית אבא. See Sokoloff (2002a:512).

107 For this suffix, see also Garr (1985:101-104).

108 See Worschech (2006:104). See also MI 25-26: באסרי ישראל.

109 However, his own translation “for the chief (of) the sons of the spring” seems to indicate that he considers a triple construct chain which contradicts his formula elements.

110 See Worschech (2006:104).

2.2 *Erasmus Gass 2009*

Gass proposed a slightly different reading¹¹¹ starting from the gap in the middle of line 2 between הַבֶּךְ and the following word. Thus, the reading בְּכַר seems to be even more questionable considering that הַבֶּךְ refers to the inscribed object and רַב could be found in line 1 as a long form רַבֵּב. The perfect symmetry between both lines speaks for this new grouping of letters. Thus the following reading was proposed:

'anû 'ašînû ha-bak[k] li-r³bab “We (who) have made the pestle for the chief,
 banê 'ayîn ha-bak[k] rab[b] (are) sons of the spring. The pestle of the chief of his house/temple”¹¹²
 bēt-uh

Contrary to Worschech's proposal of line 1, the sentence עֲשֵׂנוּ הַבֶּךְ לְרַבֵּב was interpreted as an asyndetic relative clause referring to the personal pronoun אֲנִי. One can find a similar construction with the relative pronoun שֶׁ twice in the 'Ešmun'azar-Inscription.¹¹³ In that respect, the “we”-group responsible for the manufacture of the pestle could be identified with the בְּנֵי עַיִן (“sons of the spring”) of line 2. Thus the verbal sentence was changed to an identifying nominal sentence with אֲנִי as subject and בְּנֵי עַיִן as predicate. The double form רַבֵּב was regarded either as a writing error – especially in view of the same word רַב in line 2 – or as an intensive form. Since line 2 starts with the letter ב, the writer could have tried to incise the first word of line 2 before he realized that there is not enough space left. Perhaps he wanted to give a hint to find the beginning of the next line; this seems the more probable as the first letter of line 2 is a ב as well. In any case, the doubling does not prevent a correct understanding. The interpretation of בַּתְּהָ written defectively like in the MI¹¹⁴ is difficult since the word בַּת could mean “house” or “temple”. The translation “temple” would indicate a cultic use of the pestle.

However, the main uncertainty of both proposals is the lack of syntax in line 2 since the last two words are surplus and can only be interpreted

¹¹¹ See Gass (2009:70-71).

¹¹² However, the article on the first noun makes it rather difficult to see in *ha-bak[k] rab[b] bēt-uh* a construct chain. The article ה might be an error of the scribe due to the first line.

¹¹³ See KAI 14:16-17.

¹¹⁴ MI 7 as against the long form in MI 25.

as an additional label. It is difficult to find a syntactic solution within the present semantic framework.

2.3 *Ernst-Axel Knauf 2010*

Perhaps considering the syntactic and semantic problems inherent in the above approaches, Knauf proposed the following:¹¹⁵

'anú 'asínu ha-kább li-rább {b} “We apply the pestle to (its) master
(=mortar)
bané 'iyyín ha-bákk {r} bi-bétuh sons of ruins (=prisoners of war?), the
pestle in its house”

Unfortunately Knauf read *kább* instead of *bákk* in line 1, thus giving a rhyme to the line. Moreover he omits the clearly legible letter ר in line 2. He may have employed this strategy in order to reconstitute the word בך “pestle” in line 2. Furthermore, he deletes the last consonant of רבב. This deletion seems to be correct inasmuch as one could establish a clear symmetry of both lines,¹¹⁶ which Knauf misses since he deleted the letter ר.

Nevertheless, Knauf made an interesting suggestion for the genre of this inscription as a semiliterate ditty or work-song. Furthermore, he interpreted רב as “master” or as a metaphor for the “mortar”. Thus the “we”-group works with pestle and mortar, according to Knauf: “We apply the pestle to the mortar”. However, the verb עשה is never used with the meaning “apply to”, neither in Moabite nor in the Northwest Semitic text corpus.¹¹⁷ In the MI, this verb signifies building operations most probably of new items,¹¹⁸ whereas the synonym בנה is used mainly for renovation work.¹¹⁹ The preposition ל indicates the person for whom to build

115 Knauf (2010:2).

116 הבך לרב (line 1) and הבך רב (line 2).

117 See DNWSI 890-891. For the Biblical usage, see also BDB 793-795; HALOT 890-892.

118 See MI 3,9,23,25,26: הבמת זאת “this highplace” (MI 3); האשוח “reservoir” (MI 9); כלאי האשוח “dam wall of the reservoir” (MI 23); בר “cistern” (MI 25); המסלה “road” (MI 26). The projects of MI 3 and 24 are clearly newly built. But all the other objects could also be reconstructed.

119 MI 9,10,18,21,22,23,26,27(*bis*),29. Objects are especially toponyms (7 times), a temple, a palace and the towers. Most of all, the toponyms refer to already existing sites that could be renovated by Mesha. See especially Gass (2009:24).

something. The Moabite inscription on the incense altar of *Hirbet el-Mudēyine* also attests the usage of עשה + ל as “to build for”. Thus, the translation “apply to” has to be rejected.

Instead of “sons of the spring” Knauf transliterated בני עין *bané ‘iyyín* and translated “sons of ruins” thus relating this word to the stem עוה “to bend, to twist”.¹²⁰ This suggestion concurs with the curious social term for water workers of *el-Bālū’*, but seems to be correct since the preserved י indicates this etymology. Furthermore עין can also be found with this meaning in the MI.¹²¹ Knauf argued that the “sons of ruins” were prisoners of war.

Knauf’s suggestion that בני עין could be “prisoners of war” is problematic. Both the MI and the Royal Inscription attest the word אסר, meaning “prisoner of war”. Furthermore, if the “sons of ruins”, who most probably wrote the inscription, have been prisoners of war, the inscription could not be regarded as of Moabite but of foreign origin. Consequently, though found in Ancient Moab this inscription would not belong to the Moabite text corpus since foreigners have incised the inscription most probably in their own language.

In view of this, *bané ‘iyyín* seems to indicate something different. The plural *nomen regens* בני does not necessarily denote a family relationship. It could also refer to a group of workers or of a special status.¹²² In the MI, עין characterizes the ruins of the town of Bezer. Mesha characterizes the towns of Bet-Bamot and Bezer as destroyed cities and expresses this with nominal clauses using the nominal forms הרס¹²³ and עין. Particularly the first line of the couplet makes clear that the meaning of עין must be “ruins”. Thus the idiom “sons of ruins” could refer to people out of damaged sites. Therefore, they might be displaced people granted asylum at *el-Bālū’*.

Regarding the Moabite term בני עין, two more appreciative explanations are possible as well: on the one hand, the word עין could be a personal

120 See BDB 730; HALOT 796-797; DCH VI, 353. See further Arabic عىء and the Jewish-Aramaic root עוא. See Dalman (1967:307). However, Moran (1958:420) questions whether one could relate עי to the stem עוה.

121 See MI 27.

122 According to DNWSI 171, בן could also designate “someone belonging to a family, a tribe or another community”, for example, בן נסך or בן חרש. For the biblical evidence, see Gass (2007). For Ugaritic, see also DULAT 227.

123 הרס could be either participle passive or noun. See GB 188; BDB 248-249; HALOT 256-257. The participle passive would surely be written defectively.

name or a place name. There are three biblical places with a similar name: Ai near Bethel (= Aija?) or Ijon, a town in Naphtali. Maybe עי could also be a Moabite place.¹²⁴ In the Ugaritic text corpus, there is also the construct chain עין בן, whereby in most cases עין must be a personal name.¹²⁵ However, the construct chain בני + personal name has never been used in Moabite so far for describing a certain group of people. Instead, Moabite uses either gentilic forms with the *nisbe* י¹²⁶ or the construct chain אש + toponym¹²⁷. On the other hand, “sons of ruins” could be interpreted as “sons who have caused the ruins”, thus taking עין as the action fulfilled by בני עין.

Line 2 looks awkward in Knauf’s translation. The syntactic value of “sons of ruins” is not clear since Knauf gives no discussion of his translation. Maybe, it is a vocative meant to encourage the group of workers. The last phrase “the pestle in its house” could be an elliptic statement used like an invitation: “put the pestle in its house”. Therefore, the workers could cheer each other on while working with pestle and mortar. Unfortunately, there is no evidence of a directive force in the preposition ב in Moabite and in other Northwest Semitic languages.¹²⁸ Perhaps these two words form a nominal sentence like “the pestle (is) in its house”. In that respect, the workers have put the pestle already in its mortar. Be that as it may, the main problem with Knauf’s rendering and interpretation is the missing letter ר.

2.4 *New Proposal*

However, Knauf with his poetic interpretation of this two-lined inscription seems to be on the right track even if the syntactic interpretation invites further refinement. Thus, the following transcription and translation is proposed considering all of the challenges of the previous attempts for a reading of this short two-lined inscription:

124 Jer 49:3. See DCH VI 353.

125 CAT 2.70:11,17; 4.348:18; 4.357:26; 4.366:10; 4.371:7; 4.422:52; 4.617:6; 4.692:15. DULAT 195 also considers עין a personal name most probably due to its single occurrence without בן in CAT 4.273:5 and the context of this construct chain within lists. There is also a short form ען, see DULAT 169 in a similar construct chain.

126 MI 2: הדיבני.

127 MI 10: אש גר; MI 13-14: אש שרן and אש מחרת.

128 See DNWSI 137-141.

'anû 'ašīnû ha-bak[k] li-r^ḥbab “We (who) have made the pestle for the master (=mortar),
 banê 'iyyīn ha-bak[k] rab[b] (are) sons of ruins (=displaced persons or destroyers). The pestle (is) master of his house (=mortar)”

Still adhering to the former syntactic solution of line 1, one could read an asyndetic relative clause after the personal pronoun. Knauf's interpretation of רב as metaphor for the mortar and his reading 'iyyīn instead of 'ayīn are valuable suggestions that could be kept. But בני עין are either displaced persons or destroyers, surely not prisoners of war. The remaining three words form an identifying nominal sentence, with בך as subject and the construct chain רב בתה as predicate. Thus, a reversal of the hierarchic order is indicated: whereas the pestle is made for the mortar in line 1, the same pestle is the actual master of its mortar in line 2. This word play is achieved by repeating the same words in both lines.

All in all, this two-lined inscription has two nominal clauses identifying the group responsible for the manufacture and identifying the pestle as master of the mortar. It is a poetic text playing on and celebrating an everyday item, which is a quite remarkable case. Moreover, the metaphorical use of words and the cunning word play betray the language skill of these Moabites.

2.5 *The Cultural Background of the Pestle Inscription*

Inscriptions on tools are widespread in the Ancient Near East. In most cases they serve the purpose to label the actual item, be it weapon or tool. For example, sixty-one Phoenician arrowheads have been found inscribed with the name of the owner.¹²⁹ Other weapons are engraved with names related to their actual use. Unfortunately, there is no indication that poetic texts are inscribed on the weapons.¹³⁰

129 See Elayi (2005:36).

130 For linking tools with a mighty description, see however the Ugaritic Baal cycle when the god Kothar wa-Khasis described the two weapons: “Your name, yours, is Yagarrish: Yagarrish drive Yamm, drive Yamm from his throne, [Na]har from the seat of his dominion. May you leap from Baal's hand, like a raptor from his fingers. Strike the torso of Prince Yamm, between the arms of [Jud]ge River.” (CAT 1.2 IV 11-15) or “Your name, yours, is Ayyamarri: Ayyamarri, expel Yamm! Expel Yamm from his throne, Nahar from the seat of his dominion. Leap from Baal's hand, like a raptor from his

Inscriptions could also describe the purpose of the tool. A spindle whorl found in Level 6 at Chatal Hüyük has a Phoenician Inscription that could be dated paleographically to the middle of the 8th century BCE. This inscription tentatively reads: “This produces spun yarn”.¹³¹ There are also numerous Aramaic inscriptions on pestles and mortars from Persepolis, but without poetic texts.¹³² These pestles have been used in ritual within a proto-Mithraic cult already in Achaemenid times.¹³³

A few examples should throw further light on the ritual and metaphorical use of pestles. In the Ancient Near East, a pestle is mainly a metaphor for strength. According to a Neo-Assyrian prayer to Marduk, the patron-god of magic, the word *bukannu* is used in symbolic action: “the oath (sworn by) showing the (symbolic) pestle in the assembly”.¹³⁴ In this text, the pestle seems to be a symbol of power rendering the oath valid and unbreakable for both parties.

Also in the Hebrew Bible the imagery of the pestle is used, although expressed by the word עָלִי for “pestle”. Here, even the mighty pestle is not able to drive out foolishness, see Prov 27:22, “Crush a fool in a mortar with a pestle along with crushed grain, but the folly will not be driven out.”

Also in later times the pestle could be used as a metaphor. In Palestinian Aramaic, בּוֹכְנָא can be found in sayings like: “a pestle because he pounds with it”.¹³⁵ Thus, the pestle is the symbol of strength. Furthermore in the Babylonian Talmud Tractate *Nidda* there is a similar saying stressing the might of the pestle against the mortar: “an iron pestle which breaks a bronze mortar”.¹³⁶ In the Babylonian Talmud Tractate *Sabbath*, one can find a playful etymology of the word בּוֹכְנָא where it is explained as “come and I will strike”.¹³⁷

fingers. Strike the head of Prince Yamm, between the eyes of Judge River. May Yamm sink and fall to the earth” (CAT 1.2 IV 19-23). See Smith (1997:103-104).

131 See Gevirtz (1967).

132 For the texts, see Bowman (1970:71-185); Briant (2002:433).

133 See Bowman (1970:6-15).

134 Šurpu III 36. See Reiner (1970:20). See also CAD-B 308.

135 ביה כתת ביה, ובוכנה דו כתת ביה, Beş 60c [37]. See Sokoloff (2002a:87); Jastrow (2005:145).

136 בוכנא דפרזלא ד[מת]בר אסיתא דנחשא, *Nid* 36b [50]. See Sokoloff (2002b:190); Jastrow (2005:145).

137 בוא ואכנה, *Sabb* 77b [33]. See Sokoloff (2002b:190); Jastrow (2005:145).

The following examples provide further evidence for the custom to write poetic texts on everyday items. Although the purpose of the Ammonite inscription on the Bottle from *Tell Sīrān* is highly disputed, some scholars argue for a poetic text¹³⁸ that could be compared to biblical tradition as preserved in Canticles and Qohelet.¹³⁹ An ostrakon found in *Horvath 'Uzza*, mostly regarded a Hebrew text,¹⁴⁰ might be an Edomite poetic composition.¹⁴¹ However, neither the linguistic features of the text¹⁴² nor the find spot are of definite proof for a classification as an Edomite text. In this region, one has to reckon with Hebrew, Moabite and Arabic influences so that the peculiarities need not be explained as Edomite. Since this inscription might contain the Hebrew god [הוה]י in line 2 and not the Edomite god Qaus, it is even less probable that this inscription belongs to the Edomite text corpus. Moreover, the paleography resembles similar forms of inscriptions from Arad¹⁴³ that are regarded as Hebrew. Nevertheless, this text, regardless whether it is Hebrew or Edomite, attests to the custom of writing poetic texts on items used in daily life.

138 Krahmalkov (1977) argues that at least lines 4-5 are a quotation of a vineyard song. Shea (1978) describes the poetic structure of the whole inscription. Emerton (1982) also considers lines 4-8 a poem. For the poetic character, see also Müller (1996:156-158).

Jackson (1983:37) however regards the *Tell Sīrān* Inscription a commemorative text, “recognizing the works of the Ammonite king and offering a wish for his continued well-being”. Hübner (1992:29) also concurs the poetic interpretation. According to Rollston (2010:64), the *Tell Sīrān* Bottle memorializes the deeds of the Ammonite king.

139 Krahmalkov (1976:56) considers parallels to Song 5:1 and 8:6. Müller (1996:158-163) argues for parallels to Qoh 2:1-11; Song 1:4; 6:12.

140 According to Beit-Arieh (1993), the inscription was an unconventional document with neither economic nor administrative content, but of literary character.

141 See Sasson (2006).

142 Sasson (2006:610-611) mentions three forms not attested in Biblical Hebrew.

143 Beit-Arieh (1993:57).

3. *REMARKS ON MOABITE LITERACY*

If this inscription is indeed written in poetic style, what, in brief, does this mean for literacy in Iron Age Moab?¹⁴⁴

3.1 *Biblical reference*

In biblical records, Transjordan was depicted as moderately literate. According to Judg 8:14 by chance Gideon, traveling near Succoth, found a young man who was able to write down the names of the elders of Succoth. Apparently, the biblical author assumed that some people in Transjordan were literate in the Iron Age.¹⁴⁵ Of course, this does not mean that every young lad was similarly able to write and that literacy was widespread in Transjordan, let alone in Moab.

3.2 *Criteria for literacy*

Literacy can be judged to be widespread, if a vast number of inexpensive textual material is at hand.¹⁴⁶ Unfortunately, this criterion depends on complex logistics that was mostly not available in the Ancient Near East: the technology to produce vast numbers of texts, a network of schools run by the state or religious institutions, economic complexity with the need for (semi-)educated masses and the ideology of the usefulness of literacy.¹⁴⁷ However, it is a debatable point whether this criterion of number alone should be used to decide about literacy. The existence of a poetic text on an everyday object seems to indicate literacy at least of certain social groups in Iron Age Moab (here the “sons of ruins”). The author of this skillful text most probably tried to entertain his audience challenging them with a proverbial saying. I would argue that this poetic text provides a more convincing piece of evidence regarding literacy in Transjordan than labeling or counting inscriptions that could have been done even by illiterate people reproducing a certain shape of characters.

144 For the problem of literacy in Israel, see Rollston (2010:127-135). It is also a matter of debate whether one could relate this to literacy in Cisjordanian Israel and Judah.

145 But see also the criticism raised by Young (1998:239).

146 See especially Young (1998:242). However, this presupposes the existence of the technology of the printing press or of scriptoria that could copy easily and cheaply many texts.

147 See Young (2005:565).

It seems that there were (semi-)literate groups in Iron Age Moab. More specifically, the pestle inscription suggests that writing was used in Moab not only for official purposes. The poetic yet profane Pestle Inscription underlines the literary skill of its author and his audience suggesting that literacy was at least not an isolated phenomenon. After all the “sons of ruins” seem also to have been able to read the Pestle Inscription for their delight.

3.3 *Social or rural diversity in Moabite?*

Given the homogeneity of Moabite texts, Knauf divides between the official “Moabite language”, that is the language of the royal administration, and “languages in ancient Moab,” which may or may not have been influenced by the former.¹⁴⁸ Thus, one could argue that languages in Moab originated in different social strata. Since Moab lies in a peripheral large region north and south of the river Arnon, one might find multiple simultaneous linguistic developments in Moab. In that respect, there may have been regional and rural differences in grammar, orthography, syntax, and possibly semantics. In spite of these possible regional differences, the new Moabite texts discussed above argue that MI is still a reliable reference text to evaluate other Moabite texts, regardless whether they are official, such as the New Royal Inscription, or colloquial, such as the Pestle Inscription. Therefore, the MI is a good evidence base to check further inscriptions regarding their Moabite provenance.¹⁴⁹

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148 Knauf (2010:2).

149 According to Young (1993:34), the reference to the MI might be a problem since the MI is only an early form of the Moabite language: “We must always bear in mind that when we are talking about Moabite, we are talking about an inadequately attested ninth century form of the language.”

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