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ABSTRACT: During the 2012 excavations at the Ophel, a large building was partially revealed; it is broadly dated to the early (?) Iron Age IIA (it is hoped that a more accurate dating will be obtained after the study of its finds has been completed). A pile of large pottery fragments (L.223C) from seven pithoi was used as a stabiliser for the earth fill under the second floor of the building. All the pithoi belong to the neckless, folded-out rim type that is most likely the successor of the Collared-Rim Jar of the Iron Age I. The inscribed pithos rim was analysed by thin section petrography. The results indicate that the vessel was made of clay sourced to the central hills region, as were several other pithoi found with it. However, a certain variability in the so-called Moza clay formation used for these vessels was identified. Similarly-shaped pithoi from southern Israel that were analysed have the same provenance. The inscription is incised in a Proto-Canaanite/Early Canaanite script of the eleventh–tenth centuries BCE. It reads from left to right, but a combination of the letters m, q, p, h, n, l, n yield no meaning in west-Semitic. The inscription remains, for now, enigmatic.
of the finds from the building, including the pottery and the bullae, as well as 14C tests for a cluster of raisins, have not yet been completed; it is hoped that the results will make it possible to narrow down the date further.

A pile of large pithos fragments was found (fig. 2; L.223C), filling a shallow natural depression in the bedrock. These turned out to be fragments of seven pithoi (one base and six rims) that had probably been piled up in secondary use to stabilise the earth fill under the second floor layer of the building. One of the rims bears an inscription (fig. 3). The large size of the pithoi suggests that they stood in this area before the construction of the floor.

Although the pithoi vary greatly in rim shape, they all belong to the same general type — neckless with folded-out rim — and they all date from the early (?) Iron Age IIA. They can be divided into two main sub-groups: type A
A pithos that seems to be an early variant of type A (late Iron Age I?), with a small groove near the rim, was found by Albright in Tell el-Fül, Second Period (Albright 1924: 12, pl. XXVIII:18–23; similar to pithoi found many years later at Kh. ed-Dawwara [Finkelstein 1990: 185, fig. 16:11–12] and Lachish IV [Zimhoni...
2004: fig. 25.54:13). This led him to first suggest that the collared-rim jar transitioned into a type that lost its collar sometime in the second half of the eleventh century BCE (Albright 1934: 12–13). Grant and Wright corroborated Albright’s claim with finds from their excavations at Beth-Shemesh, presenting the variants of the new form — one of which is the same as our type A — as the type that took the place of the collared rim (Grant and Wright 1938: pl. LXV:4,9; 1939: 129, 143–144). Following his excavations in Kh. ed-Dawwara, Finkelstein reiterated that claim: ‘This is probably a descendent and successor of the collared-rim jar. It is popular in the central hill country … apparently in the 10th century and maybe later’ (Finkelstein 1990: 190).

Such pithoi seem to have a tendency to last for two to three centuries, with or without minor variants. This is the case for the collared-rim pithos, as well as for the neckless folded-out rim pithos.

Examples of type A can be found as early as the eleventh century BCE in Tel Masos, Stratum II (Fritz and Kempinski 1983: pl. 143:9, 155:3), and the City of David, Stratum 15 (De Groot and Ariel 2000: 115, fig. 12:6), as well as in tenth- and ninth-century BCE sites, such as Kadesh Barnea, Stratum 4 (Bernick-Greenberg 2007: part II, 8, pl. 11.5:2), Arad, Stratum XI (Singer-Avitz 2002: 118, fig. 4:11), Lachish, Stratum IV (Zimhoni 2004: 1757, figs. 25.39:6, 25.46:25), and the City of David, Stratum 13 (De Groot and Bernick-Greenberg 2012a: 34; 2012b: 217, fig. 5.7:22).

Type B of the neckless, elongated folded-out rim is rarely found by itself, as the example from Tel Moza, Stratum VI, dated to the ninth century BCE (Greenhut and De Groot 2009: 73, fig. 3.7:6), and is mostly found alongside what seems to be a later sub-group of this type of pithos. Type C is characterised by the same elongated rim as type B, but is now notably incurved. So far, the earliest
appearance of type C seems to be the one sherd found in the oldest phase of Lachish, Stratum IV (Zimhoni 2004: 1727, fig. 25.23:21). However, types B and C appear together in the late Iron Age IIA and more commonly in the early Iron Age IIB (the ninth–eighth centuries BCE), as in Lachish, Stratum IV (Zimhoni 2004: 1740, fig. 25.30:10; 1771, fig. 25.46:24), and Kuntillet ʻAjrud (Ayalon 2012: fig. 7.8; 7.9:1; 7.46, 7.48:4–6; Singer-Avitz 2009: 117), respectively. Type C became the most popular type during the eighth–early seventh centuries BCE, as seen in Tel ʻIra, Stratum VII (Kletter 1999: 350–358).

In sum, the neckless folded-out rim pithos of the Iron Age II is most likely the successor of the collared-rim jar of the Iron Age I. Its earliest form is the late Iron I (?) neckless pithos with a small groove near the rim. This form developed into the early Iron IIA form — our type A — of the thickened rim without groove near it. It seems that type A rapidly developed into its subsequent variant: type B with horizontal elongated rim. Both types appear together in our L.223C. Type C, with the notably incurved elongated rim, is absent from L.223C, even though it seems to follow immediately after type B. Even though no type B pithos has yet been found in any other early Iron IIA context, it is plausible, on the basis of the above-mentioned evidence, that it should be dated to a developed phase of that period.

PETROGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

Fragments of six out of the seven pithoi uncovered in the 2012 excavations, including one pithos inscribed before firing (sample 1), were thin-sectioned and examined through a petrographic polarising microscope by standard optical petrography methods.

The petrographic analysis revealed certain similarities in the fabric of all six pithoi (fig. 5). Samples 2, 4, 5 and 6, however, are more closely similar and were possibly produced in the same workshop or indicate the same clay source. This fabric is characterised by a dark, silty, calcareous matrix with silt-sized dolomite and relatively small and variable quantities of sand-sized dolomite. It is tempered with limestone and chalk fragments (sand-sized) as well, and certain amounts of clay pellets occur in most examples. The clay was fired in a high temperature — probably over 800°C. Sample 1 (the inscribed pithos) is also quite similar to this group, but is somewhat finer in its clay and lacks dolomite in sand size. All these five samples may have a similar geographic provenance, related to Moza marl outcrops located in the Judaean (?) central hill area of Israel. The appearance of clay pellets and the variability of quantities of dolomite sand and quartz in these samples may indicate a certain mixing of clays. This may be especially true in the inscribed pithos (sample 1), as the clay pellets are composed of a different clay type than the matrix of the sherd.

Sample 3 (of a pithos of which only the base was found) is different: it is made of a reddish and compact fabric rich in dolomite sand. The dolomitic sand points
to an Aminadav formation source, perhaps from the region just west and south of Jerusalem or from the area near Shechem (see, e.g., Goren, Finkelstein and Na'aman 2004: 263–264).

The results from the Ophel pithoi indicate at least two variations of the same clay type, one with coarse dolomite sand temper (pithos 3 of the Aminadav formation) and the others with the finer clay without the dolomite sand (of Moza marl). The latter seems less common, at least according to published pottery analyses. Clay related to Moza marl without dolomite sand was used for several figurines from the City of David, yet this clay is very rich in microfossils, probably mixed with rendzina soil (Goren, Kletter and Kamaiski 1996). For the Moza clay formation usually with dolomite sand, commonly used for pottery during the Iron Age II and other periods, see, e.g., Goren 1996: 51–52 (and discussion therein).
Similarly shaped pithoi that underwent petrographic analysis include several examples from Kuntillet ʿAjrud (Goren 2012: sample 4; Gunneweg, Perlman and Meshel 2012: 280–284) and Beer-Sheba (Singer-Avitz 1999: 18, fig. 4) and one example from Tell es-Ṣafï/Gath (Ben-Shlomo 2006: 178, 184, sample Safï 32). These vessels were made from Mo‘a marl clay tempered with dolomite sand. INAA indicates that the pithoi from ʿAjrud also form a chemical group related to the Mo‘a clay (Gunneweg, Perlman and Meshel 2012: table 8.1), yet the precise geographic provenance of this clay is difficult to ascertain within the central hills at this stage. In any case, it is quite interesting that this specific type was made roughly from the same types of clay and in the same region for a long period of time.

THE INSCRIPTION

The inscription under discussion was incised below the rim of the pithos. Seven letters appear on the two joined pieces (see fig. 3 on p. 41); one of these letters is partially broken and is indecipherable. It seems that the inscription is not complete. The letters appear to belong to the eleventh–tenth centuries BCE. The inscription was incised before firing, and the blunt side of the stylus was used to press it into the still wet clay.

The letters are not of the Phoenician-Hebrew script, but are similar to the Proto-Canaanite/Early-Canaanite one. The inscription is written from left to right (as evident from the stance of the letters), like the Qubur al-Walaydah and the ʿIzbet Ṣarṭa ostraca. Although a comprehensive meaning of the inscription still eludes us, the letters (from left to right) are: m, q (less likely r), p, h, n, a broken letter which might be l (or perhaps is two broken letters) and another n. The q was retraced on its left, creating a ‘shadow’ that is sharper than the main lines of the letter. Below the break, the end of a long vertical line appears; this might a tail of a letter, or, more improbably, a casual incision. It is not the continuation of the left line above it (the left side of the reconstructed l).

The letters are quite large — c. 25–30 mm. high and c. 1 mm. deep. Some of the lines pressed into the wet clay are c.1 mm. wide and c. 5–7 mm. high, reflecting the thickness and height of the tip of the stylus. The letters are proportionally spaced, with c. 10 mm. between each pair; only between the last two letters (the reconstructed l and the n) is the space doubled to c. 20 mm. Since in the Proto-Canaanite and the Phoenician-Hebrew writing system there were no spaces between words, it is possible that the inscription began at what is here described as the last letter of the inscription, which might have run around the pithos shoulder.

Following is a comparison of the letters to those of other early inscriptions (table 1):
Table 1. Comparative chart of letters*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Ophel</th>
<th>Qeiyafa</th>
<th>Sarta</th>
<th>Arrows</th>
<th>Walaydah</th>
<th>Tekke</th>
<th>Veradin</th>
<th>Gezer</th>
<th>Batash</th>
<th>Eshtemoa†</th>
<th>Beth Shemesh</th>
<th>Reḥov</th>
<th>Fekheriyeh</th>
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<td>h</td>
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° — For the ladder-like h with two rungs only, compare the h incised in the Tel Batash/Timnah inscription (יהו יבז) and the one written in ink on a jug from Eshtemoa† (יהו), both ascribed to the tenth century BCE.

l — If the two lines, one curving to the left and the other to the right, meet at the broken-off part of the pithos, the letter might be l, not unlike one of the ls of the Qeiyafa ostracon. This leaves the solitary line below the break enigmatic.

m — The m resembles the ones from the Qubur al-Walaydah (c. 1200 BCE) and †Izbat Šārta (eleventh century?) ostraca, the Kefar Veradim bowl (early tenth century), the Gezer Calendar and the Khirbet Qeiyafa ostracon (tenth century?).
Compare the first $n$ to the $ns$ on the aforementioned inscriptions from Tel Batash/Timna (‘תל באתש’, Beth Shemesh (‘beth shelom’)) and Tel Reḥov (‘תל רֶהוֹב’). The second $n$ is of a more regular shape.

Compare to the $p$s of the Gezer Calendar.

The letter is very similar to the $qs$ on the ‘Izbet Şarṭa and Khirbet Qeiyafa ostraca.

The letters might be referring to the name of the owner of the pithos, its addressee, or its contents, but unfortunately, they do not yield any intelligible combination. Perhaps they represent a non-Semitic combination or combinations. One might suggest that the writer of the inscription was a descendant of the pre-Israelite inhabitants of Jerusalem (a ‘Jebusite’?), but this remains in the realm of conjecture. In the absence of any further insight, the new inscription from the Ophel remains, for the time being, enigmatic.

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