

## Jehoash's Improbable Inscription

*Ernst Axel Knauf – Bern/Jerusalem\**

An inscription from the Jerusalem antiquities' market, which was rejected by the Israel Museum for good reasons, has now been "authenticated" by geologists<sup>1</sup>. The conflict between the epigraphical and the scientific evidence calls for some remarks.

### 1. Epigraphy

The inscription is incised on a rectangular tablet (0.31 x 0.27 m) of sandstone, colored dark by a high content of hematite. All signs are clearly readable:

(1') חזיהו : מן  
 (2') הדה : ואעש : את : הבן  
 (3') ה : כאשר : נמלאה : [נדר]  
 (4') בת : לב אש : בארץ : ובמד  
 (5') בר : ובכל : ערי : יהדה : ל  
 (6') תת : כסף : הקרשם : לרב:  
 (7') לקנת : אבן : מחצב : ובר  
 (8') שם : ונחשת : אדם : לעשת  
 (9') במלאכה : כאמנה : ואעש  
 (10') את : בדק : הבית : והקרת ס  
 (11') בכ : ואת : היצע : והשבכ  
 (12') ס : והלולם : והגרעת : וה  
 (13') דלתת : והיה : הים : הזה  
 (14') לעדת : כי : תצלח : המלאכה  
 (15') יצו : יהוה : את : עמו : בברכה

The forger betrayed himself in the last line: in Epigraphic Hebrew, עמו could only mean "his (two or more) peoples", which is hardly intended. It is noteworthy that this evident blunder escaped the notice of highly qualified scholars who are native speakers of (modern) Hebrew<sup>2</sup>. Far from being the epigraphic source of 2 Kings 12, the inscription has the (partially miscopied and misunderstood) Hebrew Bible as its source. Line 15' is a hackneyed version of Dtn 28.8. Line 13f

\* This note was drafted at the Institute for Advanced Studies, The Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

<sup>1</sup> Sh. Ilani, A. Rosenfeld & M. Dvorachek, A Stone Tablet with an Ancient Hebrew Inscription Attributed to Jehoash, King of Judah – Archaeometry and Epigraphy: Geological Survey of Israel Current Research 13 (2003) 109-116.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. the voices collected by N. Shragai, There is nothing else like it: Ha'aretz January 16, 2003 ([www.haaretzdaily.com](http://www.haaretzdaily.com)). According to a follow-up (Ha'arety January 17, 2003), the expert consulted by the Israel Museum was Josef Naveh. A good photograph of the inscription was published by E. Lefkovits, Controversial 'First Temple tablet' reputedly dates to King Joash: The Jerusalem Post January 17, 2003 ([www.jpost.com](http://www.jpost.com)).

is based on Ex 12.14, exchanging זכרון for an unwarranted<sup>3</sup> עדות. To what shall “this day” testify – that the work was successful? Then, the yiqtol-L is impossible. Or that it shall be successful? But when, if not by the time of its completion? The architectural *termini technici* are drawn from 1 Kings 6f and 2 Kings 12 with characteristic mistakes. From 1 Kings 6.5-8, 31-34; 7.17 derive the מַגְרֵעוֹת, לְלוּלִים, שְׂבָכִים, צִיֵּעַ קִירוֹת סָבִיב (sic!) and דְּלִתוֹת; the writer dropped a *mem* in the “recesses” and forget to delete a plene-writing in the “spiral stairs”. From 2 Kings 12 come כֶּסֶף קֹדְשִׁים and לֵב אִישׁ (12.5), בִּדָק (12.6ff), עֲשֵׂה הַמְּאֻלְכָה (12.12ff), לְקִנּוֹת עֲצִים וְאֲבֹנֵי מַחְצָב (12.13, the “wood” upgraded by the scribe – with the help of 2 Chron 2.6f,13 – to “cypress-wood” and augmented by copper/bronze, which was, evidently to the forger’s incomprehension, used by Solomon in plenty, but is not mentioned in 1 Kings 12 at all) and אֲמוֹנָה (12.16). The “faithfulness” of 2 Kings 12.16 was misconstrued by the forger as referring to the work instead of the accounting, and biblical “damage” became modern Hebrew “repair”.<sup>4</sup> Further biblical texts utilized by the forger were 1 Kings 9.18 (the “desert” and the “land”), augmented by “all the towns of Judah”, which make their first appearance in 2 Kings 18.13 = Isa 36.1<sup>5</sup>, and then quite prominent in Jer and 2 Chron. The introductory remark לֵב נִרְבֵּה seems to be drawn from Exod 35.29,31.

At the beginning, one is invited to restore אֲחִיזָהוּ מִלֶּךְ [יְהוֹשָׁפָט], or something very similar, but it remains a mystery how these insinuated restorations are to be reconciled with the abundant space waiting to be filled in.

For the script (and maybe also for the frame around the text), the Mesha inscription obviously served as the model. The “Jehoash”-text squares badly with the Siloam inscription, an incomplete royal Judaean epigraph from the 7<sup>th</sup> century<sup>6</sup>, and the 8<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> centuries fragment from the City of David excavations<sup>7</sup>. It is by no means impossible that fragments of Judaean building inscriptions have been or will be found during the continuing illegal Waqf construction work on the Temple Mount, but Naveh’s piece [Jer(7):39] demonstrates how such are to be expected to look.

## 2. Geology

Carbon particles from the stone’s patina gave the <sup>14</sup>C date of 390/200 cal BCE (2σ). This date is meaningless without comparative soil and patina samples from various locations in Jerusalem (it is assumed that the patina was formed in the earth, after the stone was buried). Each carbon particle from the patina could have had a different historical origin, nor is it clear when and how it became incorporated in the patina. The obvious conclusion from the geological tests is that Jerusalem’s forgers now know how to produce patina (because the patina also covers the letters, the assumption of an ancient unscripted stone having been used by the forgers is not sufficient

<sup>3</sup> M. Greenberg according to Ha’aretz (n. 2).

<sup>4</sup> M. Greenberg according to Ha’aretz (n. 2).

<sup>5</sup> Where Sennacherib is charged for rather more damage than he inflicted indeed, cf. recently E. A. Knauf, Who Destroyed Beersheba II?: U. Hübner & E. A. Knauf ed., Kein Land für sich allein. Studien zum Kulturkontakt in Kanaan, Israel/Palästina und Ebirnäri für Manfred Weippert zum 65 Geburtstag (OBO 186; Fribourg und Göttingen 2002) 181-195.

<sup>6</sup> E. A. Knauf, Hezekiah or Manasseh? A Reconsideration of the Siloam Tunnel and Inscription: Tel Aviv 28 (2001) 281-287.

<sup>7</sup> J. Naveh: IEJ 32 (1982) 195-198; J. Renz & W. Röllig, Handbuch der althebräischen Epigraphik I (Darmstadt 1995) 266f Jer(7):39..

to explain the data). This observation is also relevant for the authenticity of the “brother of Jesus” ossuary. Scientific testing can, in this case, only prove the non-authenticity. If an object is devoid of material traces irreconcilable with what it pretends to be, it is by no means implied that it is genuine. In the case of the “Jehoash” inscription – and probably of the “Brother of Jesus” ossuary, too – scientific testing only shows that the forger(s) did a good job.

The explanation of the gold particles found in the patina as given by the geologists shows a lack of coordination between scientists and historians: they derive it from the 586 destruction of Solomon’s temple<sup>8</sup>. As readers of the Bible know, it was not exactly Solomon’s temple that was destroyed by the Babylonians. In addition to various tributes and conquests, which affected Jerusalem between the 10<sup>th</sup> century and 586, there was at least the earthquake of Amos (9.1) which necessitated a refurbishing of the temple in the Egyptian manner *en vogue* at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century (Isa 6.2)<sup>9</sup>. If the stone was buried for a while – for “aging” – in Temple Mount debris<sup>10</sup>, the gold could easily be explained as washed down from the dome above the rock (which requires re-gilding from time to time for this very reason). More likely, however, is the assumption that the workshop which produced this forgery also works in gold<sup>11</sup>.

### 3. A note on the antiquities’ market

The author is aware of several workshops producing “antiquities” in Jerusalem or its vicinity for the last 25 years. In the case of inscriptions (not all of them ever published), the technical perfection of the letter forms usually surpasses the grammatical and lexical understanding of what the forgers intended to write. With the breakdown of tourism in the past two years and the disappearance of the market for “small forgeries” like pottery and seals, the workshops now seem to concentrate on more spectacular objects which they hope to market internationally.

### 4. 2 Kings 12 – an improbable candidate for archaeological “verification”

Nadav Na’aman expressed reservations concerning the inscription’s authenticity because he had postulated an epigraphical source for 2 Kings 12 in 1998<sup>12</sup>. A murder of Athaliah by Judaeans conspirators, and a renovation of the temple under Jehoash, there might have been. Except for a rather limited core of Ch. 11, 2 Kings 11.1-12.17 betray themselves as post-exilic additions to the book of kings, presupposing the finalized Torah, by a number of linguistic<sup>13</sup> and historical anachronisms:

---

<sup>8</sup> Ilani & al., 115f.

<sup>9</sup> O. Keel, *Jahwe-Visionen und Siegelkunst : eine neue Deutung der Majestätsschilderungen in Jes 6, Ez 1 und 10 und Sach 4* (SBS 84/85; Stuttgart 1977).

<sup>10</sup> According to Haaretz, January 17, 2003, the stone was “found” in the Islamic cemetery beneath the Golden Gate. Because of its higher content of acids and other organic agents, cemetery soil might be particularly well suited for artificial aging.

<sup>11</sup> A seal of a Judaeans king, consisting of pure gold, was recently offered on the market and, again, not bought by the Israel Museum or knowledgeable collectors.

<sup>12</sup> N. Na’aman according to Ha’aretz January 16, 2003; cf. id., *Royal inscriptions and the histories of Joash and Ahaz, kings of Judah*: VT 48 (1998) 333 - 349. The present author regards the “irregular words and expressions” (ibid. 344) in 2 Kings 11f as late-biblical rather than pre-biblical.

<sup>13</sup> Narrative qatal (ktiv) 11.1; באייה (ktiv) 11.4,9f, 15. Karien mercenaries (11.4, 19) are not attested before the 7<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, מיבחרו (ktiv) 11.18 and ביה מלך 11.20 are rather archaic.

- The existence of a High Priest<sup>14</sup>;
- Athaliah's supposed attempt to murder the source of her own rule's legitimacy, the crown prince<sup>15</sup>;
- The need of fees and a "national" fund raising effort to support what has been a royal sanctuary, and the king's obligation to take care of.

2 Kings 12 addresses problems of the Second Temple, not of the royal sanctuary of the pre-exilic period. If Jehoash ever repaired the temple, and referred to his work in an inscription, the entry would probably have read

ואחזק את בֵּית יְהוָה

or simply

ואבן את בֵּית יְהוָה כִּי עִים הָאֵל

Additional notes (July 22, 2003): Since the above was submitted, the "Joash Tablet" has been declared a fake by the Israel Antiquities Authority, and its owner is under interrogation by the police. Cf. further E. A. Knauf, Die "Joasch"-Inchrift – ein Nachruf: WUB 28 (2003) 62-63; F. M. Cross, Notes on the Forged Plaque Recording Repairs to the Temple: IEJ 53 (2003) 119-122; I. Eph'al, The 'Jehoash Inscription': A Forgery: IEJ 53 (2003) 124-128.

(July 23, 2003): "Antiquities dealer Oded Golan has been arrested on suspicion of forging artifacts linked to Jesus and the Jerusalem Temple. He is being investigated for fraud, forgery, using forged documents, and perverting the course of justice. Golan was arrested Monday at his Tel Aviv home during a probe into his dealing in fake antiquities. These included the Joash inscription, ... and an ossuary ... bearing the inscription "James, brother of Jesus." ... During the searches, Golan led investigators to a room he had built on the roof of his Tel Aviv home where they found equipment and materials Golan is believed to have used to "forge" antiquities. A number of other "antiques" in various stages of production were uncovered. During yesterday's court hearing, detectives expressed their "surprise" that the James ossuary, briefly insured for more than \$1 million, was being stored on Golan's roof without any security or protection from the elements. Police suspect Golan has sold millions of dollars worth of forged antiquities over the years to various museums and institutions abroad... Golan denies all allegations...": Jonathan Lis & Nadav Shragai, Haaretz English Edition, Wednesday, July 23, 2003, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> יהוידע הכהן 11.9 (who might have been one of the conspirators against Athaliah) becomes "the priest" among the other priests (thus, the High Priest, 12.11) in 12.8.

<sup>15</sup> Ch Levin, Der Sturz der Königin Atalja : ein Kapitel zur Geschichte Judas im 9. Jahrhundert v. Chr (SBS 105; 1982) 85-87. If there was an epigraphic source for that event, it might have read: "Athaliah bat Omri established herself at Jerusalem and oppressed Judah for seven years. In the seventh year, Yhwh's anger subsided, and he returned his favor to his people. Yhwh (and not Jehojada!) made me king, but as for Athaliah, my servants cut her down in the palace."

