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A RE-EXAMINATION OF THE READING BT DWD ("HOUSE OF DAVID") ON THE MESHA STELE

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One and a half centuries after its discovery, the Mesha stele continues to fascinate scholars. It still contains some enigmas, notably at the end of line 31, where André Lemaire proposed reading BT DWD, that is, "house of David" (Lemaire 1994a; 1994b). The purpose of this article is to examine the evidence based on my own examination of the stone and of the squeeze that belongs to the Louvre Museum, as well as the available images of them and of other squeezes that belong to Charles Clermont-Ganneau's archives and are kept at the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in Paris. After the stone was destroyed by Bedouins, Clermont-Ganneau was able to reconstruct the stone with the remaining fragments and based on various squeezes. While the most important squeeze (now belonging to the Louvre) was made prior to the destruction of the stone, others were made after and are limited to fragments.

From a historical point of view, it is important to remember that the syntagm "house of David" occurs on the Tel Dan stela, which means that no competent historian today denies that King David is attested, as early as the second half of the 9th century BCE, as the initiator of a dynasty reigning over Judah. But what is at stake here is the possibility of a second occurrence of the same expression on a contemporary royal inscription, as well as the possibility of an attestation of the role played by the kingdom of Judah in the Israelite-Moabite conflict, as is related in 2 Kings 3.

In what follows, I will first briefly summarize previous research and then present my own view on the debated letters.¹ It is an honor to offer this modest essay in memory to Ada Yardeni, who contributed so much to the field of West-Semitic epigraphy.

1. Ancient and recent research

Many proposals have been made in previous studies; the table at the end of this article only contains a sample of these hypotheses. It aims to be representative rather than exhaustive, and to illustrate the earliest and the most recent publications on the subject, corresponding to the most significant efforts made to decipher this part of the inscription.

Most scholars agree that a B and a W can be read with certainty, but they disagree with regard to the space in between them and the letter following the W. In recent years, however, there seems to be a relative consensus about the latter, which is to be read D. By contrast, the space between B and W is still a matter of debate.

Interestingly, Clermont-Ganneau hesitated a lot about this area, and he mentioned the possibility of a word divider here—not a sentence divider, however. On the Mesha stele, sentence dividers are marked by vertical strokes, whereas word dividers are marked by dots. In the first publication in 1870, there is nothing

between B and W on the drawing but there is a word divider right after B in the transliteration (Clermont-Ganneau 1870: 5), and the tentative translation presupposed that B is a preposition: “he dwelt with...” (“*il y résida avec...*”; Clermont-Ganneau 1870: 8, 41). In 1875, he noted the presence of a word divider preceding W but added that it was “very doubtful” (“*très-douteux*”; Clermont-Ganneau 1875: 173). In his last publication on the subject, he made the same remark (Clermont-Ganneau 1887: 38). Moreover, on the draft of a drawing that is kept in his archives at the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, he drew a Š between B and W, which is all the more surprising because this draft bears the same legend (“8th reproduction of the original”) as the drawing of the 1870 publication. He hesitated a lot, and we can understand why.

A few new proposals were made in the hundred years following Clermont-Ganneau’s publications, but certainly it is Lemaire who defended the most exciting hypothesis when he suggested reading BT[D]WD, that is, “house of David” (Lemaire 1994a: 18; 1994b). In other words, like Mark Lidzbarski (1902: 9) and René Dussaud (1912: 5) before him, he was able to see some remains of a T, but he proposed for the first time that the next, missing, letter should be reconstructed as a D. Lemaire then integrated this new information into his outstanding reconstruction of the 9th century BCE in the Southern Levant (e.g. Lemaire 2007). His reading has been accepted by many scholars and is reflected in numerous textbooks, including the excellent ones written by Shmuel Ahituv (2008: 369–418, esp. 417) and Ada Yardeni (2019: 84–90).

That said, Heather D.D. Parker observed in her doctoral dissertation that it was not possible to read anything between B and W. At least, in the 2018 edited version, she wrote that in spite of examining the stone, the different squeezes and RTI images, she found no evidence for reading anything there (Parker 2013: 171, fn. 792). In the meantime, and more precisely in 2015, a team of scholars of the West Semitic Research Project, together with Parker, Michael Langlois and

Lemaire, took RTI images that are now available on Inscriptifact.

In 2018, Thomas Römer organized an exhibition on the Mesha stele in Paris, together with a number of scholars of his research team, including myself, and with the collaboration of the Louvre Museum. At that time, the Louvre Museum decided to take new photographs of the squeeze, notably backlit images. A few months later, Israel Finkelstein, Nadav Na’aman and Thomas Römer (2019) published an article where they ruled out the “house of David” reading. In their view, it is possible to see a sentence divider right before W, both on the stone and on the new images taken by the Louvre. Accordingly, what precedes is a three-letter word that begins with a B and is the subject of the previous verb YŠB, “to dwell,” in the sentence: “As for Horonaim, [B??] dwelt in it.” They considered a number of options (Bedad, Bedan, Becher, Bela’, Ba’al, Barak) but they settled on “Balak,” a king of Moab mentioned in the Books of Numbers. This is an educated guess based on biblical criticism, because Römer and Finkelstein believe that the earliest Balaam narrative was written down in the 8th century and contains some early memories. They suggest Balak was “the king of the region south of the Arnon River until Mesha conquered his kingdom” (Finkelstein, Na’aman and Römer 2019: 8), and they note that Horonaim was located in this region.

Lately, Langlois published an article in *Semitica* where he puts forward a sophisticated defense of the “house of David” reading based on RTI images of the stone and of several squeezes (Langlois 2019). In his view, it is possible to see an overlooked word divider following WD, as well as traces of the T and D that Lemaire reconstructed between B and W.

Finally, Na’aman argued that according to an analysis of West Semitic royal inscriptions, “a collective name of a kingdom as an operative agent that is the subject of an active verbal form is extremely rare” (2019: 196). He therefore rejected the BT DWD reading again, and he reaffirmed his preference for the “Balak” reading.

2. Re-examination

First of all, what about the dividing stroke pointed out by Finkelstein, Na'aman and Römer right before W? As noted by Langlois (2019: 39), the stroke is not present on the stone itself, it is part of a reconstruction made of plaster. It is crucial to note that in the contested zone, only a small triangle is made of stone (see Fig. 1); the rest, immediately around this triangle, is plaster. The stroke in question appears right below the triangle; its top runs along a side of the triangle and is not part of it (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Detail of the Mesha stele; photograph of the stone taken at the Louvre Museum by M. Richelle.

As Langlois notes, there is no trace of a dividing stroke on the different squeezes either. There are some traces that look like a miniature B, not like a stroke, on the Louvre squeeze (Fig. 2). But the position of this miniature B makes it doubtful that these traces belong to a letter (Langlois 2019: 41). In fact, there are others, similar dark traces in the vicinity that cannot correspond to letters either (Fig. 2).

Moreover, almost at the same place, there appears a hollow crooked line on the Louvre squeeze where the letters are embossed, which

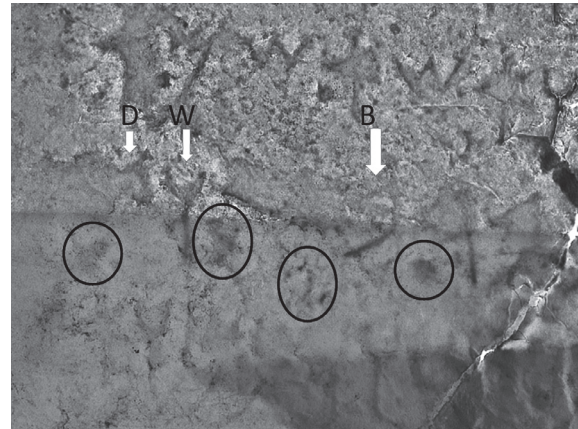


Fig. 2: Detail of the Louvre squeeze; the full backlit image was provided by the Louvre Museum.

confirms that this must be due to some accident or deterioration of the stone or the squeeze (Fig. 3).

Now is there a word divider after WD? It is true that there is a rounded depression, not only in the RTI images as correctly noted by Langlois, but also on the stone. In my view, there are several difficulties, however. First, according to both RTI images and my direct examination of the object, this possible divider has not left what I would regard as convincing traces on the only squeeze that preserves this area, that is, the Louvre squeeze (Fig. 2).

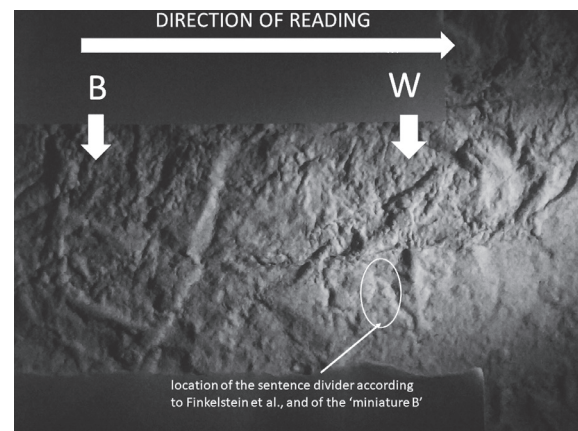


Fig. 3: Detail of the Louvre squeeze; photograph taken in the Louvre basement by M. Richelle.

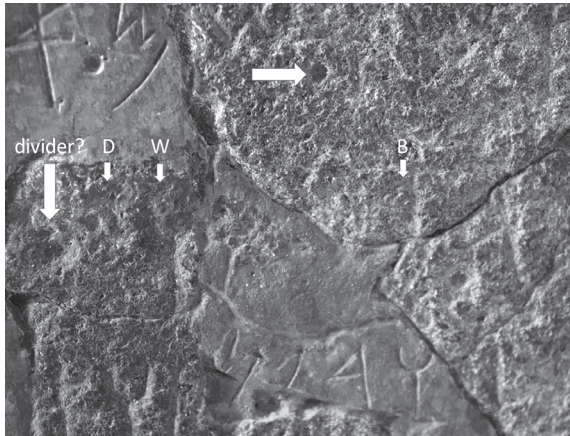


Fig. 4

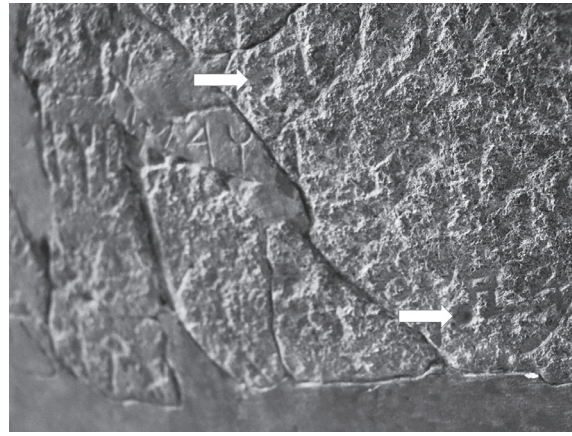


Fig. 5

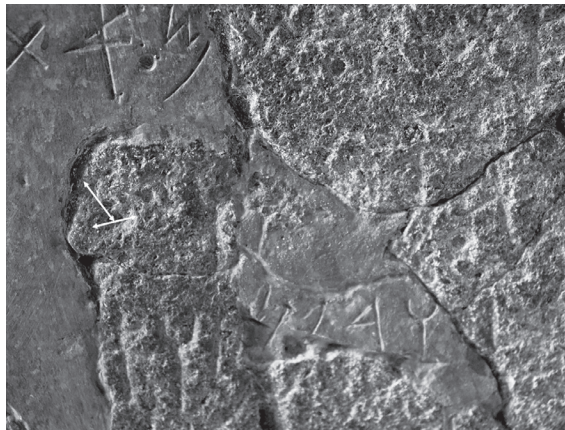


Fig. 6

Figs. 4–6: Detail of the Mesha stele; photographs of the stone taken at the Louvre Museum by A. Burlingame.

Second, there is a difference between this circular depression and the best-preserved word dividers on the stone. Many of the latter consist in a smaller, deeper hole, and exhibit a neat circular shape (see line 30, top of Fig. 4).

Some exhibit a wider circular depression in addition to the deep inner hole (Fig. 5).

The rounded depression following D does not exactly correspond to either form. Its diameter makes it of approximately the same dimension of the larger depression we see in the second type of word divider, but it does not seem to contain an inner, deeper hole. Or we must assume that the stone was damaged precisely in this area in a way that erased the difference between the larger depression and the inner hole; the depression now looks like some sort of crater with shallow

inner slopes. However, a close examination of the stone shows that the rounded depression is not isolated but that it is connected to some larger depression to its left both upwards and downwards (Fig. 6).

While it is not impossible that this depression once *contained* a word divider, it cannot be regarded as proven. This depression could also be the result of some accident, some bump, that happened to the stone, possibly after the Louvre squeeze was made since it does not appear on it.

Let us now consider the space between B and W. On RTI images of the stone, with specular enhancement, there seem to be two recesses that cross each other and, according to Langlois (2019: 42–3), correspond to the upper half of a T (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7: Detail of the Mesha stele; photograph of the stone taken at the Louvre Museum by M. Richelle.



Fig. 8: Detail of the Mesha stele; photograph of the stone taken at the Louvre Museum by M. Richelle.

However, I see two difficulties. First, assuming that these recesses are strokes engraved on the stone, their width is strikingly larger than expected, as a comparison with other letters, especially the well-attested T, shows; this is readily apparent on the figure published by Langlois (2019: 44, fig. 14). It is as if the engraver used a chisel with a flat nose for these strokes, contrary to what he did in the rest of the inscription.

Second, a close examination of the stone shows that the shape of the recesses is not really rectangular, as it seems in some images, because the depression in the stone continues in several directions (see the arrows on Fig. 8). To put it another way, if these recesses are strokes made by the engraver, then other different places should be regarded as his work, whereas they are certainly not parts of letters.

Here again, I am not denying that reading a T is possible; what is certain is that there is

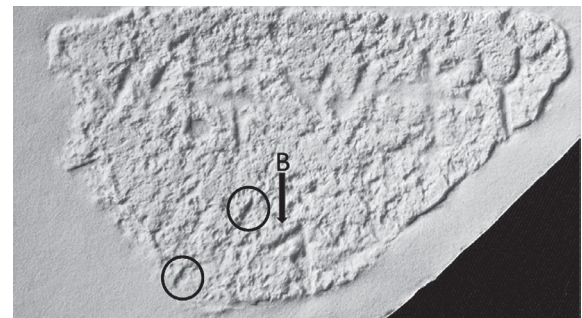


Fig. 9: RTI image of a squeeze of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres (Inscriptifact).

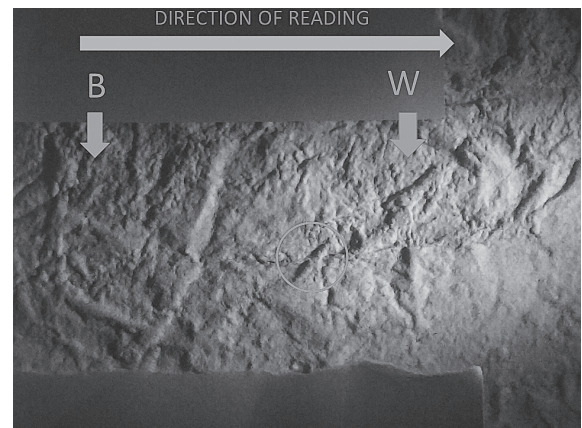


Fig. 10: Detail of the Louvre squeeze; photograph taken in the Louvre basement by M. Richelle. ▷

room for two strokes in the depressions of the stone, but since these depressions are larger and more “diffuse,” the reading T cannot be proved. Regarding the squeeze of the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres where Lemaire and Langlois also see a trace of one or two strokes (Langlois 2019: 43, fig. 13), the only possible trace of a stroke that I can see after using the RTI images is located too high, compared to the preceding B, to be part of a letter (Fig. 9).

Finally, are there traces of D before W? The backlit image of the Louvre squeeze may give the impression that the left angle of a triangle is present (Fig. 2). However, the lower side of this possible triangle extends to the right, which makes it likely that it is not part of a letter. Once it is removed from consideration, what remains of the possible left side of the triangle is too small and too faint to prove that there was a stroke there. My direct examination of the squeeze with raking light confirms that there is no assured trace of a letter here.

However, the same examination, as well as RTI images, shows the presence of a segment that has the same appearance as strokes in letters (Fig. 10). It is too low to be part of a D, and as far as I can see, the only letter to which it could belong would be a Š—perhaps this could explain why this reading has been considered by Clermont-Ganneau. Nothing guarantees that this is a remnant of a letter, however; it could also be accidental.

Moreover, on RTI images of a squeeze kept at the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, there appears another segment at the place where some colleagues read a D (it is aligned with a Š on line 30) (see Fig. 9 to the left). But this segment is now too high to be part of a D or of a Š. Here again, I am not sure that it is part of a letter. We probably have to accept the fact that various factors impacted the state of the stone and of the squeezes, so that “artificial” strokes were created by accident.

Scholar	Reading
Clermont-Ganneau (1870: 5, 41)	B[??]W (drawing) B[??]W ³ (commentary)
Clermont-Ganneau (1875: 173)	B[?]. ³ WD/T (commentary)
Smend and Socin (1886: 12, 29)	BN.DDN.WDDN. ³ MR
Clermont-Ganneau (1887: 38)	B[?]. ³ WD? (commentary)
Lidzbarski (1898: 416)	BN--WD-- ³ MR
Lidzbarski (1902: 9)	BT--WQ- ³ Š
Dussaud (1912: 5)	BT.WD- ³ Š
Lemaire (1994a: 18; 1994b)	BT[D]WD
Na'aman (1994: 27)	BT[D]WD[H W] ³ Š[³]
Ahituv (2008: 417)	BT[D]WD
Parker (2018 [2013]: 171)	?[]WD (reading) B/R[]WD (footnote)
Römer, Na'aman and Finkelstein (2019: 6-9)	B[LQ].WD
Langlois (2019: 45)	BTDWD.

Conclusion

What seems to be sure, in the end, is that it is very difficult to read anything in this part of the inscription. So for the time being, I would side with Parker (2018) and abstain from proposing a reading between B and W. The reading BT DWD is possible, but not required by the evidence; there exist many other possibilities. Since, in my view, no convincing trace of a divider can be seen before or after the second D, there are many possible reconstructions of this part of the text, depending on how one would fill the lacunae and divide the words. From an epigraphical point of view, only more advanced technology will, perhaps, help us improve our understanding of this part of the Mesha stele in the future.

Finally, regarding Na'aman's argument that the phraseology of West Semitic royal inscriptions renders unlikely the possibility that "house of David" could be the subject of the verb "to dwell" in line 31, it does not seem very strong *per se*. In his article, Na'aman (2019) searches for instances where the *name of a kingdom* could be the agent of an operation, but "house of David" could also refer to *people*, either the dynasty, or, by synecdoche, some members of the royal family that dwelt in Horonaim. I am not sure that the last possibility sounds very probable from a historical point of view, but this is a different judgment than an argument based on phraseology.

Notes

- 1 This article is based on a paper presented at the ASOR Annual Meeting in San Diego, November 2019. I have had the privilege of examining the main squeeze three times at the Louvre Museum. I would like to thank Marielle Pic, then head of the Department of Oriental Antiquities, as well as Isabel Bonora, researcher at the museum, for their help, and Ariane Thomas, now head of the Department of Oriental Antiquities, for

giving me the permission to publish the images in this article that were taken at the Louvre. This essay owes much to Andrew Burlingame, who accompanied me to the Louvre in October 2019, examined the squeeze and the stone, took photographs and discussed the readings with me. Many thanks to B. Zuckerman and M. Lundberg for allowing me to publish a photograph of the West Semitic Project (Inscriptifact).

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