

The Name of the Goddess of Ekron: A New Reading

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There are still many questions regarding the origin, language, script and religion of the Philistines who came to Canaan in the Early Iron Age and ultimately assimilated and disappeared leaving only the name Philistia to haunt later generations.¹ The recently discovered monumental votive inscription from a temple complex at Tel Ekron now promises to shed new light on such questions.² Prof. Joseph Naveh has interpreted the inscription, and Dr. Ada Yardeni has made a hand-copy of it. The inscription was written in a lapidary style on a porous local limestone that was probably used for building the wall of the temple. The language appears to be a South Canaanite dialect that probably was spoken at Ekron. It must be the fore-runner of the “Ashdodite” mentioned by Nehemiah around the mid-fifth century BCE (Neh.13:24).³ The form and formulary of the inscription indicate scribal training. The five-line text has been placed within a drawn framework marking off the border and the individual lines. The formulary follows the scribal tradition found in the tenth century BCE Phoenician votive inscriptions from Byblos.⁴

The most interesting and problematic word in this inscription is found on the third line. It is the unique name of the goddess to whom the inscription was dedicated and to whom in all likelihood the temple was built. The scholarly world has been taken by surprise by this find and especially by the appearance of an otherwise unknown goddess in this Philistine setting.

Naveh reads the name as *Ptḡyh*. His assumption that the divine name is of Greek origin and is not Semitic is quite plausible and supports the theory of an Aegean

1. See T. Dotan, *The Philistines and Their Material Culture* (New Haven, 1982); *ibid.*, “Philistines: Early Philistines,” in E. Meyers, ed., *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East* (New York, 1997), 4.310–11. In particular, see A. Mazar, “The Emergence of the Philistine Material Culture,” *IEJ* 35 (1985), 95–107, esp. 101ff.; and T. Dothan and M. Dothan, *People of the Sea: The Search for the Philistines* (New York, 1992).

2. S. Gitin, T. Dotan, and J. Naveh, “A Royal Dedicatory Inscription from Ekron,” *IEJ* 47 (1997), 1–16, esp. 8ff.

3. Three words found in the Book of Samuel in stories of the conflict with the Philistines are regarded as stemming from their original Indo-European language: *seren* may be Lydian and a cognate of Greek *tyrannos*; *koba*/*qoba* from Hittite *kupakhi*, “a cap, helmet,” and perhaps *’argaz* that may be related to Latin *arca*, “ark”; see C. Rabin, “Hittite Words in Hebrew,” *Orientalia* 32 (1963), 113–39; also E. Sapir, “Hebrew *’argaz*, a Philistine Word,” *JAOS* 56 (1936), 272–81; *idem*, “Hebrew ‘Helmet’, a Loanword and its Bearing on Indo-European Phonology,” *JAOS* 57 (1937), 73–77.

4. See H. Donner and W. Röllig, *KAI* 5 (Abibaal), 6 (Elibaal) and 7 (Shipitbaal).

background for the Philistines. In the same vein, Naveh proposes that the king's name Achish/Ikausu should be derived from *'Achaios* or "Achaean," meaning "Greek," though I would still prefer its identification with the name of the hero Anchises (Iliad ii:819; v:268ff.; xx:239ff.). In fact, the personal names in this king's four generation genealogy should draw attention for they are uncommon, seemingly West Semitic hypocoristic forms (without a theophoric element), which may indeed turn out to be Greek in origin. For instance, Padi should be compared to Linear B: *pa-de, pa-di-yo*, identified with Pandion (Iliad xii:372), ΥSD with Hesiod and 'd' with another Trojan, Iдайos (Iliad iii:248; v:11–24; vii:381–97).

Be that as it may, there are some serious reservations regarding the reading *Ptgyh* as Naveh and Yardeni indicate by placing a dot above the supposed *gimel*. In fact, it seems that not only the modern epigraphers but the ancient engraver of the inscription had difficulties as well. At first, the engraver seems to have thought that the name ended in a *yod*, after which he made a deep word-divider mark; then, apparently as a second thought, he added the *he* above that dot and bored a second word-divider. Was this a mistake or, perhaps, as strange as it might seem, an indication of an alternate pronunciation? In any case, this should have been noted by the publishers as *Ptgy.h!*

The problem for the modern interpreter is twofold: semantic and paleographic. For one, a goddess by the name of *Ptgyh* is unknown, though the last three letters might refer to Gea as (Mother) Earth. More important, there are problems with the third sign that Naveh and Yardeni read as an unusual minuscule *gimel*. Methodologically, the third sign can be understood in various ways: (a) as a more or less complete letter, as Naveh suggests; or alternatively, as an *aborted* letter that was left incomplete for whatever reason (an imperfection in the stone, or some outside distraction, or perhaps a hesitation regarding the spelling of a foreign word); if so, then it might be seen (b) as the start of an unintended letter that should be ignored or (c) as the beginning of an intended letter that remained to be completed.

I have had the opportunity to examine the inscription twice under different lighting conditions, first in the basement of the Albright Institute and second in the restoration room of the Israel Museum, where it is now on public display. Yet another time I observed it to make a drawing from the plaster copy now at the Tel Ekron Museum in Kibbutz Revadim.⁵ It seems to me that the mark interpreted as the third sign in the deity's name is no more than a wedged shaped chip in the porous stone. In Yardeni's drawing the left side of that third letter has been made too concave, perhaps under the influence of the shading in the photograph or perhaps in light of the proposed reading. Rather this line appears to me to be a short straight diagonal. The supposed right line seems to be a spur and not a real line. It is certainly not an upside-down V-shaped, minuscule *gimel!* If this is indeed so, then this mark is an aborted letter. This conclusion leads therefore to the above-mentioned possibility that the mark should be ignored. The goddess' name should then be read *ptyh*,

5. I wish to thank Prof. S. Gitin for his kindness in allowing me to examine the inscription at the Albright Institute and to Ms. Osnat Misch-Brandel, curator at the Israel Museum, and to Mr. Natan Eidlin of Kibbutz Revadim. for the courtesy they extended to me.

perhaps a local transliteration of *pythia* (πυθία), referring to Artemis Pytheie, the sister of oracular Pythion Apollo of Delphi, whose inscriptions have been found in Didyma in Anatolia although from a much later period.⁶ The only, albeit weak, support for this suggestion is the fact that there was an oracular god at Ekron, Baalzebub, to whom King Ahaziah of Israel sent to inquire about his ill health (2 Kgs. 1:2).

My own opinion, however, is that this mark stands for an aborted letter that remained to be completed. The question is, which letter? After a paleographic analysis of the letter forms, I have come to the conclusion that it is not a *gimel*, but rather the partial left line of a *nun*! Unfortunately there are no other *gimels* in the inscription for comparison, but there are five *nuns* in the first and second lines. A comparison of the diagonal line of our aborted mark with the left diagonal line of the head of the *nuns* is illuminating (see the appendix below). These five letters are not identical, so the slight aberration of our aborted letter is not surprising. There is a sufficient similarity to suggest it is an incomplete *nun*. In any case, I have set up a basis for a paleographic comparison.

This reading will be strengthened if it results in a recognizable term that more aptly fits the context. I therefore propose to read the word *pt'n'y.h*, which in Canaanite letters would represent the Greek term *potni'*, *potnia* (ποτνί', ποτνια), i.e., “mistress,” “lady,” the formal title of various goddesses in the Minoan, Mycenaean and archaic Greek writings. The root is *pot*, meaning “lord, master,” as in *despot*. The term is found already in Mycenaean documents written in Linear B dated to the 14th–12th centuries BCE, from Knossos (Crete) and Pylos (Peloponnesus).⁷ After making a search, I find that the term appears 90 times in the Homeric epics and hymns, dated to the eighth century BCE, as well as six times in Hesiod and in some 40 Greek inscriptions dating from the sixth–third century BCE.⁸ Sometimes *potnia* is used with the name of a specific goddess, while at other times it is used as a vocative “Mistress, Lady”—making the title into a proper name of veneration like Martha or Madonna.

In Late Bronze Age Knossos, *potnia* was an epithet of the goddess Athena as in *a-ta-na-po-ti-ni-ja*, which recalls Homer: *potni'* 'Athenain—“O Lady Athene, our city’s defender, shinning among goddesses. . . .” (Iliad vi:305). Artemis is called *potnia theron* 'Artemis, i.e., “the mistress of wild beasts” (Iliad xxi:470) and other goddesses like Hera, Demeter and Persephone also bore this title. For the sake of comparison to the context of the Ekron inscription, we note that Athena “was originally the goddess who protected the palace of the Mycenaean king, and whose cult belonged and whose protection was afforded to the king personally.”⁹ *Potnia* also

6. H. W. Pleket and R. S. Stroud, eds., *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* (SEG) 30 (1980), 357, #1286 (1st c. CE); S. Hornblower and A. Spawforth, eds., *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (1996), 467; K. Tuchelt, “Didyma,” in Meyers, ed., *Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology*, 2.59–61.

7. M. Ventris and J. Chadwick, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, 1973), 126f., 289, 311.

8. R. J. Cunliffe, *A Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect*, rev. ed. (Norman, 1963), 341, s.v. *potnia*. See Pandora 5.3, *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* on CD Rom. I wish to thank my colleague Dr. David Schaps of the Department of Classical Languages, Bar-Ilan University, for his help in retrieving and clarifying the Greek sources.

9. M. P. Nilsson, *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion and its Survival in Greek Religion*, 2nd ed. (Gleerup, Lund, 1950), 499.

appears in Knossos and in Pylos as a divine name standing by itself. John Chadwick even declares, “It is possible . . . that she (i.e., *potnia*) is at each site the patron goddess, who is thus referred to instead of by her real name.”¹⁰

Furthermore, it is worth noting that these descendants of the Sea Peoples probably understood their Greek, for *Ptīnyh* is called in this inscription *'dth*, “his mistress,” in good Canaanite, as it appears in the Byblian votive inscriptions. The term *'dt* is the singular feminine form of *'adon*, “lord, master.” The *nun* is assimilated in Ugaritic and Phoenician as well as in a seventh century BCE personal seal bearing the woman’s hypocoristic name: *'adt'eshet Pashhur*—“Adata the wife of Pashhur.”¹¹ While this word is absent in Biblical Hebrew, it appears in Mishnaic Hebrew as *'adonah*, *'adonit* (*Gen. Rabbah* 89, 98; Midrash Tehillim 7:3) and now in the South-Canaanite dialect of ancient Ekron.

In conclusion, we have corrected the reading of the newly discovered monumental votive inscription from Ekron to read *Potnia*, “Mistress,” the well-known title/name of a patron goddess documented already in the Mycenaean Linear B inscriptions from Knossos and Pylos. At once, this proposal sheds new light on Philistine religion and origins. Our suggested reading also provides the earliest evidence of Greek written in the Canaanite alphabet. In addition, this text shows that even with their assimilation to the local Canaanite culture and scribal literary forms, the Philistines preserved traditions from their Greek-speaking past. The as yet unidentified “Mistress of Ekron” is a case in point, for it is possible that she was the Canaanite Ashtoreth or Asherah reverently referred to here by her Philistine devotees by the ancient Greek title *Potnia*.

Appendix: A paleographic analysis

The 5 *nuns* will be referred to by line and letter as they appear in this inscription from right to left (see fig. 1). The proposed uncompleted letter will be compared to the above five in three ways: 1) the length of the diagonal compared to that of the left diagonal line of the head of the *nun*; 2) the distance of this diagonal from the overhead guideline in the inscription; 3) the degree of the obtuse angle of that diagonal line. Our results are as follows:

1. The length of the diagonal: (line) 1: (letter) 4 = 17mm; 1:10 = 13mm; 1:15 = 18mm; 2:5 = 19mm; 2:10 = 15mm; and the aborted letter = 14mm.
2. The distance from the upper line from which the letters hang: 1:4 = 2.5mm below; 1:10 = 5.5mm below; 1:15 = 1.5 mm below; 2:5 = on the line; 2:10 = 5mm above the line; and our aborted letter 7mm below the line.
3. The obtuse angle of the diagonal line: 1:4 = 113 degrees; 1:10 = 124 degrees; 1:15 = 109 degrees; 2:5 = 111 degrees; 2:10 = 122 degrees; and the aborted letter = 132 degrees.

10. See n. 9 above, 410; also J. Chadwick, “Potnia,” *Minos* 5 (1957), 117–29.

11. See N. Avigad and B. Sass, *Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals* (Jerusalem, 1997), #33.

The results are that our suggested aborted diagonal is shorter than four of the five compared heads. It is a bit lower than 1:10 from the overhead guideline. Of course, *nun* 2:10 is more of an aberration by extending 5mm above that line. In fact, its left side most resembles our aborted letter with its spur to the right. The obtuse angle is a bit larger than in the compared *nuns*, but less than the 15 degrees' difference between the smallest and largest angles of these letters. The porous stone surface probably caused these slight differences which led the engraver to leave the letter incomplete.

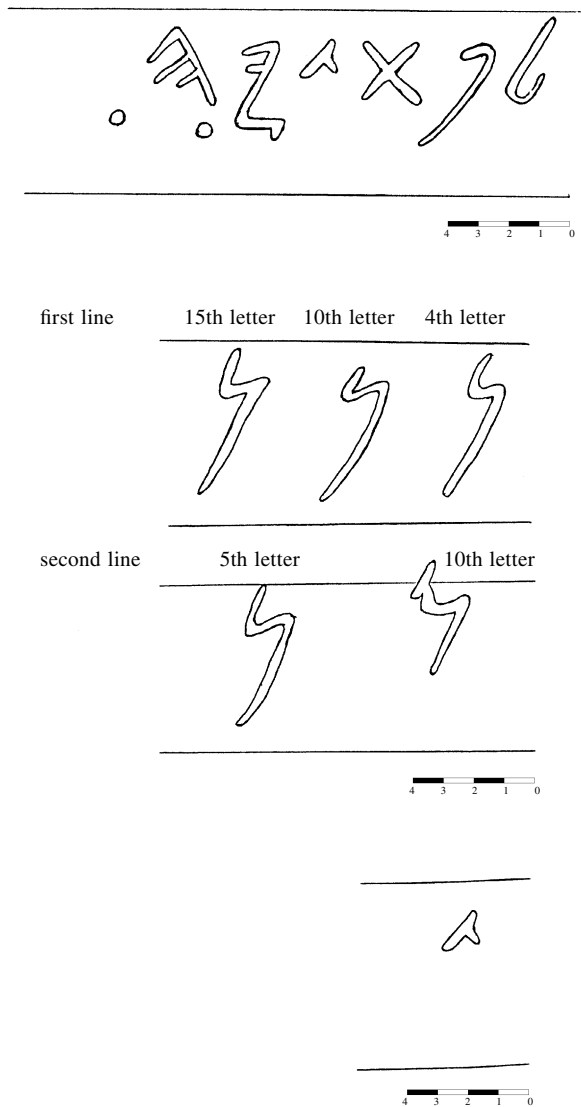


Fig. 1. Paleographic analysis