THE SEAL OF BAALISHA, KING OF THE AMMONITES

SOME REMARKS

Bob Becking, Utrecht

1. Introduction

Recently a seal has been published claiming that it would bear the name of Baalis, the King of the Ammonites known from Jer. 40:14 as the one who plotted the assassination of Gedaliah the governor over Judah appointed by the Babylonians after their final capture of Jerusalem.[1] The seal is a scarab shaped tiny piece made from brown agate. It measures 0.5 inches in diameter and is 0.2 inches thick.[2] On the seal are three lines of an inscription separated by double lines. Between these double lines a winged sphinx wearing an Egyptian-style apron with a tail in the shape of the character *s* is depicted.

Fig.1 Seal-impression of the seal of Ba'alis.

Drawing by R. Deutsch

2. A Forgery?

The editor of the seal does not supply information on the provenance of the new find. He only remarks that the seal "recently ... has come to light".[3] A hint at an archaeological context indicating at which excavation the seal was found is absent. The interested reader is left with the idea

---

[1] R. Deutsch, "Seal of Ba'alis surfaces", *BAR* 95 (1999) Vol. 2, 46-49.

[2] According to Deutsch, "Seal of Ba'alis", 46; note that the seal is not edited with a scale to confirm his measurement.

[3] Deutsch, "Seal of Ba'alis", 46.

that the object was purchased at the antiquities market. This circumstance might cause the idea that the seal is a forgery.[1] As long as additional information is not supplied, a decision on this point cannot be made. For the time being I take the seal to be genuine since both paleography and iconography make an authentic impression.

3. The Inscription

Deutsch proposes to read: ל[ל[בעלישׁ]ע] // מלך // בן[ב[עמ]ן, '[Belonging to] Ba'alis // King of // the B[nei Ammo]n".[2] This reading is plausible but should be considered cautiously. In the first line the ל, 'Belonging to', the introduction to almost all westsemitic seal-inscriptions is absent. It might have been broken or worn off. Of the royal name only the three first characters are clearly legible. The fourth sign might be the beginning of a *yod* the fifth sign most probably is the lower part of the Ammonite letter *šin*. The '*ayin* as final character is tentative based on the orthography of the name Ba'alis known from an Ammonite bulla with a seal impression.[3] The word מלך, 'king', in the middle register is clearly legible. For the lower register Deutsch proposes to read ב[עמ]ן. On the photo of the seal printed on the cover of the pertinent issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review* only a scratch that might be interpreted as the upper end of an Ammonite *nûn* is visible. At the place where Deutsch reads the remains of a *bēth*, the surface of the seal is worn off. Although the addition of Deutsch makes sense in the context, there is no evidence for it on the artifact. In sum it would be more cautious to read [x x x] // מלך // [ל[בעלישׁ]ע(?)], '[Belonging to] Ba'alish[a(?)] // king // [of ......]'.

3. The Name Ba'alis

Without argument, Deutsch identifies [בעלישׁ]ע(?)], 'Ba'alish[a(?)]', from this new seal with the Ammonite king בעליס, 'Ba'alis', mentioned at Jer. 40:14. As regards the person mentioned in the Old Testament, the *versiones antiquae* already indicate that the name is enigmatic. Most versions have rendered his name correctly.[4] Some late minuscule manuscripts of the LXX, the Old Greek textgroup A and the Arabic translation have transmitted a form of the name ending in -/a/: i.a. βελισσα (538) βελισαν (26) viz. βελισα (LXX^A).[5] Before the edition of the

---

[1] U. Hübner, "Fälschungen Ammonitischer Siegel", *UF* 21 (1989, 217-226, has indicated that about 25% of the Ammonite seals known sofar should be considered as forgeries.

[2] Deutsch, "Seal of Ba'alis", 46.

[3] Its inscription reads לבעלישׁע עבד למלכמעור; see L.G. Herr, "The servant of Baalis", *BA* 48 (1985), 169-172; W.E. Aufrecht, *A Corpus of Ammonite Inscriptions* (ANETS, 4), Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter, 1989, 308-309; U. Hübner, *Die Ammoniter: Untersuchungen zur Geschichte, Kultur und Religion eines transjordanischen Volkes im 1. Jahrtausend v. Chr* (ADPV, 16), Wiesbaden, 1992, 86-87 (with lit.).

[4] LXX, Vulg, Targum Jonathan, Pešiṭṭa.

[5] See J. Ziegler, *Jeremias - Baruch - Threni - Epistula Jeremiae, Septuaginta auctoritate societas litterarum Gottingensis* Vol. XV, Göttingen, 1957, 419.

bulla from Tell el-'Umeiri different guesses have been made with regard to the meaning of the name. Cross thought that the original form of the name was *Ba'lay*. The *sin* must have been inserted as a result of dittography with the following *mēm*. *ba'lay* is a Canaanite hypo-coristicon.[1] Van Selms surmised a contraction of the name *ba'al yēšā'*, 'Baal is liberation'.[2] Zayadine suggested the original name Ba'al-Isis, but gave no interpretation for this name.[3] The find of the Ammonite bulla from Tell el-'Umeiri opened the lane for an adequate interpretation of בעלים.

The inscription on this bulla reads למלכמעור עבד בעלישע. As Herr[4] has shown, biblical Ba'alis is not to be construed as a conscious change of Ba'alisha on pious grounds, a position defended by Shea.[5] The Book of Jeremiah contains several personal names with "other" Gods as theophoric elements, which have not been mutilated: Benhadad; Evilmerodak; Nabushasban; Nebuzaradan; Nergalsharezer and Nebuchadnezzar. Besides the example given by Shea is not convincing. In the name Abed-Nego (Dan 1:7ff) probably the theophoric element is mutilated, when it can be assumed that Nabu was changed to Nego. In Ba'alis the name of Ba'al remains recognizable. That means that if the name is a mutilation on pious grounds, this mutilation is not very successful.

Elsewhere, I have argued that the Ammonite name should be read as *ba'alîšā'*.[6] The /š/ in *ba'alîšā'* goes back to a proto-semitic /ṯ/.[7] This unvoiced interdental sounded in Ammonite as a /sāmek/. This might explain why the name was written in Hebrew with a /s/.[8]

Deutsch proposes as meaning of the name Ba'alisha 'Ba'al has saved' or 'Ba'al is sal-vation'.[9] He construes the element בעל to be theophoric and the element ישע either as a Qal pf

---

[1] F.M. Cross, "Notes on the ammonite inscription from Tell Sîrān", *BASOR* 212 (1973), 15+n23.

[2] A. van Selms, *Jeremia* II (de Prediking van het Oude Testament), Nijkerk, 1974, 229n7; see also E. Puech, "L'inscription de la statue d'Amman et la paléographie Ammonite", *RB* 92 (1985), 10.

[3] F. Zayadine, "Die Zeit der Königreiche Edom, Moab und Ammon", in: *Der Königsweg. 9000 Jahre Kunst und Kultur in Jordanien und Palestina*, Köln, 1987, 120.

[4] L.G. Herr, "Is the Spelling of "Baalis" in Jeremiah 40:14 a Mutilation?", *AUSS* 23 (1985), 187-191.

[5] W.H. Shea, "Mutilation of foreign Names by Bible Writers: a possible Example from Tell el-'Umeiri", *AUSS* 23 (1985), 111-115.

[6] B. Becking, "Baalis, the King of the Ammonites. An epigraphical Remark on Jeremiah 40:14", *JSS* 38 (1993), 15-24.

[7] See also Hübner, *Ammoniter*, 203.

[8] The decay of the final *'ayin* is difficult to explain. Possibly the variant-readings in the Old Greek tradition mentioned above—βελισσα; βελισαν viz. βελισα—preserved a remini-scence to the original form of the name.

[9] Deutsch, "Seal of Ba'alis", 48.

3.m.s. or as a noun comparable to Hebrew $y^e\check{s}\hat{u}\,{}^\prime\bar{a}$, 'help; salvation'. Although this interpretation probably is correct, I would like to give an alternative for it. In Biblical Hebrew a root *$\check{s}w\,{}^\prime$ exists meaning 'to be noble' that occurs in the adjective $\check{s}\hat{o}wa\,{}^\prime$, 'noble'.[1] Tigay reckons with the possibility, that in the personal name $yhw\check{s}\,{}^\prime$ the element $\check{s}\,{}^\prime$ means 'noble'.[2] In Ugaritic a noun $\underline{t}\,{}^\prime$, 'hero', is attested as a title for Karitu derived from a root *$\underline{t}w\,{}^\prime$.[3] Hebrew $\check{s}\bar{a}\,{}^\prime$ would then be a Qal pf 3.m.s. meaning 'he is noble'.[4] By implication the name of the Ammonite king could mean 'My Lord is noble'.

4. The Iconography of the Seal

The middle register of the seal depicts a winged sphinx wearing an Egyptian style apron. Deutsch accepts Egyptian influence but notifies identifying characteristics particular to Ammonite culture.[5] He particularly refers to the tail of the sphinx in the form of the letter s. The same motif occurs on a seal of Pado'il, most probably the King of the Ammonites in the last years of the eighth century BCE.[6] Deutsch refers to the fact that the same motif occurs also on the seal of the Edomite king Qausgabri.[7] The s-shaped tail, however, cannot be taken as a characteristic for Trans-Jordanian royal seals, since it also occurs on non-royal artefacts from Israel.[8]

5. Historical Implications

The absence of a clear archaeol. context for the new seal of Ba´alisha makes it difficult to draw

---

1   Isa 32:5; Job 34:19.
2   J.H. Tigay, *You Shall Have No Other Gods: Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions* (HSM, 31), Atlanta, 1986, 81n37
3   This root should not be confused with the verb $\underline{t}\,{}^\prime y$, 'to offer'; cf., e.g., M. Dietrich - O. Loretz, "Ugaritisch $t\,{}^\prime/t\,{}^\prime y$ und Hebräisch $\check{s}w\,{}^{\prime\prime\prime}$", *UF* 19 (1987), 33-36; G. del Olmo Lete, "Ug. $\underline{t}\,{}^\prime$, $t\,{}^\prime y$, $t\,{}^\prime y$: nombre divino y acción cultual", *UF* 20 (1988), 26-33.
4   Not an adjective; cf. the remarks of J.D. Fowler, *Theophoric Personal Names in Ancient Hebrew. A Comparative Study* (JSOTSup., 94), Sheffield, 1988, 114.
5   Deutsch, "Seal of Ba'alis", 48.
6   Editio princeps: A. Reifenberg, "Ancient Jewish Stamps and Seals", *PEQ* 70 (1939),196-197, No. 3; see Aufrecht, *Corpus*, 79-80; Hübner, *Ammoniter*, 106-107; N. Avigad and B. Sass, *Corpus of West Semitic Seals*, Jerusalem, 1997, No. 965. On the probability of the identification of this פדאל with the Ammonite king *Pudu'ilu* mentioned in inscriptions of Sennacherib and Esarhaddon, see Hübner, *Ammoniter*, 193-194.
7   See C.-M. Bennett, "Fouilles d'Umm el-Biara rapport préliminaire", *RB* 73 (1966), 372-403; J.R. Bartlett, *Edom and the Edomites* (JSOTSup, 77), Sheffield, 1989, 213.
8   For instance on an Iron Age IIB scaraboid from the area of Shechem; see A. Rowe, *A Catalogue of Egyptian Scarabs, Scaraboids, Seals and Amulets in the Palestine Archaeological Museum*, Cairo, 1936, Nr. SO. 3; O. Keel and C. Uehlinger, *Göttinnen, Götter und Gottessymbole: Neue Erkenntnisse zur Religionsgeschichte Kanaans und Israels aufgrund bislang unerschlossener ikonographischer Quellen* (QD, 134), Freiburg Basel Wien, 1992, 292; Abb. 258c.

historical conclusions. Since the seal cannot be dated with the help of a stratigraphy, it remains tentative to identify 'Ba'alisha the king' with 'Ba'alisha the master of Milkom'ur' and with 'Baalis mentioned in Jer. 40:14'. Our limited knowledge of the history of the Ammonites and of the development of their script should make cautious to draw extensive conclusions. On a scale from 1-10 the probability of the identification of 'Ba'alisha the master of Milkom'ur' with 'Baalis mentioned in Jer. 40:14' is in my view 8. The probability of the identification of 'Ba'alisha the king' with 'Ba'alisha the master of Milkom'ur' would on the same scale be 7 since the script in the two seals on which they are attested differs.[1] This means that an easy identification as implied by Deutsch[2] should be considered with caution.

Finally, 'names' are not 'stories'. With this clause I mean that the occurrence from an archaeological excavation of a name already known from the Hebrew Bible might suggest the historicity of the character but does not imply that all elements from the Biblical story should be construed as historical. This means that even a full identification of 'Ba'alisha the king' with 'Ba'alisha the master of Milkom'ur' and with 'Baalis mentioned in Jer. 40:14' does not imply the historicity of all the elements in the Biblical report on the assassination of Gedaliah. The event is mentioned in 2 Kgs 25:22-26 and Jer. 40:7-41:15, the latter text supplying the reader with more details on the political background of the event. Jer. 40:7-41:15, however, should be seen as a post-exilic text that might be biased by pro-Davidic and anti-Ammonite feelings. The publication of the new seal does not hint at the historicity of these details neither positive nor negative.[3]

---

[1] As can be inferred from a comparison between, e.g., the forms of the ע as well as of the ל in both inscriptions.

[2] Deutsch, "Seal of Ba'alis", 46-49.

[3] See also my remarks in B. Becking, "Inscribed Seals as Historical Sources for 'Ancient Israel'? Jeremiah 40.7-41.15 *par exemple*", in: L.L. Grabbe (ed.), *Can a 'History of Israel' be Written?* (ESHM, 1 = JSOTSup, 245), Sheffield 1997, 65-83