

**The Lachish Letters:
A Reappraisal of the Ostraca
Discovered in 1935 and 1938 at Tell ed-Duweir**

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Volume I

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in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
at the University of Oxford

St Antony's College

2016

Dedicated to the memory of
James Leslie Starkey (1895–1938),
Olga Tufnell (1905–1985),
Gerald Lankester Harding (1901–1979),
and Harry Torczyner (Naftali Herz Tur-Sinai) (1886–1973).

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DPhil in Oriental Studies, Michaelmas 2016

ABSTRACT

The 21 inscribed ceramic sherds (or ostraca) known as the “Lachish Letters”, which were discovered during the British Mandate Period excavations of Tell ed-Duweir (Lachish), underwent eighty years of scholarship that improved our understanding of at least some of these inscriptions. The archive is terse and fragmentary, and the least well-preserved and faded ostraca from this collection have been seriously overlooked, ironically when the “Lachish Letters” have more or less been regarded as a homogenous group of documents written during the final decades of the Judahite kingdom. Some of the ostraca were discovered in different stratigraphic contexts and pertaining to different settings, if not timeframes.

The principal aim of this study is to produce an updated edition of these ostraca by objectively and systematically reassessing and understanding these artefacts, the inscriptions they bear, and their respective stratigraphic layers and archaeological contexts. This is carried out by integrating past studies and modern-day developments on the ostraca (and the site itself) from different perspectives: archaeology, palaeography, philology, the Hebrew Bible, and Classical Hebrew studies. This interdisciplinary approach enables a revision of outstanding controversial issues and a dismissal of outdated proposals on the readings, interpretation, and import of these ostraca in their contemporary world. Despite the illegibility of some inscriptions, this study pays attention to all 21 ostraca via physical examination under the lens, to confirm or deny any dubious readings as far as the naked eye can tell us. A crucial criterion is the integration of photographic data and written documentation gathered from unpublished and archived material of the Mandate Period that were accessible to the author at the time of writing.

The study concludes that this surviving group of ostraca is far from homogeneous, and there still exist lacunae in their historico-archaeological contexts and interpretations. Our understanding of the source and function of the ostraca (especially the few legible messages and lists of names) remains riddled with controversies, which derive from the fragmentary nature of the corpus and the limitations in the documentation and preservation of these artefacts.

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This research is dedicated to the memory of four key figures in relation to the discovery and initial study of the "Lachish Letters" – James Leslie Starkey, Olga Tufnell, Gerald Lankester Harding, and Harry Torczyner (later Naftali Herz Tur-Sinai) – who have left this legacy for us to build upon.

DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY

I, the undersigned, declare that I am the legitimate author of this dissertation and that it is my original work, gathered and utilized especially to fulfill the purposes and objectives of this study. No portion of this work has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or institution of higher education. I also declare that the publications cited in this work have been personally consulted.

Abigail Zammit

22 November 2016

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>ABC</i>	A. K. Grayson, <i>Assyrian and Babylonian Chronicles</i> , Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns (2000).
<i>ABD</i>	D. N. Freedman (ed.), <i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> , 6 vols., New York: Doubleday (1992).
<i>AHI</i>	G. I. Davies, M. N. A. Bockmuehl, D. R. de Lacey, and A. J. Poulter, <i>Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions: Corpus and Concordance</i> , Vol. 1, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1991).
<i>AJA</i>	<i>American Journal of Archaeology</i>
<i>AfO</i>	<i>Archiv für Orientforschung</i>
<i>Antiquities</i>	Flavius Josephus, <i>Antiquities of the Jews</i> .
<i>Arb.</i>	Arabic
<i>ARM I</i>	G. Dossin, <i>Archives royales de Mari</i> , Vol. 1 (TCL 22, 1946, republished 1967), <i>Correspondance de Šamši-Addu et de ses fils</i> (ARMT I, Imprimerie nationale, 1950).
<i>BA</i>	<i>The Biblical Archaeologist</i>
<i>BAR</i>	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
<i>BASOR</i>	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
<i>BDB</i>	F. Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs (eds.), <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> , Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company (1906).
<i>BH</i>	Biblical Hebrew
<i>BM</i>	British Museum (Catalogue Designation)
<i>BM Quarterly</i>	<i>The British Museum Quarterly</i>
<i>BSOAS</i>	<i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>
<i>DJD</i>	<i>Discoveries in the Judaean Desert</i>
<i>EI</i>	<i>Eretz-Israel</i>
<i>EHL</i>	G. Kahn, ed., <i>Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics</i> , 3 vols., Leiden: Brill (2012).
<i>ESV</i>	English Standard Version
<i>ETL</i>	<i>Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses</i>
<i>ExpT</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
<i>EVO</i>	<i>Egitto e Vicino Oriente</i>
<i>HAE</i>	J. Renz, and W. Röllig, <i>Handbuch der Althebräischen Epigraphik</i> , 3 vols., Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft (1995).
<i>HB</i>	Hebrew Bible
<i>Heb.</i>	Hebrew
<i>Henoch</i>	<i>Henoch: Studies in Judaism and Christianity from Second Temple to Late Antiquity</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>The Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>IEJ</i>	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
<i>IAA</i>	Israel Antiquities Authority
<i>ILN</i>	<i>The Illustrated London News</i>
<i>inf. cons.</i>	infinitive construct
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>JAS</i>	<i>Journal of Archaeological Science</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JHS</i>	<i>Journal of Hebrew Scriptures</i>
<i>J.L. & Relig.</i>	<i>Journal of Law and Religion</i>

<i>JQR</i>	<i>The Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
<i>JRS</i>	<i>Journal of Religious Studies</i>
<i>JS</i>	<i>Journal des Savants</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal of the Study of the Old Testament</i>
<i>JSS</i>	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>The Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>KAI</i>	H. Donner and W. Röllig, <i>Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften</i> , Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz (1962).
<i>KJV</i>	King James Version Bible
<i>KUSATU</i>	<i>Kleine Untersuchungen zur Sprache des Alten Testaments und seiner Umwelt</i>
<i>Lachish I</i>	H. Torczyner, with contributions by L. Harding, A. Lewis, and J. L. Starkey, <i>Lachish I: The Lachish Letters</i> , London: Oxford University Press (1938).
<i>Lachish II</i>	O. Tufnell, with contributions by C. H. Inge, and L. Harding, <i>Lachish II: The Fosse Temple</i> , London: Oxford University Press (1940).
<i>Lachish III</i>	O. Tufnell, with contributions by M. A. Murray, and D. Diringer, <i>Lachish III: The Iron Age</i> , London: Oxford University Press (1953).
<i>Lachish IV</i>	O. Tufnell, with contributions by D. F. Baden-Powell, D. Diringer, B. S. J. Isserlin, E. Parada, D. M. A. Bate, M. Giles, O. Murray, F. C. Thompson, E. Todd, J. Černý, H. Helbaek, B. Parker Mallowan, and J. Waechter, <i>Lachish IV: The Bronze Age</i> , London: Oxford University Press (1958).
<i>Lachish V</i>	Y. Aharoni (ed.), <i>Investigations at Lachish: The Sanctuary and the Residency (Lachish V)</i> , Tel Aviv: Gateway Publishers Inc. (1975).
<i>Lak(6)</i>	Lachish ostraca designation in J. Renz, and W. Röllig, <i>Handbuch der Althebräischen Epigraphik</i> , 3 vols., Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft (1995).
<i>Levant</i>	<i>Levant: The Journal of the Council for British Research in the Levant</i>
<i>Libr Cult</i>	<i>Libraries & Culture</i>
<i>m.l.</i>	<i>mater lectionis</i> (singular)/ <i>matres lectionis</i> (plural)
<i>MT</i>	Masoretic Text
<i>NASB</i>	New American Standard Bible
<i>NEA</i>	<i>Near Eastern Archaeology</i>
<i>NIV</i>	New International Version
<i>obv.</i>	obverse
<i>OLP</i>	<i>Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica</i>
<i>Onomasticon</i>	Eusebius of Caesarea, <i>Onomasticon [On the Place-Names in the Holy Scripture]</i> .
<i>OT</i>	Old Testament
<i>Palestine Post</i>	<i>The Palestine Post</i>
<i>PEF</i>	Palestine Exploration Fund
<i>PEQ</i>	<i>Palestine Exploration Quarterly</i>
<i>PEFQSt</i>	<i>Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Supplement</i>
<i>PN/N</i>	personal name/s
<i>PNAS</i>	<i>Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America</i>
<i>ptc.</i>	participle

<i>PTU</i>	F. Gröndahl, <i>Die Personennamen der Texte aus Ugarit</i> , Rome: Pontificio Istituto Biblico (1967).
<i>RB</i>	<i>Revue Biblique</i>
<i>Renewed Excavations</i>	D. Ussishkin, ed., <i>The Renewed Excavations at Lachish (1973–1994)</i> (Monograph Series of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University 22), 5 vols., Tel Aviv University (2004).
<i>RES</i>	<i>Revue des études sémitiques</i>
<i>RESB</i>	<i>Revue des études sémitiques et babyloniaca</i>
rev.	reverse
<i>RMI</i>	<i>La Rassegna Mensile di Israel</i>
<i>RSO</i>	<i>Rivista degli Studi Orientali</i>
<i>RSV</i>	Revised Standard Version
<i>Signs</i>	<i>Signs of the Times</i>
<i>Syria</i>	<i>Syria: Archéologie, Art et Histoire</i>
<i>TB</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>Tel Aviv</i>	<i>Tel Aviv: Journal of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University</i>
<i>Times</i>	<i>The Times</i> (London, England)
<i>UF</i>	<i>Ugarit-Forschungen</i>
Typed Reports	Unpublished Fortnightly Reports of Lachish (1932–1938)
<i>VT</i>	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
<i>ZA</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Althebraistik</i>
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZDMG</i>	<i>Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft</i>
<i>ZDPV</i>	<i>Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins</i>

Books of the Hebrew Bible

Gen.	Genesis	Joel	Joel	Ps.	Psalms
Ex.	Exodus	Hos.	Hosea	Prov.	Proverbs
Lev.	Leviticus	Ezek.	Ezekiel	Job	Job
Num.	Numbers	Am.	Amos	Cant.	Canticles
Deut.	Deuteronomy	Obad.	Obadiah	Ruth	Ruth
Josh	Joshua	Jonah	Jonah	Lam.	Lamentations
Judg.	Judges	Mic.	Micah	Eccl.	Ecclesiastes
1 Sam.	1 Samuel	Nah.	Nahum	Esth.	Esther
2 Sam.	2 Samuel	Hab.	Habakkuk	Dan.	Daniel
1 Kgs	1 Kings	Zeph.	Zephaniah	Ezra	Ezra
2 Kgs	2 Kings	Hag.	Haggai	Neh.	Nehemiah
Isa.	Isaiah	Zech.	Zechariah	1 Chr.	1 Chronicles
Jer.	Jeremiah	Mal.	Malach	2 Chr.	2 Chronicles

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14. (a) James Leslie Starkey in the “guardroom” pointing at the findspot of the “Lachish Letters”, photograph taken by Rev. Charles Bernard Mortlock in 1935 (PEF-Portrait-Starkey) (Copyright: Palestine Exploration Fund).

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Introduction

The reading of the Lachish ostraca has been a very fascinating, but also a very difficult, task. During my studies the new facts arising have more than once changed my views on even main questions connected with the interpretation of our letters, and new facts may necessitate still further alterations. All these changes have only added to my belief in the great importance of these invaluable documents.

H. Torczyner (N. H. Tur-Sinai)¹

Inscriptions constitute material remains and above all written evidence, and serve as primary archaeological tools for the study of scripts, languages, and literate societies. The present research re-examines 21 ostraca (inscribed pottery sherds) that were discovered in the British Mandate Period excavations of the mound of Tell ed-Duweir (ancient Lachish) in Israel, under the direction of J. L. Starkey. These ostraca are collectively known as the “Lachish Letters”, most of which bear traces of the Palaeo-Hebrew script dating to the late 7th–early 6th century B.C.E. H. Torczyner (later N. H. Tur-Sinai), Bialik Professor of Hebrew in the University of Jerusalem, was entrusted with the Letters’ transcriptions and translations, and interpreted them as a court dossier from the time of Jehoiakim’s reign, revolving around the fate of the prophet Uriah. He initially published a selection of the ostraca in a few articles, and later presented his *editio princeps* (with later expanded editions).² As a reaction to Torczyner’s interpretation of the ostraca, scholars raised several counterarguments, textual corrections, revised philological notes, and new interpretations, as they dated the ostraca rather to Zedekiah’s reign and Jeremiah’s activities. Much ink has thus been spilt over the interpretation of the ostraca and their significance to Classical Hebrew, biblical studies, and the history of the final decades of the Judahite kingdom.

¹ *Lachish I*, 1938: Foreword.

² The first 18 ostraca appeared in an English edition (*Lachish I*, 1938), and the full corpus of 21 ostraca appeared in a revised Hebrew edition (Tur-Sinai 1940) (republished in an expanded edition under the care of S. Aḥituv in 1987).

Apart from miscellaneous lapidary inscriptions, seals, and seal impressions, the Lachish corpus later amounted to 35 ostraca in total, following discoveries made during Y. Aharoni's and D. Ussishkin's respective excavation campaigns at the site of Lachish/Tell ed-Duweir. My discussion will revolve around the 21 "Lachish Letters" only, without disregarding the other ostraca for any comparative analyses. The archive has been thoroughly studied by scholars over the past eight decades. Notable transcriptions, translations, commentaries, and concordances of either the full Lachish corpus or selections from the "Lachish Letters" themselves have significantly improved our understanding of the ostraca. Among them are publications by D. Diringer, H. Donner and W. Röllig, A. Lemaire, and D. Pardee and colleagues.³ A number of comprehensive editions and handbooks of all pre-exilic Hebrew inscriptions have been published in the last 20 years, which include the archive of Lachish or selected ostraca thereof, among which are the works of G. I. Davies (*AHI*), J. Renz and W. Röllig (*HAE*), F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp and colleagues, and S. Aḥituv.⁴

A particular shortcoming of the above works is that the least well-preserved and faded ostraca from the 21 under study have been seriously overlooked, especially when the "Lachish Letters" have more or less been regarded as a homogenous group. This study will give due attention to all 21 ostraca, despite the illegibility of some of the sherds. Published and public images of the ostraca have only permitted a limited reading and decipherment of the respective inscriptions. The study necessitated that I examine the ostraca under the lens to confirm or deny any dubious

³ Diringer 1953, *Lachish III*: 331–359; Donner and Röllig 1962 (*KAI*): 189–199, Nos. 192–199; Lemaire 1977: 155–184; 2004 (*Renewed Excavations*, IV): 2099–2132; Pardee *et al.* 1982: 67–114.

⁴ *AHI*: 1–11; *HAE*, II: tables XLIX–LVI; III: 405–440; Dobbs-Allsopp *et al.* 2005: 8–41; Aḥituv 2005: 82–111; 2008: 56–91.

readings of my own or those which have been proposed by other scholars, and to contribute further to the line drawings that I reproduced following my observations of available high quality photographs. I carried out first-hand examinations of all “Lachish Letters” with kind permission of the Trustees of the British Museum, the Israel Antiquities Authority, and the respective curators of the Rockefeller Museum, the Israel Museum, and the Bible Lands Museum, in Jerusalem.

In addition, this study incorporates data from unpublished material, including typed reports of the British Mandate Period excavations (a copy of which is held in the Department of the Middle East at the British Museum), the online archives of the Israel Antiquities Authority,⁵ several letters, articles, news, and notes that appeared in the press following the discoveries, and personal letters of a member of the British excavation team, the late O. Tufnell (the Olga Tufnell Archive, Palestine Exploration Fund, London), that were accessible to me at the time of writing.⁶

The principal aim of my research is, therefore, to provide a holistic approach towards an objective and systematic understanding of the “Lachish Letters” (and of the site of Lachish itself) by integrating past and present studies on the ostraca from different points of view: archaeology, palaeography, philology, the Hebrew Bible, and Classical Hebrew studies. In light of modern-day advances in the above-mentioned fields, especially with regards to Lachish (and pre-exilic Judah in general), this multi-disciplinary approach enables a revision of outstanding controversial

⁵ <<http://www.iaa-archives.org.il>>

⁶ In addition, the University College London (UCL) holds the Gerald Lankester Harding Archive, with material ranging from personal diaries, photographs, and 9mm films of excavations, mostly from the time Harding and Starkey were students of Sir Flinders Petrie during his excavations in Egypt. At the time of writing, the Archive was not yet catalogued, yet I was told that virtually no written or photographic data on Lachish or the “Lachish Letters” were present in the Archive (Rachael Sparks, email to A. Zammit, dated 27 October 2015).

issues and a firm dismissal of old-fashioned proposals. Furthermore, this method makes room for impartial reconsiderations, especially when it comes to the archaeological context/s and the historical value of the ostraca. As remarked above, this research gives due attention to the often ignored fragmentary or illegible ostraca of this corpus, since past studies focused their scrutiny, analysis, and overall interpretation essentially on the legible ostraca that allude to events similar to those described in the Book of Jeremiah. Thus, this research presents a revised, complete edition of the 21 “Lachish Letters”, and systematically places the ostraca in their wider socio-political and historical context.

Structure

This research is presented in two volumes. Volume I is divided into three parts:

1. THE SITE: Chapter 1 comprises a discussion of the site of Tell ed-Duweir and of the archaeological expeditions held there, and provides an archaeological synopsis of the controversial late Iron Age levels (Iron IIC) at Tell ed-Duweir, and of the respective discoveries of all 21 ostraca.
2. THE OSTRACA: Chapter 2 provides an overview of the initial studies on the “Lachish Letters”, a palaeographic survey of the ostraca, and a summary of grammatical features observed in the Lachish ostraca. Chapter 3 produces an up-to-date edition of the “Lachish Letters”, with a comprehensive line-by-line philological discussion of each inscription. Chapter 4 discusses the question of literacy among the social classes and military personnel of pre-exilic Judah, and examines the nuanced differences between the forms of handwriting observed in the “Lachish Letters”, and the use of pottery sherds as writing surfaces. The

discussion also analyses the use of formal language in the ostraca, and discusses and lists all featured personal names (hereafter PNN).

3. REAPPRAISALS: Chapter 5 closely examines problems that arise from loop-holes in the excavation method, documentation, and publications of the British expedition. Attention is devoted to any underlying archaeological lacunae surrounding the “Lachish Letters”, in relation to our understanding of the source and function of the ostraca. The chapter proceeds with discussions of Torczyner’s *editio princeps* and the resultant scholarly reviews. Discussions proceed on the geographical implications of the ostraca and the identities of the authors and recipients of the ostraca. Chapter 6 places the “Lachish Letters” in their contemporary world, and takes an historical approach to available biblical and other texts that throw light on the final decades of the Judahite kingdom. Included is a brief description of survey results and archaeological findings in Jerusalem, the Shephelah, and the Negev that bear witness to the outcomes of contemporary politico-military skirmishes. A final section devoted to the “Lachish Letters” aims at a contextualisation and an understanding of these ostraca and their import to our knowledge of the period.

The Conclusion to this reappraisal of the “Lachish Letters” sums up the resulting situation concerning these inscriptions in light of archaeological, epigraphic, and textual analyses brought forth throughout my discussion, and closes with a reflection on the way forward for such multi-disciplinary approaches to similar ostraca corpora.

Volume II comprises two Catalogues of edited texts and all Figures accompanying the main text, including my photographs of all 21 ostraca, and line drawings I produced for each inscription. My transliterations and English translations of the 21 inscriptions are reproduced in Catalogue A

for easy reference. Catalogue B reproduces other scholars' readings and translations of the rest of the Lachish ostraca (22–35), for comparative analysis and reference.

Notes on use

1. *General label.* Throughout my discussion I will be using the term “Lachish Letters” (in inverted commas), since the corpus is not entirely constituted of correspondence, and since this was a label originally adopted by the British team.
2. *Numerical convention.* The 21 “Lachish Letters” were labelled I–XXI in the conventional numbering.⁷ Throughout this research, I will be referring to the individual Lachish ostraca with the label “Lachish” tied to the number of the ostrakon that follows the British convention, although in Arabic numerals. This applies to other ostraca from other sites as well (e.g. Arad, Ḥorvat ‘Uza, and so on). Therefore, the 21 ostraca will be hereafter referred to as Lachish 1–21 (or ostraca 1–21).
3. *Lines of text.* At times I will be referring to the corresponding lines of texts in the form of decimal numbers, e.g. Lachish 1.2 (ostrakon 1, line 2), Lachish 3.19–21 (ostrakon 3, lines 19 to 21), and so on. The same applies to ostraca from other sites.
4. *Obverse and/or reverse.* The term “obverse” is used when an inscription is written on the outer surface of the original ceramic vessel, while the term “reverse” refers to text written on the inner surface. Most ostraca bear inscriptions on their outer surfaces only, while a few others (either whole or fragmentary) bear writing on both their outer and inner sides (with the inscriptions of the intact ostraca starting on the outer surfaces). Only two exceptions bear writing on their inner surfaces only. In my labelling convention I will not be making a

⁷ The first 21 Lachish ostraca are classified as 1.001–.021 by Davies 1991 (*AHI*), and Lak(6):1.1–21 by Renz and Röllig 1995 (*HAE*), III.

distinction between obverse lines and reverse lines, to avoid confusion. Instead, I will make use of the corresponding lines of texts in their numerical order, as identified on the respective ostraca and presented in Catalogue A. Therefore, e.g. for Lachish 3.21 refer to Catalogue A to see that line 21 is the fifth line of the reverse of Lachish ostrakon 3, and so on.

5. *Different sentences/clauses.* Whenever different sentences, clauses, or expressions within the same line of writing are discussed, small Roman letters (a/b) will distinguish such sentences, e.g. Lachish 4.4b–6a denotes the start of a new sentence/clause in (the “middle” of) line 4 and ends at (the “start” of) line 6 of ostrakon 4. This is of course subjective, but it serves the purpose to distinguish sentences.

For further detailed information on conventions used consult Catalogue A.

THE SITE

1. The Excavations at Tell ed-Duweir

1.1 The site's identification

Tell ed-Duweir (Arb. “the hill of the little monastery”) lies approximately 40km south-west of Jerusalem and almost half-way between Ashkelon and Hebron (Fig. 1). The tell (or tel) has been commonly identified by scholars with the ancient city of Lachish, although initially not by all, as explained below.

In 1878, Major C. R. Conder proposed to identify modern Tell el-Ḥesi, not far from Gaza, with Lachish on the ground of its position.¹ The site of Tell el-Ḥesi was first excavated in 1890 by Sir Flinders Petrie, and later in 1892 by Frederick Jones Bliss.² Both expeditions were sponsored by the Palestine Exploration Fund (hereafter PEF).³ Conder's identification remained unchallenged till 1929, when William F. Albright, then Director of the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem, reached the conclusion that Lachish could not have been at Tell el-Ḥesi, but was in all likelihood at Tell ed-Duweir, a few kilometres north-east in the Shephelah, the foothills between the plain and the Judaeian plateau.⁴ Albright based his identification on: (i) Eusebius, the Bishop of Caesarea in the 4th century C.E. (*Onomasticon*

¹ Bliss 1894: 2; Petrie 1989: 18–29.

² See Petrie 1989; Drower 1990: 87–95. Petrie thought the name Lachish had been preserved in the later ruins of Umm Lakis, ca. 5km north-west of Tell el-Ḥesi (Bliss 1894: 3).

³ See Kent 1892: 236–237; King 1990; see also Kenyon 1979: 330–331 and references there.

⁴ Albright 1929: 3.

120.20), who stated that Lakeis was the name of a village in the seventh Roman mile (ca. 10.5km) of the road leading south from Eleutheropolis (Beth-Govrin) to the Negev (Daroma); (ii) and on the size of the mound of Tell ed-Duweir, which is four times as large as Tell el-Ḥesi.⁵ This identification was proven correct by the British excavations at Tell ed-Duweir in the 1930s (see §1.2.1).⁶ Even so, Ahlström raised doubts about Tell ed-Duweir and instead followed Beyer's suggestion of Tell 'Eṭun (in the Beit 'Auwa region to the south-west of Tell ed-Duweir), while for Tell ed-Duweir itself, Ahlström suggested ancient Libnah.⁷ Davies capably countered Ahlström's suggestions on two occasions, but the arguments were brought to a halt by Ahlström's untimely death.⁸ It is now generally accepted that the imposing archaeological mound of Tell ed-Duweir is to be identified with ancient Lachish, and today the site also goes by the name of Tel Lachish (Fig. 3).

The origin of the name Lachish is a puzzling issue. The name first appears during the Late Bronze I, in an Egyptian papyrus of the late 18th Dynasty, dating to the time of Amenhotep II (pLen 1116A:2),⁹ and the toponym appears as ^{uru}*La-ki-ša* in two el-Amarna letters sent from Lachish (EA 328.5; 329.6) and on one of Assyrian King Sennacherib's relief panels showing the siege of Lachish (see §1.3), while ^{uru}*La-ki-ši* appears in another el-Amarna letter from one

⁵ Tufnell, Aharoni and Ussishkin 1977: 735; see *Renewed Excavations*, I: 50–51; Ussishkin 2014a: 25–27. Tufnell (*Lachish III*: 59–60) also wrote about a few hours of excavations that the British team made at two points on the far side of the valley, north of Tell ed-Duweir, on the seventh milestone mentioned by Eusebius, which (at least at the time of the *Lachish III* publication) was still marked by protruding stones on the surface. Work revealed a cambered road, flanked by a footpath and a drainage channel, and yielded several coins from the first three-quarters of the 4th century C.E. By then, the old city of Lachish lay in ruins, so Eusebius might have seen an open village to the south, at Khirbet Duweir, which is (or was) marked by piles of 4th-century C.E. pottery.

⁶ Wright 1938: 22.

⁷ Ahlström 1980; 1983; 1985; see also Beyer 1931.

⁸ Davies 1982; 1985.

⁹ Bekkum 2011: 153, n. 112.

‘Abdi-Ašarti (EA 335.16).¹⁰ The place-name לַכִּישׁ (Lākîš) (Gr. Λαχεῖς) appears in 24 biblical references, mostly in the book of Joshua, as well as in 2 Kings, 2 Chronicles, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah, and Nehemiah. Zadok raises the possibility of a North-west Semitic derivation of the name, namely from לָכַשׁ (“to burn, to set on fire”) – specifically the Qatil passive participle, i.e. “the burnt (place)”.¹¹ Ussishkin remarks that the latter name might have been applied to the site after the end of the Early Bronze Age, following the urban settlement’s desertion (and perhaps destruction), or else, following the end of the Middle Bronze Age when the settlement was totally destroyed. If so, the large Early Bronze and/or Middle Bronze centres at the site probably had another name, now forgotten.¹² Be that as it may, both Ussishkin’s and Zadok’s toponymical interpretations remain hypothetical.

Today, the nearly rectangular tell extends over 18 acres (ca. 72 dunams) on its flat summit alone, and 31 acres (ca. 124 dunams) at its base, making it one of the largest and most significant mounds in the whole of Israel, especially when considering its location along the main route from the coastal plain to the Hebron hills. To give an approximation of size and population, assuming 25 persons per dunam and a settlement size of ca. 70 dunams, about 1750 people might have lived at Lachish at any given time.¹³ The slopes of the mound are very steep, probably owing to the massive ancient fortifications (namely, the Middle Bronze Age ramparts), and the glacis and moat (or fosse) that once defended Lachish give the mound its present conspicuous shape.¹⁴

¹⁰ Moran 1992: 354, 357–358; see Tufnell 1950: 69–70.

¹¹ See arguments and further references in Zadok 2004. Israel Ephal, however, remarks that one cannot be sure whether the original (pre-Israelite) toponym of the name Lachish was Semitic (personal communication, 2014).

¹² *Renewed Excavations*, I: 51; Ussishkin 2014a: 28.

¹³ *Renewed Excavations*, I: 47.

¹⁴ Ussishkin 1978a: 18; *Renewed Excavations*, I: 25, 55.

With the number of references in the Hebrew Bible, the occurrences in Egyptian and Assyrian records, and the commemorative bas-relief wall panels in the palace of the Assyrian king Sennacherib at Nineveh (see §1.3), Lachish has become one of the well-known sites of ancient Israel. Three archaeological expeditions took place on site over the course of the 20th century, with an additional fourth expedition that commenced in the summer of 2013, as summarised below.

1.2 Expeditions at Tell ed-Duweir

1.2.1 The Wellcome-Marston Expedition

The first large-scale excavations of the tell were initiated and largely funded by Sir Henry Wellcome, and subsequently supported by Sir Charles Marston.¹⁵ Works began in 1932, under the direction of British archaeologist James Leslie Starkey, with the assistance of Olga Tufnell and Gerald Lankester Harding. Starkey's excavation of the mound and surrounding area (together called the "concession area" in the dig's permit) was a model by the standards of the time. David Ussishkin, who would later direct long-term excavations at the site almost forty years after the British excavations (see §1.2.3), praised the Wellcome-Marston expedition and described Starkey as "a meticulous planner".¹⁶

¹⁵ The expedition spanned the period 1932–1938. Harris Dunscombe Colt was a partner in the dig of 1932, and the expedition was initially called the Wellcome-Colt Archaeological Research Expedition to the Near East. From 1933 till 1938 the expedition became known as the Wellcome-Marston Expedition (Tufnell, Aharoni and Ussishkin 1977: 736). See also Sir Henry Wellcome's and Sir Charles Marston's respective obituaries in the *Times* (Dale and Marston 1936; no author 1946).

¹⁶ Ussishkin 1987: 20.

Much of the first three seasons' work was concentrated on the slopes and areas around the tell, and the most satisfactory results were obtained from these areas: the Late Bronze Fosse Temple, the late Judaeian and Persian city gates, the outer revetment wall, and the discovery of the "Lachish Letters" from the late Judaeian gateway area (§1.4.1). The time and enormous effort invested in clearing the large parts of the slopes and encircling the entire site, which Tufnell called a planned strategy,¹⁷ took attention away from the mound proper, and in fact "contributed almost nothing to the understanding of the tell and its remains".¹⁸ Garfinkel adds that these activities might have been an *ad hoc* tactic rather than planned strategy, given that the expedition had not yet received the landowners' permission to work on the summit at the time, leaving Starkey in a desperate situation.¹⁹ The purchase of and further haggling over the land took place during 1934, and from January 1935 onwards the expedition was busy with regular scientific and archaeological matters, and proceeded with great progress in every excavated area (Fig. 5).²⁰

Further significant discoveries were made on the mound itself: the Persian Residency, the Solar Shrine, the Great Shaft, and the town south of the Palace-Fort.²¹ The team also cleared a slope on the north-west corner of the tell to serve as a dumping ground for excavations planned on the mound itself.²² Starkey distinguished multiple occupation levels at Lachish,

¹⁷ *Lachish III*: 88.

¹⁸ Ussishkin 2014a: 38.

¹⁹ Garfinkel 2016: 91; see Typed Reports 1933–1934: 30–31.

²⁰ See details summed up in Garfinkel 2016: 91–94.

²¹ See Starkey 1937a; 1937b. The label "Persian" was replaced with "post-exilic" by Tufnell (cf. Starkey 1938: 11; *Lachish III*: 97), but Ussishkin and his colleagues make use of the former label throughout the 2004 report to distinguish between the term "Persian" (which designates the settlement and fortified centre of Level I) and the term "Hellenistic" (which designates the deterioration of the Level I settlement). For the sake of continuity, this research will conform to the 2004 report and make use of both labels ("Persian" and "Hellenistic") for Lachish Level I accordingly.

²² Starkey 1937a: 171.

starting from the Pottery Neolithic (ca. 5500–4500 B.C.E.) and Chalcolithic (ca. 4500–3300 B.C.E.) periods, and from the beginnings of the Early Bronze Age (ca. 3300–3000 B.C.E.) down to the Persian and Hellenistic periods (ca. 538–37 B.C.E.) (Fig. 4).

The Expedition spent an average of six months of the individual years at the site under Starkey's direction.²³ Every fortnight Starkey sent a typed report to Sir Henry Wellcome in London. Two copies of these reports exist in London: the one I consulted is held at the Department of the Middle East at the British Museum, and the other is kept by the Wellcome Trust. Starkey also published brief annual preliminary reports, with the intention to excavate the whole mound through all the stages of occupation, a program of excavation that was to extend over several years.²⁴ The operations however came to a halt unexpectedly, when on 10 January 1938 Starkey was murdered by Arab bandits near Beit Jibrin while on his way to the opening of the new Palestine Archaeological Museum in Jerusalem (now the Rockefeller Museum).²⁵ He was succeeded for the remaining months of the season by Charles H. Inge, Tufnell, and Harding, but there could be no question of another expedition, and the outbreak of war put an end to further excavation, not to mention that the camp was soon destroyed by marauding bands.²⁶ Inge presumably took over the task of typing and sending reports of the expedition's final months to Sir Henry Wellcome.

²³ Tufnell, Aharoni and Ussishkin 1977: 736.

²⁴ Kenyon 1979: 323; Ussishkin 1987: 20.

²⁵ J. L. Starkey was buried in the Mount Zion Protestant Cemetery in Jerusalem. See the details about Starkey's controversial murder in Garfinkel (2016), with further bibliography. See also Begin 2000: 92–95; Ussishkin 2014a: 48–56; the reports in the *Times* (Gardiner 1938; no author 1938a; 1938b; 1938c).

²⁶ Ussishkin 2014a: 57. See reports in the *Times* (no author 1938d; 1939) and in the *Palestine Post* (no author 1938g). See also Inge 1938: 240–256; Drower 1986: 2. For further general publications on Lachish, with particular reference to the British Excavations, see, in chronological order, Burrows 1941, §81; McCown 1943: 133–144; Finegan 1959: 160–162; Horn 1960; Hamilton 1962; Torczyner 1962a; Tufnell 1970; Avi-Yonah 1971; Ussishkin 1992.

Afterwards, most of the team dispersed to take up other posts and duties, while Tufnell returned to London, and devoted the following 20 years to processing all the finds with great skill and patience, despite the various issues and problems, and despite the fact that she had no formal archaeological training.²⁷ As a fitting memorial to “a far-sighted leader and a dear friend”, Tufnell took care to publish the results of the excavations up to the time of Starkey’s death as well as those of the continued excavations, bringing the publications to completion in 1958.²⁸ The final reports of the British expedition are as follows:

1. *Lachish I: The Lachish Letters* (1938) deals with 18 Lachish ostraca that were retrieved in 1935;
2. *Lachish II: The Fosse Temple* (1940) deals with a small Canaanite temple of the Late Bronze Age that had three superimposed stages, and was discovered in the fosse at the north-west of the mound;
3. the two-volume work that followed, entitled *Lachish III: The Iron Age* (1953), deals with Levels V through I, dating between the 10th and 4th centuries B.C.E., and which also includes a then up-to-date discussion by David Diringer of the 21 Lachish ostraca under discussion together with other miscellaneous (incised or lapidary) inscriptions recovered in the British excavations;²⁹
4. and finally, a fourth volume, *Lachish IV: The Bronze Age* (1958), which deals with the earlier history of the city as found in Levels IX through VI and associated tombs.

The finds of the British excavation have been scattered throughout the world. Some of them were kept by the British Mandate Department of Antiquities (the functions of which were

²⁷ Ussishkin 2014a: 58.

²⁸ *Lachish III*: 82.

²⁹ See review by Rowley (1953).

taken over by the present Israel Antiquities Authority, hereafter IAA), with some finds today held on display in Jerusalem in the Israel Museum and the Rockefeller Museum, including four of the “Lachish Letters”. Most of the finds were sent to London and placed in the Institute of Archaeology of London University, which later sold the collection to the British Museum in 1980, making the latter institution the main museum for Lachish-related finds and holder of the main bulk of the “Lachish Letters”. Back in the first season of the excavation (1932–1933), Harris Dunscombe Colt sent various finds to the United States. After the processing of the material, Tufnell distributed groups of finds to various museums worldwide, among which are the archaeological museums in Oxford, Manchester, and Birmingham, the university museum of Dublin, the Louvre in Paris, the Lucknow Museum in Lucknow (northern India), and the Living Torah Museum in Brooklyn, New York.³⁰

1.2.2 Aharoni’s Excavations

Israeli archaeologist and historical geographer Yohanan Aharoni led a second though limited excavation at Tell ed-Duweir in 1966³¹ and later co-directed another season with Bernard Boyd in 1968, on behalf of the Hebrew University, Tel Aviv University, the University of North Carolina, the American Institute for Holy Land Studies, and the Israel Exploration Society. Together with the contributions of other scholars, Aharoni published the results of his excavations in an additional fifth volume to the previous Lachish reports, entitled, *Investigations at Lachish: The Sanctuary and the Residency (Lachish V)* (1975). These small-scale excavations were limited to the study of two areas on the city mound of Lachish – the area of the Residency, and the area of the so-called Solar Shrine (in the eastern part of the

³⁰ Ussishkin 2014a: 59; for a full outline on the dispersal of the Lachish finds, see Magrill 2006: ix–x.

³¹ Aharoni 1968b: 157–169.

city, which was previously excavated by Starkey).³² In 1966 Aharoni recovered another ostrakon from a Level II archaeological context below the Level I Solar Shrine. This ostrakon (Lachish 22, conventionally numbered as XXII) bears a fading list of PNN (Catalogue B).³³

Aharoni's investigation at Lachish was limited in scale and objectives, and was carried out between the Tel Arad and Tel Beersheba excavations. All of Aharoni's excavations were intended to understand royal cities during the Israelite Monarchy, with a specific focus on cult and worship connected with these sites. The Lachish expedition focused on clarifying the date and early history of the Solar Shrine, in light of its alleged similarity to the Tel Arad sanctuary.³⁴ Two temples were actually recognised at the Solar Shrine area: a later temple dated to the Hellenistic period (the Solar Shrine itself); and a high place and shrine pertaining to the First Temple period and located beneath the Solar Shrine.³⁵ Aharoni thus identified the Solar Shrine as a place in which an Israelite cult continued to be practised since Lachish Level V, owing to cultic features belonging to the period. After concluding his work at Lachish, Aharoni moved on to the Tel Beersheba excavations in the hopes of finding a "border sanctuary" there.³⁶ Given that Aharoni's short-term work at Lachish was restricted to the history of one structure and the strata beneath it, it had little impact on the understanding of the site's history and on the renewed excavations, which were to commence five years later.³⁷

³² See Starkey 1937a: 171–172.

³³ Cf. Aharoni 1968b: 168–169; 1975: 22–24.

³⁴ See Aharoni 1968a.

³⁵ Aharoni 1975: 1–2 and references there. For previous interpretations of the site, see *Lachish III*: 141–145; for a general overview, see Tufnell, Aharoni and Ussishkin 1977: 747–749; Ussishkin 2014a: 61–63.

³⁶ Aharoni 1968a: 32. On Tel Beersheba, see Herzog 1984; 2010; see also Chapman (1986; 1987) vis-à-vis the Beersheba excavations and their methodologies. On Tel Arad, see also Herzog 2002.

³⁷ Ussishkin 2014a: 62.

1.2.3 The Renewed Excavations

From 1973 to 1994 (the excavation proper ended in 1987), David Ussishkin of Tel Aviv University undertook renewed excavations at Lachish to complete Starkey's unfinished work, and to systematically study the history of the site, its material remains, and its surrounding area on a long-term basis.³⁸ These excavations were sponsored by the then newly established Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University, as well as the Israel Exploration Society.³⁹ Ussishkin's excavations focused on six principal areas in which previous excavations began (Fig. 7):

- (1) a large and narrow cardinal section-trench in **Area S**, at the upper periphery of the mound (to elucidate the stratigraphy of Lachish);
- (2) the acropolis of the mound (**Area Pal.**);
- (3) the Judaeen city-gate complex previously investigated by Starkey – **Areas GE** (the inner gate) and **GW** (the roadway, the outer gate, and the gate courtyard);
- (4) the monumental Middle Bronze Age palace and the Late Bronze Age temple underlying the northern end of the Judaeen Palace-Fort (**Area P**);
- (5) the south-west corner and the remains of the Assyrian attack on Lachish (**Area R**);
- (6) and the Bronze Age levels underlying the courtyard of the Palace-Fort (**Area D**).⁴⁰

Ussishkin's special interest was the Late Bronze (1550–1200 B.C.E.) and Iron Ages (1200–587 B.C.E.), with the aim to solve the archaeological problems that were left vague when

³⁸ Ussishkin 1978a: 19; 1978b: 3.

³⁹ For a detailed narrative on how the expedition came to be, see *Renewed Excavations*, I: 3–22; Ussishkin 2014a: 65–81.

⁴⁰ *Renewed Excavations*, I: 39–40.

previous excavations ended.⁴¹ In fact, the chronology of Iron Age Lachish had been left unresolved by Starkey and his team, and Ussishkin's work at the city-gate complex stood out for considering with extreme care the pottery forms and solving problems associated with the pottery chronology of Iron Age II (1000–587 B.C.E.).⁴² With the help of Olga Tufnell's observations and studies, Ussishkin and his colleagues were able to reach new "conclusions" about the long undetermined conundrum of the superimposed city-gate complex (Levels III and II). Starkey detected little difference in pottery typology between Levels III and II, so he assigned the Level III destruction to the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II's attack in 597 B.C.E. Tufnell on the other hand, using ceramic typology, detected a difference between the two levels, as she identified the Level III destruction with Sennacherib's conquest in 701 B.C.E. and then distinguished two phases in the gate area of Level II, one dated to 597 B.C.E. and the other to 588/6 B.C.E. (see §1.3). Yet other scholars of the time, including William F. Albright, G. Ernest Wright, Kathleen Kenyon, and Yigael Yadin, dated Level III to 598/7 B.C.E. and Level II to 587/6 B.C.E., arguing that Tufnell's published evidence did not support her opinion but rather sustained Starkey's.⁴³ However Tufnell, later joined by Aharoni, was proven correct, as Ussishkin demonstrated with his renewed excavations and careful reassessment of the stratigraphic layers previously unearthed by the British expedition (see further discussions in §1.3).⁴⁴

Ussishkin recovered further varied ostraca (Lachish 23–35), particularly from two adjoining storerooms, which formed part of the built-up complex of Lachish Level II near the inner city-

⁴¹ *Renewed Excavations*, I: 30.

⁴² King 2005: 38–39.

⁴³ See Albright 1935: 46; Wright 1938: 29; 1955: 15, n. 2; Kenyon 1979: 297–299, 324.

⁴⁴ Ussishkin 1977: 35–36; see Drower 1986: 2.

gate (Area GE): 4084 (ostraca 24–28, and 31 below the floor) and 4086 (ostraca 29 and 30). These sherds are largely contemporary with ostraca 1–15, 18, 20–22. A few other fragmentary ostraca originate from earlier levels (23 and 33), or else lack a stratified context (32, 34, and 35) (Catalogue B).

Ussishkin comments that the decision to continue where previous excavations left off and to continue the study of areas already partly excavated ultimately proved to have been the right one, as it made it possible to evaluate afresh the results of previous excavations in view of the new data and to consider all the excavated data from the site as a single entity.⁴⁵ Ussishkin moreover commended Tufnell’s “scrupulous and meticulous excavation report”, and his subsequent publications relied mostly on Tufnell’s conclusions and work.⁴⁶

Ussishkin’s archaeological work at the site was regularly published over the years, including three preliminary reports on excavations and restoration work.⁴⁷ After 11 excavation seasons, the team devoted their efforts to publishing the results into a five-volume final report, entitled *The Renewed Excavations at Lachish (1973–1994)* (2004), which contains contributions from sixty-two specialists in different fields, ranging from lithics to archaeozoological studies to ceramic typology to geology and topography, among others. Ussishkin’s 30-year project reinterprets and integrates the older British material, thus providing a fully integrated synthesis of all the work involved on site. Also worth mentioning, especially with respect to the subject of this dissertation, is the revised analysis by André Lemaire of the inscriptions

⁴⁵ *Renewed Excavations*, I: 30–31.

⁴⁶ Ussishkin 1977: 57.

⁴⁷ Ussishkin 1978a; 1983; 1996.

retrieved at Tell ed-Duweir, including the so-called “Lachish Letters”, in the fourth volume of the final report.⁴⁸

1.2.4 The Fourth Expedition to Lachish

The summer of 2013 (15–29 July) saw the launching of *the Fourth Expedition to Lachish*, a joint project between the Institutes of Archaeology of Southern Adventist University (with co-director Michael Hasel) and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (with co-director Yosef Garfinkel).⁴⁹

The principal aim of this excavation project and the reason behind the choice of Lachish is to provide a clear picture regarding the early development of the Kingdom of Judah, since Lachish was the second most important city in the Southern Kingdom after Jerusalem. The project gives special attention to the north-east quarter of the tell and adjacent slopes, and is aimed specifically at Levels IV and V, which mark the early establishment of the Judaeian Kingdom, in an attempt to understand when Lachish was first inhabited during the Iron Age, the date of its first Iron Age fortifications, and whether the city was fortified during Rehoboam’s reign, as mentioned in 2 Chr. 11:5–12. Work resumed during the summers of 2014, 2015, and 2016, and a 12th-century B.C.E. abecedary, incised on a jar fragment, was found in 2014.⁵⁰ Further seasons are planned for this project in the hopes of getting a complete sequence of the Iron Age historical outline of Lachish from Level II down to Level V.

⁴⁸ Lemaire 2004.

⁴⁹ See public talk by Garfinkel (2015); see also Garfinkel, Hasel and Klingbeil 2013; no author 2013: 1–2.

⁵⁰ Sass et al. 2015.

1.2.5 The Israel Antiquities Authority Excavations

From January till March 2016, the IAA, under the direction of Sa'ar Ganor, resumed excavations of the inner gate of Tell ed-Duweir (where Ussishkin had left off), with the aim to excavate the Level III–IV six-chambered gate completely.⁵¹ The gate is now exposed and preserved to a height of ca. 4m (13ft), and measures around 24 by 24m total (ca. 80 by 80ft), and the sheer size continues to confirm “Lachish [as] a major city and the most important one after Jerusalem”, as stated by Ganor. The excavations uncovered an alleged gate-shrine having a large room with bench used for offerings, and an opening in the corner leading to another room with ceramic lamps, bowls, stands, and two four-horned altars, with their horns appearing to be intentionally cut. The excavators are associating such destruction, along with the inclusion of an unused stone toilet in the corner of the shrine, with probable evidence of desecration following Hezekiah’s religious reform. After this destruction, the gate-shrine appears to have remained sealed until Sennacherib’s siege around 701 B.C.E. At the time of writing, Israel’s Nature and Parks Authority was working with the IAA in the hopes of opening the newly exposed gate to visitors.

1.3 Iron Age Lachish: dating debates on Levels III and II

Tell ed-Duweir is an extensive multi-period mound of ruins, spanning from the Pottery Neolithic to the Hellenistic period, with seven strata or levels (VII–I), adopted from the British terminology, which designate only the time span from the Late Bronze Age IIIA (VII) to the Persian and Hellenistic periods (I) (Fig. 4).⁵² For the purpose of this research I am

⁵¹ See weblink in Pruitt, 3 October 2016.

⁵² As Ussishkin (*Renewed Excavations*, I: 43) points out, Starkey made use of the term “level” (an abbreviation for “city-level”) to designate an archaeological stratum and, for the sake of continuity, Ussishkin himself adopted the same term for the renewed excavations. This research will also adopt the term “level” throughout.

limiting my discussion to Iron IIB, i.e. Lachish Levels III and II, and the related underlying debates that I mentioned in §1.2.3.⁵³

Level III (Iron Age IIB)

The beginning of Level III is marked by the rebuilding of the public structure of Level IV. The palace atop the mound (Palace B) was subsequently enlarged (Palace C), and close to the palace were numerous stamped handles of the royal Judaeen storage jars (the *lmlk* stamp seals – “belonging to the king”). Diringier categorised the royal seal impressions into three classes (I, II, and III) based on the Lachish material. These seal impressions range from the late 8th century till the later part of Josiah’s reign (ca. 615–610 B.C.E.), and bear Egyptianizing symbols, as well as one of four place-names – *ḥbrn*, *swkh*, *zyp* and *mmšt* – in Diringier’s Class III.⁵⁴ Three excavations retrieved a total of 413 *lmlk* seals and 76 “private” stamped seals.⁵⁵ Through excavation, Tufnell observed that the royal Judaeen storage jars were used in and restricted to Level III.⁵⁶ However, contrary to this observation, Tufnell still accepted Diringier’s wide range of palaeographic dates of the royal seals, since Classes I and III were discerned in loci that are either earlier or later than Level III.⁵⁷

⁵³ For a detailed discussion of the multiple periods identified at Tell ed-Duweir, see the following publications and further literature there: the respective British reports (*Lachish II, III, IV*), Aharoni’s report (*Lachish V*), Ussishkin’s preliminary articles and reports (1978a; 1978b; 1983; 1996), his multi-volume report with several contributions on the different occupation levels (*Renewed Excavations, I–V*), and his recent book on Lachish (2014). Moreover, the Fourth Expedition to Lachish is focusing its excavations on Levels V and IV (Iron Age IIA) (see §1.2.4); see also Negev and Gibson 2001; Zimhoni 2004; and the review by Dever (2005).

⁵⁴ For further details, see Diringier 1941a; 1941b; 1949.

⁵⁵ See Ussishkin 1976; 1977; 2004c: 87; 2004g.

⁵⁶ *Lachish III*: 315.

⁵⁷ *Lachish III*: 45, 48. Ussishkin (*Renewed Excavations, I*: 89, n. 7) suspects Diringier’s change in the dating of Class II seal impressions to have been influenced by Tufnell’s suggestion to date the destruction of Level III to 701 B.C.E. (contrast Diringier 1949: 85; 1953: 45, 48).

Even so, Ussishkin has maintained a 30-year old consensus that complete *lmlk* storage jars were recovered *in situ* beneath the destruction debris of Level III, and none in later levels, and they therefore must have been produced exclusively during Hezekiah's reign as a short military *ad hoc* operation, and then ceased with the destruction layer of 701 B.C.E.⁵⁸ During the 1970s and 1980s Ussishkin's ideas concurred with the detailed typology of Lemaire, who epigraphically dated the royal seal impressions to the 8th century B.C.E. and divided them into five main types (Ia, Ib, IIa, IIb, and IIc), as well as with Na'aman, who assigned the seal impressions to the reign of Hezekiah, arguing that such royal storage jars were prepared over a short period (704–701 B.C.E.) for the impending Assyrian attack.⁵⁹ Ussishkin thus remarks that “the stratigraphic evidence from Lachish shows that the royal storage jars were certainly manufactured prior to 701 [B.C.E.], but does not indicate whether or not they may have continued in use in other parts of Judah during the earlier part of the [7th century B.C.E.]”⁶⁰ For the so-called *rosette*-stamped handles, Ussishkin suggested another *ad hoc* military operation initiated by Zedekiah in preparation for the Babylonian attack of ca. 588/7 B.C.E., which implies that no stamped jars were produced in Judah in the 110 years between Hezekiah's revolt against the Assyrian attack of 701 B.C.E. and Zedekiah's revolt against the Babylonian campaign of 588–586 B.C.E.⁶¹

However, recent studies by Lipschits, Sergi, and Koch revealed that the *lmlk* stamp seal impressions have been found in many other sites, in levels deemed to be 7th century B.C.E., as

⁵⁸ Ussishkin 2011: 223.

⁵⁹ Ussishkin 1977: 54–57; Ussishkin 2014b: 96–98; see Lemaire 1981; Na'aman 1979.

⁶⁰ *Renewed Excavations*, IV: 2142; see Barkay and Vaughn 2004: 2169, n. 16.

⁶¹ Ussishkin 2011: 235; Lipschits 2012: 2.

well as in one-period settlements.⁶² Their results point rather to an ongoing administrative system *contra* Ussishkin's theory of *ad hoc* military operations, since it would seem that the *lmlk* system was already initiated during the last quarter of the 8th century B.C.E. (early *lmlk* types) and continued during the first quarter of the 7th century B.C.E. (late *lmlk* types) and during the mid 7th century B.C.E. (concentric circle incisions). Moreover, the *rosette*-stamp system was complex (having 24 sub-types) and had a long-term usage since the time of Josiah. In addition, the system of stamping jar handles continued in Judah for a further 450 years, when Judah was a province under different empires (Babylonian, Persian, Ptolemaic, and Seleucid).⁶³

The city of Level III was apparently highly fortified, since excavations uncovered the outlines of the defensive system established round Lachish. The mound was encircled by a double wall, which was buttressed at intervals by towers. No signs of restoration were traced in the city walls, which remained in use during Level III.⁶⁴ The inner city gate of Levels IV–III was very large and massive: a six-chambered gatehouse measuring ca. 25m by 24.5m, with the ground plan resembling in principle that of the “Solomonic” city gates of Megiddo, Hazor, Gezer, and Ashdod,⁶⁵ although apparently larger in size (Fig. 10).⁶⁶ On the east of the town a great but incomplete shaft (measuring 25 by 25 by 22m) was discovered (the so-called Great Shaft), which either provided the city with a safe water supply, as at Megiddo and Hazor, or served as a stone quarry.

⁶² Lipschits 2012; Lipschits, Sergi and Koch 2010, 2011.

⁶³ For the *yhd* stamp impressions (Persian and Hellenistic periods), see Vanderhooft and Lipschits 2007; Lipschits and Vanderhooft 2011.

⁶⁴ *Renewed Excavations*, I: 83.

⁶⁵ Ussishkin 1978a: 23–24.

⁶⁶ Ussishkin 1976: 1.

The Level III city suffered heavy destruction by fire, and its remains were buried under a metre-thick layer of ashes.⁶⁷ The entire superstructure of Palaces B–C was pulled down or destroyed, and never raised again. The cause and date of this level’s destruction has been an ongoing dispute. The long drawn out debate has been reported thoroughly by Rainey, who discusses the historical sources which deal with the respective campaigns of Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar.⁶⁸ The dating controversy over Lachish III was essentially divided between two camps.⁶⁹ One camp (Starkey, Albright, Buchanan, Wright, Kenyon, Lapp, Cross, and Lance, among others) ascribed the destruction of Level III to Nebuchadnezzar II in 597 B.C.E. Starkey and Inge found the pottery of Level III and the subsequent Level II (see below) to be identical, and thus they formulated an opinion based on ceramic typology that the two levels had to be only about ten historical years apart. Therefore, they held that Level III suffered an initial attack by Nebuchadnezzar around 597 B.C.E., while Level II reflected the city’s ultimate destruction at his hands about a decade later (587 B.C.E.).⁷⁰ Buchanan, Lapp, and Lance, among others, considered the royal seal impressions that abundantly turned up in Level III as evidence in the dating debate, and the general consensus about the palaeographical typology of the seal inscriptions pointed towards a 7th-century B.C.E. date.⁷¹ The problem with the latter was that Lance and his predecessors assumed Starkey’s arguments on ceramic typology to be conclusive in dating the destruction of Level III to 597 B.C.E., and therefore in harmony with the palaeographical interpretation. Rainey appropriately argues against such an approach, since the dating of the seal inscriptions would have to have been “determined first of all by the historical considerations bearing on their

⁶⁷ Negev and Gibson 2001: 289.

⁶⁸ Rainey 1975.

⁶⁹ For full references, see Rainey 1975, and Ussishkin 1977: 32.

⁷⁰ Starkey 1937a: 175–177; 1937b: 235–236; Inge 1938: 251–255. See also Ussishkin 2014a: 77.

⁷¹ See Buchanan 1954: 335–336; Lapp 1960: 17–18; Lance 1971: 315–330.

stratigraphic find spots and secondly by the historical implications of their own semantic formulae”, not the other way round.⁷²

The other camp (Tufnell, Aharoni, Amiran, Barnett, Mazar, Rainey, and Ussishkin, among others) argues that Lachish III was destroyed by Sennacherib more than a century earlier, namely in 701 B.C.E. As mentioned above, the city of Level III had been heavily fortified by an impressive system of walls, and had a large palace in the centre of the mound, essentially making Lachish Level III a strong fortress and an important administrative centre that ultimately underwent heavy destruction, with signs of conflagration everywhere.⁷³ Upon completing the publication of the excavation reports, Tufnell came to a different conclusion altogether than that of Starkey and the others. She insisted upon some significant differences in the pottery typology between Levels III and II that were enough to warrant the assumption that Lachish III was in fact destroyed by Sennacherib around 701 B.C.E.⁷⁴ Her observations were as follows: within the Level II gateway were two ash layers that were respectively assigned to the Babylonian campaigns of 597 and 587 B.C.E. (see discussion on Level II below). The underlying Level III city-gate must have therefore been destroyed at an earlier date. From a ceramic standpoint, pottery typology indicated a longer span of time than the other school had suggested. Moreover, the stamped *lmlk* jars of Level III were dated to the end of the 8th century B.C.E. on palaeographic grounds.⁷⁵ Tufnell’s views unsurprisingly evoked a wave of criticism from Albright and the others, who were not persuaded about the long span of time between the two levels. Even so, Tufnell’s dating found support through

⁷² Rainey 1975: 48.

⁷³ Rainey 1975: 47.

⁷⁴ *Lachish III*: 45, 48, 55–56, 95–97.

⁷⁵ See Diringier 1941a; 1941b; 1953: 344; Lipschits, Sergi, and Koch (2010:11 and fig. 1) define the *lmlk* jars of Lachish Level III as “early types” used in the Assyrian attack of 701 B.C.E.

Ussishkin's renewed excavations, which demonstrated that there was a thick mud deposit between Levels II and III that suggests a longer time had passed than what Starkey supposed.⁷⁶

The renewed excavations also revealed that the shape and layout of Lachish Level III matched the town that is depicted on the Nineveh reliefs, as well as the remains of an attack and conquest of the city.⁷⁷ The Assyrian king Sennacherib attacked Judah round the year 701 B.C.E., and conquered most of the country except for Jerusalem. Both the Old Testament (2 Kgs 18; 19:32; 2 Chr. 32:9–10; Is. 36; 37:33) and Sennacherib's annals tell us of the campaign on 46 cities and villages (Taylor Prism, col. III, lines 11–14, British Museum).⁷⁸ In addition, Sennacherib had artists carve wall panels in bas-relief, which were erected in Room XXXVI in his south-west palace at Nineveh (modern Kuyunjik, northern Iraq), and are now on permanent display at the British Museum.⁷⁹ These reliefs show Sennacherib's army storming the fortifications of Lachish: siege rams against the wall; flying arrows and rocks; impaled captives; the defenders fighting in the towers; women and men file out of the city bearing their belongings; other civilians are carried away into captivity or brought before the enthroned Sennacherib, and to the left of the enthroned king is an inscription that identifies the besieged city as ^{uru}*La-ki-ša*.

⁷⁶ Hugh G. M. Williamson, personal communication, 2014.

⁷⁷ See Ussishkin 1977.

⁷⁸ See Ussishkin 1978b: 67–74; 2004c: 88–90.

⁷⁹ Ussishkin 1977: 28–30; 1980: 176–177; see Magrill 2006 on the Nineveh wall panels at the British Museum. It is commonly suggested that, since Sennacherib had the military undertaking of Lachish represented on stone in such a detailed way, then this siege had made a great impression upon him (Ussishkin 1977: 30; Smelik 1991: 119), or else it may have served as propagandistic distortion and form of compensation for the failure in capturing Jerusalem (Mazar 2007: 173).

Debates still linger around the siege ramp (Area R), which is thought to have been built by the conquerors of Level III, and a part of which appears to cover the roadway rebuilt in the time of Level II. It raises the question of the puzzling relationship between the two layers, and as to why the builders of Level II never cleared away the ramp raised against the earlier city.⁸⁰ Ussishkin has nonetheless left the puzzling relationship open for debate, and a substantial part of the ramp was left unexcavated for future investigations. Similarly, lingering questions about the Level III city's destruction have been left open for discussion by the excavator himself.⁸¹

Level II (Iron Age IIC)

Following the destruction of Level III was a gap in settlement for a long period of time, as discerned by all excavations at Lachish.⁸² The Assyrian campaign affected the entire Shephelah, as revealed by regional surveys and other sites' excavations (see §6.3). It is difficult to assign a date to the resurgence of the Level II settlement, due to the absence of data – it may have occurred during the reign of either Manasseh or Josiah.⁸³ Ceramic analysis and the palaeography of most Lachish ostraca (see §2.3) point to an occupation spanning from the second half of the 7th to the early 6th centuries B.C.E.

⁸⁰ James 2007: 215; cf. *Renewed Excavations*, II: 716–723.

⁸¹ See observations made by Ussishkin (1977: 30, n. 2, and 35–36, n. 7); on observations made on Level IV and III cf. *Renewed Excavations*, I: 83, 89; Ussishkin and Barkay 2004: 447; Ussishkin 1978a: 25; Rainey 1975: 51–53. In his review of Ussishkin's final report, James (2007) counter-argues the excavator's dating of the Level III destruction; cf. James et al. 1991: 176–178. It is not the purpose of this dissertation to analyse the controversies raised in this review and in James et al. on Lachish Level III, or even Level II, for that matter. Such a revolutionary endeavour to lower the chronology of Lachish Levels IV–I goes beyond the scope and limitations of my current research. I can only make a brief comment on their discussion of the “Lachish Letters” (see note 90 below).

⁸² *Renewed Excavations*, I: 90.

⁸³ *Renewed Excavations*, I: 91.

A new city emerged (Level II). The settlement was smaller and weaker, and the houses were built with poor masonry. The walls and gate were rebuilt, but the palace-fort was abandoned. Ussishkin reports how the gate complex of Level II was built on top of the ruined gate complex of Levels IV–III, at a higher level, with the Level II gate complex adapting its plan to that of the older structure and incorporating some of its remains.⁸⁴ The new complex was also rectangular, but smaller, and both the inner and outer gates were of the single-entry-type, and each having two chambers only (Fig. 11).⁸⁵ According to Ussishkin, “it can be assumed” that the western tower of the outer gate, which was not preserved, contained a room similar to the so-called “guardroom” in the eastern tower, which yielded 16 ostraca (Lachish 1–15 and 18).⁸⁶ Then again, since most of the western tower’s structure is now lost, except for part of the foundation wall on the east side (flanking the outer gate), the presence of a similar room within can only be deemed a possibility (Fig. 16).

No trace of any administrative centre has been found so far (see arguments in §§5.3.3 and 5.4). A row of rundown rooms, east of the ruined palace provided indications of the kind of squatter settlements during the last decades of the pre-exilic period.⁸⁷ One particular room (L.12:1065) yielded two ostraca retrieved during the British excavations: a fragmentary ostrakon below the floor, and on top of it a storage-jar label with a date (see detailed discussions in §§1.6.2, 3.1.20, and 3.1.21).

⁸⁴ *Renewed Excavations*, II: 589.

⁸⁵ *Renewed Excavations*, II: 521; Rocca 2010: 23, 32.

⁸⁶ *Renewed Excavations*, II: 521.

⁸⁷ *Lachish III*: 57.

Like the city of Level III, the one of Level II was also destroyed by fire, with the general consensus agreeing on the *terminus ad quem* tallying with Nebuchadnezzar II's campaign against Zedekiah in 588/6 B.C.E. (Chapter 6). Tufnell identified two destruction layers in the Level II gateway area. She explains it as follows:

On at least two later occasions the gate area was attacked and the approaches were covered in ash. Inside the city gate two superimposed roadways were distinguished, passing over and coalescing on the heap of the fallen brick tower, which was scored with the ruts of chariot wheels. While denudation and the slope of the roads up to the gate make it extremely difficult to follow the succession of events, the interval between the destructions must have been unusually short: on historical grounds the first partial burning may be due to Nebuchadnezzar's campaign against Jehoiakim in 597, and this was followed in 588–586 by severe reprisals against the rebel Zedekiah, culminating in the complete destruction of Jerusalem.⁸⁸

After the destruction of Lachish/Tell ed-Duweir, the site was deserted for quite some time (ca. 586 – ca. 400 B.C.E.).

Level I and beyond

Afterwards was the latest city (Level I), which belongs to the Persian (Phases 1 and 2) and Hellenistic (Phase 3) periods. Its foundation was initially dated to ca. 450 B.C.E.,⁸⁹ but was recently revised and dated to ca. 400 B.C.E.⁹⁰ One of the Lachish ostraca (16) was discovered

⁸⁸ *Lachish III*: 57.

⁸⁹ *Lachish III*: 58–59.

⁹⁰ See Fantalkin and Tal 2004: 2174–2196; 2006, esp. pp. 172–177 and references there. This brings me to the controversies raised by James et al. (1991: 171–175) on the “Lachish Letters” and their attempt at dating Lachish Level II from the 588/6 B.C.E. *terminus ad quem* to ca. 440 B.C.E. (Persian/post-exilic). First off, as seen above, the foundation date of Level I (Persian/post-exilic) has today been revised to ca. 400 B.C.E. rather than ca. 450 B.C.E. With regards to the ostraca (which I will discuss in depth in Chapters 2 to 5), despite acknowledging some of the original editor's outdated readings and interpretation of the “Lachish Letters”, the authors take it for granted that the ostraca cache is a unitary corpus sent from one particular subordinate to his superior. Moreover, the ostraca corpus is already limited and fragmentary as it is, and yet the authors' argument revolves around mainly two particular ostraca (Lachish 3 and 6) in their attempt to strike similarities of the content of either ostrakon with Nehemiah's time (ca. 440 B.C.E.). Additionally, they never address the fact that during the 5th century B.C.E. the formal Aramaic script was in use, as testified by contemporary documents discovered in the countries which belonged to the Persian empire, particularly Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Asia Minor, Tema (North

reused in the ballast used for the Level I Persian roadway in the gateway area (E/F.17/18:C) (§§1.5 and 3.1.16). On the site of the destroyed Judaeen palace-fort now stood a public building (known as the Residency), measuring about 17 by 30m.⁹¹ In the eastern part of the city, a building identified as the Solar Shrine was excavated in the 1930s and 1960s, and seems to be the only structure of a secure Hellenistic date, as Persian and Hellenistic pottery was found in its foundation trenches beneath the courtyard.⁹² As previously mentioned, this structure must have been the central cult place during Level I, but Tufnell hesitated in dating the construction (§1.2.2).⁹³ By the 2nd century B.C.E., settlement in the region shifted to Marissa (Maresha), and the site of Lachish was ultimately deserted around 150 B.C.E.⁹⁴ Throughout the centuries and up to modern times, the site of Tell ed-Duweir was used for agricultural purposes, and at the time of commencement of the British excavations, the land belonged to various local landowners who made it inexpedient to carry out much work on the tell, resulting in the eventual expropriation of the land (§1.2.1).⁹⁵

1.4 The “guardroom”

1.4.1 The British excavations of the “guardroom” (E.18:C)

In 1934–1935, the third season of the Wellcome-Marston excavations was focused on the bastion and gateways of Lachish, in continuation of the first campaign, when the structures and roadway built by the Persians (Level I) had been removed, in order to examine the earlier

Arabia), Syria, Iran, Iraq, India, and Afghanistan (Yardeni 2002: 28). As shown in §2.3, the Lachish ostraca bear the pre-exilic cursive Palaeo-Hebrew script.

⁹¹ Aharoni 1975: 36–37; Fantalkin and Tal 2006: 168–169.

⁹² For a discussion on the shrine’s nature and function, see Fantalkin and Tal 2006: 176 and references there; cf. Aharoni 1975: 5–7.

⁹³ *Lachish III*: 141–145.

⁹⁴ *Renewed Excavations*, I: 97–98.

⁹⁵ Starkey 1934: 165; see also Garfinkel 2016.

level.⁹⁶ The Persian roadway (which overlay the Level II courtyard between the inner and outer gates) was constructed on limestone and chalk rubble about 0.61m thick,⁹⁷ and immediately below was a well-preserved cobbled surface, covered with a thin covering of ash and burnt debris.

Three rooms against the south wall of the bastion open onto the road between the inner and outer gateways, yet only the lower and foundation courses of these chambers remained at the time of discovery, and the rooms to the west, flanking the outer gate, were damaged by fire.⁹⁸ The first room that was examined was E.18:C (formerly designated as F 18 C as a result of the previous incorrect reading of the grid-coordinates). Room E.18:C was referred to throughout *Lachish I* as the “guardroom”, owing to its location between the two gates (sometimes simply referred to as “the ostraca/letters room”, since it yielded sixteen ostraca from the Level II destruction layer) (see also §4.4) (Figs 8–9).⁹⁹ The “guardroom” is small and walled on three sides, but open on the north, where its plastered floor merged, without any threshold, with the roadway/courtyard outside that is enclosed within the bastion. The outer wall was 0.85m thick, and the eastern jamb of the outer gate was built against it.¹⁰⁰

The following is a description of the stratigraphic layers observed in the “guardroom” as presented in preliminary articles and in typed and published reports. Given the nature of the open-excavation method employed by the British expedition, little attention was paid to the

⁹⁶ See Starkey 1935c: 204; 1937a: 172; 1938: 11–12; Typed Reports 1934–1935: 23, 27–28, 34–36, 42–43, 48–49, 55, 60–61, 71–72.

⁹⁷ About 2ft thick (Starkey 1938: 11).

⁹⁸ Starkey 1938: 11.

⁹⁹ Starkey 1938: 11; *Lachish III*: 96.

¹⁰⁰ Starkey 1938: 12; 1935: 204–205; *Lachish III*: 129.

stratigraphic relationship of the individual layers inside the “guardroom”. Sadly, very few plans and/or sections accompanied the reports in general, and none of Room E.18:C. The few black and white photographs of the “guardroom” are generic and taken from afar, providing little visual backup for a stratigraphic analysis, not to mention they were reproduced in very small format in the *Lachish III* report (see discussion in §5.1).

The “guardroom” underlay the foundation courses of a Persian structure that flanked the outer gate, possibly a tower, and which had not been affected by fire.¹⁰¹ In the “guardroom”, however, signs of burning or burnt debris (which at first consisted of limestone flakes in pinky-yellow earth, derived from mud brickwork) became visible once the last Persian foundation course was removed. The process also exposed the top of a stone bench (or *mastaba* in Arabic) against the south wall of the room. Below this pinky-yellow layer the colour changed to grey, and the lower levels were quite black, as the soil contained much carbonized vegetable matter. This burnt level of charcoal and ash was about 0.15m deep,¹⁰² and it was in the upper zone of this horizon, close under the east wall of the “guardroom”, that fragments of sixteen ostraca (eventually labelled as “the Lachish Letters”) were found (I–XV and XVIII i.e. Lachish 1–15 and 18) (Fig. 14) (see §1.5). Starkey remarked that these inscribed sherds were only a small proportion of hundreds of jar fragments found in this room, and since so many had been affected by fire, it is impossible to know how much correspondence may have been destroyed in this way¹⁰³ (see also the outline of the British excavations’ shortcomings in §5.1).

¹⁰¹ *Renewed Excavations*, II: 589; see Starkey 1937a: 174; 1938: 11.

¹⁰² Six inches deep (Starkey 1935c: 204).

¹⁰³ Starkey 1938: 11.

The black ash overlay flat stones that paved the floor, and their upper surface was blackened by fire, but the heat was insufficient to cause thermal fractures. Under this paving was an earlier plastered floor to the chamber, made up of crushed *nari* limestone, which showed no traces of burning, as it was sufficiently protected by the paving.¹⁰⁴ In the typed fortnightly reports, Starkey had expressed his uncertainty about the function of this supposed “paving” overlying the plastered floor: at first, he referred to this “paved” flooring as a “cobbled pavement”, but later remarked that “it is not certain whether the ‘cobbled pavement’ of the chamber mentioned on p. 35 of the unpublished report is a pavement at all; there seem to be traces of a plastered floor below it, and it may prove to be the inner face of the fallen east wall”.¹⁰⁵ Tufnell, in fact, would later point out the uncertainty about whether the stones were deliberate paving or had fallen from the walls or the ceiling.¹⁰⁶ If the latter, the Lachish ostraca were kept in an upper chamber, as they were all found above the stones; alternatively, there may have been two phases or processes of destruction: one in which the walls collapsed without suffering any burning, and a second in which there was a great fire that might have indicated a general sack of the town.¹⁰⁷

Once the stones that covered the finely plastered floor were lifted, the excavators realised that the plastered floor ran to the face of the southern wall of the “guardroom” and under the stone bench or *mastaba* built against the aforementioned wall.¹⁰⁸ Tufnell added that the bench probably was later than the plaster floor, even though the time difference may be slight.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Starkey 1938: 11.

¹⁰⁵ Typed Reports 1934–1935: 35, 43.

¹⁰⁶ *Lachish III*: 97.

¹⁰⁷ See *Lachish III*: 97 and her reference to Jer. 52:6–15, which states that houses were burned and the walls pulled down in the aftermath of the fall of Jerusalem.

¹⁰⁸ Typed Reports 1934–1935: 55.

¹⁰⁹ *Lachish III*: 97.

The top two courses of the south wall were rebuilt after the conflagration, as they bore no trace of fire. Starkey was convinced that the “guardroom” was burnt from outside owing to the damage caused to the outer side of the south wall of the “guardroom”, and that it was thus contemporary with Nebuchadnezzar’s campaign against Judah. Tufnell added that, if the fire had originated inside, the plastered floor would have been seriously affected. On the contrary, the floor was discovered uncharred below the stones that (seemingly) paved the floor.¹¹⁰ The plastered floor merged with the courtyard outside that is enclosed within the bastion, i.e. towards the north side under the mass of debris, which forms the surface of the Persian roadway.¹¹¹

Outside the “guardroom”, the Level I Persian roadway covered the previous Level II courtyard between the inner and outer gates, which had a cobbled surface. A curving drain issues from the city from below the squared nari stone threshold of the inner gate and makes a bold sweep southwards through the gate courtyard, to a point which strikes the centre of the outer gate, where presumably it would have discharged down the ascending roadway.¹¹² The drain is about 1.1m (ca. 3.6ft) deep, and its sides had been lined with rough stones, and the roofing of stones and mud was supported by wooden branches, placed across the drain and resting on the stone lining.¹¹³ During the British excavations, the drain was traced to a point some 9m (ca. 30ft) down the ascending roadway, beyond the outer gate, nearly up to the “breastwork”.¹¹⁴ In 1935, this drain was thought to date to the Persian and post-exilic

¹¹⁰ *Lachish III*: 97.

¹¹¹ *Typed Reports 1934–1935*: 55.

¹¹² *Lachish III*: 96; *Renewed Excavations*, II: 522 (Ussishkin’s loci for the Level II drain are marked as 4002, 4053, and 4220).

¹¹³ *Typed Reports 1934–1935*: 60; *Lachish III*: 96.

¹¹⁴ *Renewed Excavations*, II: 522.

levels.¹¹⁵ However, Tufnell pointed out that the drain was later “seen to be a continuation of the drain within the Level II city, and it presumably continued in use at least until the final destruction of Level II”.¹¹⁶ Today, the restored drain has been covered with alternating white and reddish flat stones, in a similar fashion as it had at the time of discovery (Figs 12–13 and 15–16).

The first season’s work of the British excavation on the defences led the excavators to assign the destruction of the Level II city to the time of Nebuchadnezzar’s campaign shortly before he destroyed Jerusalem in 588/6 B.C.E.¹¹⁷ Moreover, Starkey remarked that the burnt olive stones found in the embers of the fire suggest the autumn as a seasonal date for the time of destruction.¹¹⁸ Starkey probably referred to the autumn olive harvest, yet his argument that the actual destruction of the city took place somewhere in autumn does not stand on solid ground. Olives could have been stored away for a period of fermentation, and therefore the destruction could very well have taken place in other seasons, and not necessarily in autumn.¹¹⁹ Any radiocarbon (¹⁴C) test results of carbonised seeds and fruits recovered during the British campaign are published by Helbaek in *Lachish IV*, the final report on the British excavations of Bronze Age levels.¹²⁰ In Ussishkin’s final report, Liphshitz remarks that the bulk of the samples collected for archaeobotanical analysis were olive pips (*Olea europaea*) (445 samples), with the majority pertaining to the Late Bronze Age, while a lesser percentage

¹¹⁵ Typed Reports 1934–1935: 71.

¹¹⁶ *Lachish III*: 96.

¹¹⁷ Starkey 1933: 198.

¹¹⁸ Starkey 1938: 12.

¹¹⁹ I thank Jonathan Stökl for this observation.

¹²⁰ Helbaek 1958.

came from Iron Age levels, and the rest from the Middle Bronze and the Persian levels.¹²¹ The ¹⁴C-dated samples from the renewed excavations originate from different occupation periods, and were recovered in different excavation years and tested in three different laboratories. Carmi and Ussishkin report that the olive sample dating to Level II has produced a very low ¹⁴C-date, and it is thus aberrant.¹²²

1.4.2 The renewed excavations of the “guardroom” (Locus [E18:C])

The “guardroom” was excavated in its entirety by the British expedition, and was reexcavated during the renewed excavations, revealing no additional data (pertaining to Level II).¹²³ Ussishkin’s excavation of the eastern half of the room (Locus 4346) cut through the floor, which apparently was based upon the horizontal top of a thick foundation wall (a continuation of Foundation Wall 769 to the west and Wall 780 to the east). The northern face of the foundation wall was constructed with large stone blocks. A perforated stone was discovered embedded in Wall 780, beneath the floor of the room, which probably belongs to Level III¹²⁴ (Figs 12–13).

1.4.3 The Restoration Project of the Lachish gate complex and roadway

In 1985, the Friends of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University initiated the restoration project of the Judaeen gate-complex of Lachish, at the suggestion of Evelyn Stol.¹²⁵ Excavations in the field continued up till the summer of 1987, whereas the

¹²¹ Liphshitz 2004: 2243–2246.

¹²² Carmi and Ussishkin 2004.

¹²³ For the “guardroom” (E.18:C) Ussishkin incorporated the old designation in square brackets, hence Locus [E.18:C].

¹²⁴ See *Renewed Excavations*, II: 589, 591, 610.

¹²⁵ See Ussishkin 1988; 1996: 37–54; 2014a: 410–422; *Renewed Excavations*, II: 525–534.

reconstruction of the gate complex ran from 1985 till 1992, during the spring and summer months.

The first task of reconstruction were the outer walls of the right tower of the Level II outer gate (i.e. the outer walls of the “guardroom” – Locus [E.18:C]; W779 and W9530). The right tower had been exposed by Starkey down to foundation level and stood to a height of more than 3m (>10ft). During the 1981 season the corner of the tower collapsed, and its accurate reconstruction was based on old (British) photographs. The Level II drain extending in the gate courtyard and the buttresses flanking the western façade of the Level II inner gate were restored as well, since both the drain and the buttresses had started to fall apart. A large part of the drain was planned to be covered by stone slabs as it was at the time of Level II once the restoration work was completed. This was done only in recent years (at the time of writing of this dissertation), and I could observe it myself during my visit to Lachish in May 2015.¹²⁶ The drain is today covered by alternating white and red stone slabs, whereas the courtyard (the area in front of the inner gate) is covered by cobbles and cement, whilst gravel covers the area in front of the “guardroom” and outer gate, as well as the “guardroom” floor (Fig. 16).

The restoration of the roadway and the inner courtyard of the Level II gate required the filling to floor elevation of various trenches cut during Ussishkin’s renewed excavations. All the restored walls were strengthened with cement and iron bars to prevent their collapse, with the cement embedded in the core of the walls, so as not to be seen from the outside, in an effort to adhere to the original style of construction. Restored wall segments were marked by a thick, black-painted cement line which separates them from the preserved parts of the original walls,

¹²⁶ See blog in Zammit 2015b.

in order to help the visitor differentiate between original and restored structures (Fig. 17). The parallel walls that run along the roadway leading up to the outer gate, Starkey's wall "a" on the left (the outer city wall) and Starkey's wall "b" on the right (the Outer Revetment Wall) were also restored. Wall "a" was uncovered in a bad state of preservation and deteriorated further since the British excavations, which exposed its upper part. The wall was restored except for its upper edge, since the restoration project stopped before its completion.

The 1985–1992 Restoration Project only partly restored the gate complex and roadway, yet it was commendable work that improved the state of the main entrance to Lachish. The roadway had been mostly cleared, whereas walls "a" and "b" had been nearly completed, as were the stone substructure of the western tower of the Level III outer gate and the exterior wall of the gate inner courtyard. The restoration of Level II structures was begun, including that of the western tower of the outer gate, but was far from complete, while the area of the Levels IV-III inner gatehouse and that of the Levels IV and III drains behind the inner gate courtyard had not been touched.

In 1992, the reconstruction of the gate was halted for lack of funds. Much work was left for future generations, in the hopes of completion. In 1993 the Nature Reserves and National Parks Authority began the preparations to turn Lachish into a national park, and the restored gate complex was planned to be integrated in the proposed park, but the work was stopped at an early stage in 1994, when the National Park Authority froze the project for lack of funds, and until the early 2000s plans were still left on paper.¹²⁷

¹²⁷ See Belkin 2004.

The gate structure today looms prominently before visitors approaching the site. At the time of writing, any restoration work on Tell ed-Duweir was in the hands of the Israel's National Parks Authority. Further restorations have been made to the Lachish gate complex at the time of writing, including the "guardroom", as well as the addition of a long wooden ramp on metal bars that ascends the roadway leading up to the outer gate. During my May 2015 visit, I noticed that some of the restored areas of the gate complex and the Outer Revetment Wall bore the thick black cement line that separates restoration work from the original structures, but sadly there were no lines applied to the "guardroom" on the inside. Upon arriving at the "guardroom", I could notice that some three registers of stone have been added on the top of the south wall of the "guardroom", whilst some four stone registers have been added to the western wall, which gave the "guardroom" an almost enclosed look. The floor space was restored, and the overall result gives the visitor an idea of the original size of the room. Yet the lack of black cement lines on any of the restored walls does not aid the casual visitor to notice this huge difference in restoration of the "guardroom" ruins, which once comprised an open space with its original, low three-sided wall in bad state of preservation (Figs 13–14).

1.5 The "Lachish Letters" come to light in 1935

This section summarises the discoveries and publications of the first 18 ostraca, discovered during the third season of the British excavations (1934–1935), which were labelled as "Lachish Letters". The first ostraca and fragments were unearthed and identified on 29 January 1935, in the upper zone of a burnt debris horizon, close under the east wall of the "guardroom" (E.18:C). The ostraca were covered in soot, and most of them were recovered

in various fragments. Five of these ostraca happened to form part of the same ceramic vessel (see §5.2.2).

The initial impression of the location and function of these broken potsherds was apparently that of “filler” or “levelling fill” for the faces of the “guardroom” walls, as reported by one of the patrons of the expedition, Sir Charles Marston.¹²⁸ This idea apparently changed (or was dismissed) immediately after further investigation during the same year (1935), since such a statement appeared nowhere in Marston’s subsequent report and monograph on Lachish, nor was it mentioned by Starkey or his colleagues in any publication, for that matter.¹²⁹ In addition, this notion of reusing the ostraca to level the face of the walls of the “guardroom” is not mentioned in any of the typed fortnightly reports that Starkey sent to Sir Henry Wellcome. I, therefore, suspect that this notion was picked up by Marston during his visit to Tell ed-Duweir, perhaps through verbal communication, and was later discarded after further studies on the ostraca and the “guardroom”. In fact, in his Lachish monograph, Marston posed the question on the “immediate problem that confronts us”, i.e. “How did these fragments come to be strewn in the ashes on the stone-paved floor of the guardroom?”¹³⁰

All pottery fragments recovered from the floor deposit were taken to the camp and carefully cleaned with filtered water and using solely the forefinger to remove any dirt that adhered to the surface, so as to avoid the use of abrasive action or brushes. All soil from the Persian

¹²⁸ Soon after the discovery and following his visit on site, Marston (1935a) wrote to the editor of the *PEQ* (20 February 1935) the following: “The potsherds are thought to have been used to level the face of the side walls of a room before it was plastered, and they lay in the burnt debris left after Nebuchadnezzar’s soldiers had eaten their way by fire, first through the defences, and then through the city.” This statement was also sent *verbatim* to the editor of the *Times* and appeared on 2 March 1935 (Marston 1935b).

¹²⁹ See Marston 1935c; 1969: 130–160.

¹³⁰ Marston 1969: 142; see also the review of the first edition of Marston’s monograph by Rae (1937).

roadway, as well as the dump heap, where soil was thrown before the discovery of the ostraca, was sieved through quarter-inch mesh sieves, so that any small ceramic fragments would not evade the excavators.¹³¹ In the *Lachish I* report, Starkey remarked that the sieving operation proved rewarding as the ostracon piece which was later conventionally numbered XVII (Lachish 17) was retrieved, while another – XVI (Lachish 16) – was recovered from the ballast used for the construction of the Persian roadway, about 0.3m below the surface of area E/F.17/18:N (formerly F.18:B), which is the central area between the two gates, above the cobbled road surface (Figs 8–9).¹³² The latter is again confirmed by Tufnell in her report, albeit with a slight mistake in the case of Lachish 17 (Tufnell confuses the Roman number, and thus states that Lachish 18 [XVIII] was recovered from the dump heap instead of Lachish 17 [XVII]).¹³³ However, in the unpublished typed reports, Starkey wrote that during the excavation of the gate courtyard drain, both ostraca fragments (16 and 17) were recovered from the soil above the cobbled way and below the level of the Persian roadway, with no specification whatsoever that 17 was discovered during sieving operations of the soil from the Persian roadway.¹³⁴ Even so, since both published final reports (*Lachish I* and *III*) state otherwise, I am inclined to follow and stick to the information given in the published material.

Harding and Inge carefully examined all potsherds recovered during the operations.¹³⁵ Altogether these 18 ostraca were collectively labelled as the “Lachish Letters”, since a number of the legible ostraca bear correspondence (of a politico-military nature) (Chapters 3–

¹³¹ Starkey (1938: 12–13) remarked that only three truckloads of excavated soil had been taken away to the dump heap (he called it “dump-head” [p.12]) before the discovery of the ostraca.

¹³² Starkey 1938: 12–13.

¹³³ *Lachish III*: 129.

¹³⁴ Typed Reports 1937–1938: 61.

¹³⁵ Starkey 1938: 13.

6).¹³⁶ The photographer of the British Expedition, Ralph Richmond Brown, and the photographer of the Palestine Museum (who is unnamed in the typed reports) took care to photograph the ostraca, while Harding produced double-sized hand copies of the ostraca. Shmuel Yeivin, Benjamin Maisler (later B. Mazar), and Harold Louis Ginsberg made tentative readings of four ostraca they were shown on site (Lachish I–IV i.e. Lachish 1–4) (see §2.1).¹³⁷ The ostraca were given to Harry Torczyner (later Naftali Herz Tur-Sinai), Bialik Professor of Biblical Studies in the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, to look over the texts and he eventually went on to produce an edition of these 18 ostraca (§2.1).

1.6 Three more ostraca discovered in 1938

1.6.1 The south-western corner debris (Area 500)

During 1938, an ostrakon (XIX – Lachish 19) was retrieved from the base of the south-western corner of the mound, “among the burnt masonry fallen on the roadway”.¹³⁸ Tufnell’s report (1953) does not give too much information on this discovery, especially on the find spot itself, and it is Diringier who states that the debris on the roadway fell “from the tower”.¹³⁹ Nevertheless, the IAA archive holds a blueprint (file number 6899) of Harding’s hand-drawing of Lachish 19 (item IAA 1939.799), which also has an added handwritten note in pencil on the right margin, stating, “Area 500 From stones above upper flanking wall to roadway S.W. corner of Tell” [sic] (Fig. 65). The obvious hint for the location of the findspot

¹³⁶ Typed Reports 1934–1935: 72.

¹³⁷ Typed Reports 1934–1935: 43. The anticipated arrival of the “Jewish experts to come and view the ostraca inscriptions” is also mentioned in two of Tufnell’s letters to Blanche Tufnell (mother), dated 14 February 1935 and 28 February 1935(?) respectively (Olga Tufnell Letter Archive, Nos. 0246 and 0248, Palestine Exploration Fund, London).

¹³⁸ Inge 1938: 254; see also the report in the *Times* (no author 1938e). Note that Ginsberg (1940: 12) mistakenly wrote “S.E. corner of the tell”.

¹³⁹ Diringier 1943: 89.

of the ostrakon was “Area 500”, which equalled the vague “south-western corner debris” location mentioned in the above publications. Tufnell’s report mentions an Area 500 in the south-western valley, which yielded remains of buildings, pits, and tombs, and pottery unearthed therein that dates to various occupational phases.¹⁴⁰ The typed report for the period 1–15 February 1938 reveals that Lachish 19 was discovered in an area called Saddle Area 500, which demarcated a stretch of the descending roadway that swings sharply eastwards down into the southern valley around the tell.¹⁴¹ The following is the typed report’s description of the discovery:

The wet weather clearance of burnt masonry of the south-west corner of the Tell has unexpectedly provided us with an inscribed potsherd similar in appearance to “The Lachish Letters”. It does not come from the surface of the late Judaeen roadway, but from the mass of burnt masonry above it, which normally produces very few fragments of pottery of any kind. It must therefore have fallen from the battlements, and it is interesting to speculate how it could have reached that position.

The sherd is a fragment of a rather thick water jar, & is about the same shape and size as Lachish Letter No. IV. There appear to be five lines of writing in a somewhat bolder script than that of the Letters, but the ink used seems to be of a similar quality.¹⁴²

According to the above report, Lachish 19 did not originate from the surface of the late Judaeen roadway (leading up to the outer gate), but was discovered during the clearance of the alleged “burnt masonry” of the south-west corner of the tell that supposedly fell from the battlements onto the late Judaeen roadway. How this ostrakon ended up in its eventual findspot remained subject to speculation. The “battlements” [sic] the report refers to are also highly debated, and are probably one and the same with Diringer’s vague mention of a “tower”.

¹⁴⁰ *Lachish III*: 219–228.

¹⁴¹ Typed Reports 1937–1938: 4; see also Typed Reports 1936–1937: 45 [*contra* the erroneous p. 35 reference in Typed Reports 1937–1938: 4].

¹⁴² Typed Reports 1937–1938: 28–29.

Nevertheless, in his recent book on Lachish, Ussishkin explains a related misinterpretation that happened during the British excavations.¹⁴³ Back in 1932, the face of the outer revetment wall was exposed at the south-western corner of the tell, and large heaps of stones were discovered covering the slope. Starkey assumed that these stones were fallen masonry from the fortifications built in the corner of the mound during the Judaeen monarchy, namely during Level III, so he diverted the labourers to remove this fallen debris, and when it turned out that the stones covered the entire slope and the area below it, the labourers continued to remove them.¹⁴⁴ Most of the south-western corner was cleared until the tragic termination of the British expedition, but work contributed nothing and left the eastern end of the cleared area in a vertical section of sorts through the debris that remained relatively well preserved to the present day.¹⁴⁵ During the first season of the renewed excavations (1973), Yigael Yadin visited the site and pointed out to Ussishkin the possibility that these stone heaps might in fact be the remains of a siege ramp rather than stones dislodged from fortifications above, a possibility that was examined in 1977 with successful results, leading to the excavation of the siege ramp (Area R) in the south-western corner in 1983 and 1985.¹⁴⁶

The clarification of Starkey's misinterpretation of the supposed fallen masonry leads me to discern, therefore, that Lachish 19 had been discovered among stone heaps that actually belonged to the siege ramp erected during the Assyrian attack on Lachish, rather than the

¹⁴³ Ussishkin 2014a: 43–44.

¹⁴⁴ See reports in Starkey 1933: 198; 1934: 166; 1935c:204; 1936: 179.

¹⁴⁵ *Renewed Excavations*, II: 699.

¹⁴⁶ *Renewed Excavations*, II: 699; Ussishkin 2014a: 44, 282–286.

dislodged debris of “battlements” or “towers” of the Level III city. Tufnell, in fact, issued the following statement in her final report:

Ostrakon XIX, found in the burnt debris low on the slopes at the south-west corner, is inscribed in an earlier style, current, perhaps, about the time of the burning of Level III.¹⁴⁷

Strangely enough, Ussishkin does not mention the ostrakon while discussing the misinterpreted siege ramp debris. How the ostrakon ended amidst the stone heap is an open question (see §§3.1.19 and 5.5).

1.6.2 Room L.12:1065

The room known as L.12:1065 also dates to Level II, and is one of a row of rooms built on the burnt brick from the fallen east wall of Palace C. It was covered and almost filled with a quantity of large stones on which the north-east corner of the Persian Residency was founded.¹⁴⁸

A large selection of pottery was lying both on the cobbled and the mud areas of the floor of Room L.12:1065, with a heavy deposit of burnt wood and brick all over. The pottery forms a valuable group for contemporary dating, and includes a jar of Tufnell’s Type 495, fragments of which were inscribed (Ostrakon XX/Lachish 20). These jar fragments were found “lying blackened on the floor among the ashes of the destruction”.¹⁴⁹ The jar is of bright red colour and fairly fine texture, and although found in a very fragmentary condition, the inscription is written in two clear lines on the outer surface (see §§3.1.20 and 5.5). The other sherds from the room were carefully examined in case the owner of the room (or jars) had used others for

¹⁴⁷ *Lachish III*: 57.

¹⁴⁸ *Lachish III*: 118; Typed Reports 1937–1938: 38.

¹⁴⁹ Inge 1938: 254; see also the report in the *Times* (no author 1938e); Diringier 1943: 93.

the same purpose.¹⁵⁰ Holemouth jars of Type 495 were grouped as Class S.4 of ceramic vessels at Lachish (plain collar neck, curved shoulder, ovoid body), which “appears to have enjoyed its best period during tell Level II, when the vessels were made of a fine pink paste, tempered with grits, fired medium to hard; contrary to the general rule, the surface is covered with a cream or buff slip” (Fig. 66).¹⁵¹

While taking up the floor of Room L.12:1065 to expose the palace staircase platform beneath, a fragment of the third and last ostrakon of the season was discovered (Ostrakon XXI/Lachish 21).¹⁵² Since the ceramic piece was retrieved from below the burnt floor, both Tufnell and Diringier suggested that this sherd could belong to an earlier date (by at least a few years) than that of the inscribed jar 495, at least on an archaeological level.¹⁵³ Inge remarked that XXI “appears to be part of a letter like the Lachish Letters”, but it is uncertain whether it belonged with the other ostraca from the “guardroom”.¹⁵⁴ Although Tufnell pointed out to Diringier “that it is unlikely that this fragment was a part of the ‘Lachish Letters’ already published, as it was found in a quite different place”, a closer look at both the script and the fragmentary inscription have shown otherwise (see discussions in §§3.1.21 and 5.5).¹⁵⁵

1.7 Concluding remarks

Tell ed-Duweir (ancient Lachish) is a large multi-period site which, despite some of its controversial stratigraphic layers, reflects its great importance as a frontier outpost of Judah

¹⁵⁰ Typed Reports 1937–1938: 44.

¹⁵¹ *Lachish III*: 314.

¹⁵² Typed Reports 1937–1938: 53.

¹⁵³ *Lachish III*: 119; Diringier 1943: 96; see also Inge 1938: 254; the report in the *Times* (no author 1938e).

¹⁵⁴ Inge 1938: 254.

¹⁵⁵ Diringier 1943: 99.

against several conquerors since the Late Bronze Age till its fall at the hands of the Babylonians around 588/6 B.C.E. Excavations are still ongoing at Tell ed-Duweir, so further developments on this multi-period site are due. The British excavations of Lachish Level II (Iron Age IIC) yielded the 21 ostraca that were collectively, though misleadingly, labelled as “Lachish Letters”, the majority of which belong to an archaeological framework that has the 588/6 B.C.E. Babylonian destruction of Lachish as *terminus ad quem*. A common conception among scholars has been that the somewhat agitated period during the final decades of the city is reflected in the politico-military information provided by some of the legible ostraca, and debates ensued on the nature and origins of the messages they bear. An in-depth analysis and discussion of the content of the ostraca and the issues surrounding them is presented in the following chapters.

THE OSTRACA

2. The “Lachish Letters”: Publications, Palaeography, and Grammatical Features

After showing some of the newly discovered ostraca to Père Vincent (École Biblique et Archéologique Française de Jérusalem), a leading authority in Palestinian Archaeology and Semitic philology at the time, Starkey recognised the historical and linguistic significance of the main cache of 18 ostraca (Lachish 1–18) retrieved and identified in January–February 1935.¹

2.1 Publications and the *editio princeps*

Starkey’s initial impression of the corpus was of office copies of letters sent from Lachish/Tell ed-Duweir, with the originals probably written on papyrus.² He entrusted the material to Torczyner to study.³ Moreover, Yeivin, Maisler, and Ginsberg also made tentative readings of ostraca 1–4, which they were shown at the camp site in February 1935.⁴ Tufnell and Harding took on the task to carefully examine all the collected pottery from the “guardroom” at the camp

¹ Starkey 1938: 13.

² Typed Reports 1934–1935: 42.

³ Typed Reports 1934–1935: 43, 49, 57, 61–65, 74; Starkey 1938: 13.

⁴ Typed Reports 1934–1935: 43. The four ostraca (Lachish 1–4) are virtually intact and legible, and were the first to appear in subsequent preliminary publications by various scholars. In her personal letters Tufnell spoke of this visit of “Jewish experts” to view the ostraca on site (two letters to her mother, Blanche Tufnell, dated 14 February 1935 and 28 February 1935 respectively [Olga Tufnell Archive, PEF, London]). See Ginsberg 1935–1936; Yeivin 1935–1936; 1938–1939.

site, and they gradually identified all possible joins from the recovered ceramic sherds.⁵ R. Richmond Brown and the Palestine Museum's photographer (who remains unnamed in the typed reports) undertook photographic experiments on the ostraca, to obtain the best legibility possible (see also §1.5).⁶

While working in Jerusalem, Torczyner based his preliminary readings upon the supplied photographs of the ostraca, and later visited the site on 28 February 1935 to compare his results with the originals.⁷ He later supplied his tentative readings of Lachish 1–4 to Starkey, although some readings were subject to revision in view of Harding's double-size facsimiles of the ostraca, which were in progress at the time.⁸ Harding spent two days with Torczyner in Jerusalem to collate his facsimile copies with the Professor's transcriptions, resulting in various minor corrections that were later incorporated in Torczyner's final translations.⁹

The label "Lachish Letters" was coined during 1–15 April 1935, as reported by Starkey.¹⁰ In view of Torczyner's transcriptions, Starkey remarked that they had to reject their initial assumption of the ostraca being copies of outgoing letters in favour of the likelihood that the ostraca were original incoming documents or reports, covering a very short space of time, which would account for the fitting together of two or three of the inscriptions forming a large part of

⁵ Typed Reports 1934–1935: 42, 49. In other personal letters Tufnell remarked how the ostraca were "still yielding surprises" (letter to her mother, Blanche Tufnell, dated 21 March 1935), as well as the growing number of ostraca being identified (letter to her father, Beauchamp Tufnell, dated 29 March 1935 [Olga Tufnell Archive, PEF, London]).

⁶ Typed Reports 1934–1935: 35, 43, 64, 74, 75.

⁷ Typed Reports 1934–1935: 49.

⁸ Typed Reports 1934–1935: 57, 61, 74.

⁹ Typed Reports 1934–1935: 74.

¹⁰ Typed Reports 1934–1935: 74.

the same jar (i.e. Lachish 6 joining with Lachish 18, and the separate shoulder piece Lachish 2, bearing similar handwriting and address to that of Lachish 6).¹¹

After his initial examinations in Jerusalem and at the site, Torczyner went to London, where the ceramic sherds were cleaned and more photographic and chemical experiments were undertaken (see §2.2), but any efforts to apply infra-red and ultra-violet rays to the photographic process did not improve legibility of the ostraca any further.¹²

Apart from a few newspaper articles discussing the first six ostraca (Lachish 1–6), Torczyner had in the mean time published a preliminary article in the Bialik memorial volume, which consisted of commentary, general discussion, and good half-tone photographs of the four most legible ostraca (Lachish 1–4).¹³ His publications inspired a wave of discussion and heated debate that has lasted ever since, especially on the interpretation of Lachish 1 to 6, and Torczyner would later revise some of his views.¹⁴ At the time, several articles and letters to newspaper editors and other academic papers discussed the find.¹⁵ Torczyner also delivered a public lecture on the ostraca at the Wellcome Research Institution on 9 July 1935.¹⁶ Following preliminary publications on selected ostraca, Torczyner spent 26 January 1936 at Tell ed-Duweir, discussing the latest developments in the heated academic discussion generated by the aforesaid publications with

¹¹ Typed Reports 1934–1935: 64.

¹² See the details of the various specialists in Starkey 1938: 13–14; cf. reports of the ink tests by Lewis (1938a; 1938b; 1938c).

¹³ For the preliminary newspaper articles see Torczyner 1935a and 1936; for the *Keneset* volume see Torczyner 1935b.

¹⁴ Typed Reports 1935–1936: 23, 28–29; see also Torczyner (1936) on Lachish 6.

¹⁵ See various newspaper entries in Emmerson 1935; Marston 1935b (note Marston's error in comparing the Lachish ostraca's script to that of the Samaritan Pentateuch, which Starkey himself pointed out in Typed Reports 1934–1935: 49); Marston 1935c; no author 1935a; 1935b; 1935d; Starkey 1935a; 1935b; Vilnay 1935 (in Shavit and Eran 2007: 446, n. 245). Bernfeld (1935) did not deem the discovery of any importance (as cited in Shavit and Eran 2007: 446, n. 245).

¹⁶ No author 1935c.

Starkey and his team.¹⁷ Torczyner maintained his views of the ostraca, including the fact that they refer to and revolve around the prophet Uriah, who was active during King Jehoiakim's reign, rather than the prophet Jeremiah, as argued by other scholars (see §5.6 for a longer discussion). Starkey nevertheless expressed the view that “we ourselves would of course prefer the 588 B.C. date (Zedekiah) but under no circumstances do we want to influence unduly the work of independent scholars on literary material”.¹⁸ The much anticipated first edition of the 18 inscriptions, *Lachish I*, was finally published in 1938, penned by Torczyner, with contributions by Starkey, Harding (who also provided facsimiles of the legible ostraca to scale), and Lewis.¹⁹

In June 1938, after the termination of the Wellcome-Marston Expedition at Tell ed-Duweir, and following the publication of *Lachish I*, it was reported that the Wellcome Trustees deposited on loan in the Department of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities (British Museum) 15 of the ostraca discovered in 1935 (numbered in the publication as Lachish I, II, V, VII–XVIII respectively, i.e. Lachish 1, 2, 5, 7–18).²⁰ Some of the latter were later exhibited in the room containing Semitic inscriptions, which can still be seen today by the public (namely, Lachish 1, 2, 5, 8, 9, 16, 17).

After Starkey's tragic demise, three more ostraca were discovered in the sixth and last season of excavations, precisely during February–March 1938 (Lachish 19, 20, and 21), which obviously could not be included in *Lachish I*. A report on the discovery appeared in the *Times*, whilst Inge

¹⁷ Typed Reports 1935–1936: 23, 28.

¹⁸ Typed Reports 1935–1936: 28–29.

¹⁹ *Lachish I* (Torczyner et al. 1938). For further general publications on the “Lachish Letters” see Burrows 1941, §§ 24, 33, 52, 120–121, 151, 170, 190; Caiger 1947: 193–195; Albright 1956: 135–136, 221; Février 1960: 951–954; Gray 1962: 163–166; Horn 1960; Jean 1949; McCown 1943: 137–139; Montgomery 1938: 22–27; Naveh 1971; Torczyner 1962b; Tufnell 1967: 305–306; Williams 1962: 711.

²⁰ No author 1938f.

provided a short statement about the find in an excavation update.²¹ Following the cleaning of Lachish 19, the ostracon was drawn by Harding and photographed by one Mr. Schweig of the Department of Antiquities in Jerusalem, during March 1938, as written in the field report.²² Since Torczyner was unavailable at the time, G. R. Driver (University of Oxford) looked at the ostracon and provided his preliminary tentative reading, which was very limited and leaned towards a continuous though fragmentary text rather than a list of PNN with hieratic numerals, as was later deciphered by Torczyner and other scholars.²³ Driver later leaned towards the transcription of a PNN list, and revised some of the names that other scholars read on Lachish 19.²⁴ After Lachish 20 and 21 were also photographed by the Department of Antiquities, all three ostraca were submitted to Torczyner, who was again available to give due attention to the Lachish ostraca.²⁵

Torczyner included the three ostraca in his Hebrew edition of the “Lachish Letters” in 1940, republished with additional material in 1987 under the care of Shmuel Ahituv (Ben-Gurion University of the Negev).²⁶ Unaware of any publications on the three additional ostraca during wartime, David Diringer wrote an article in 1943, and later provided readings and translations for all 21 Lachish ostraca in *Lachish III* (together with other inscriptions pertaining to different archaeological dates and findspots).²⁷ Lachish 19 is today held in the Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem, whereas Lachish 20 and 21 were held at the Institute of Antiquities in London, until

²¹ See the *Times* report (no author 1938e); Inge 1938: 254.

²² Typed Reports 1937–1938: 43.

²³ Typed Reports 1937–1938: 43, 61.

²⁴ Driver, G. R. 1943.

²⁵ Typed Reports 1937–1938: 62.

²⁶ Tur-Sinai 1987: 197–220.

²⁷ Diringer 1943; 1953, *Lachish III*: 331–359. Furthermore, David Neiman received his M.A. from the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago in 1950, after writing a research thesis on the “Lachish Letters” (Neiman 1950).

they were finally acquired by the Trustees of the British Museum in 1980. Lachish 21 is today on permanent exhibition together with 1, 2, 5, 8, 9, 16, and 17.

The full archive of Lachish ostraca, later amounting to 35 following Aharoni's and Ussishkin's respective excavation campaigns at Tell ed-Duweir (Catalogue B), has been studied by various scholars over the last eight decades.²⁸ Among these studies are Lemaire's transcriptions, translations, and commentaries of either the full Lachish corpus or selections from the "Lachish Letters" themselves.²⁹ Pardee and others published a detailed commentary on the legible ostraca written in epistolary form.³⁰ Davies published a corpus and concordance of pre-exilic Hebrew inscriptions, including selections from the Lachish ostraca. Similarly, Dobbs-Allsopp and colleagues produced an exhaustive corpus and concordance with commentary on the pre-exilic Hebrew inscriptions, including the legible Lachish ostraca.³¹ Renz and Röllig's multi-volume handbook includes hand copies from various scholars of all Lachish ostraca except for the virtually illegible Lachish 15, whereas Aḥituv published a handbook edition (in Hebrew and later in English) of selected pre-exilic Hebrew inscriptions accompanied by high quality black-and-white photographs, including a number of Lachish ostraca.³²

2.2 Ink constituents

The inscriptions are handwritten in dark ink. At Starkey's request, Alken Lewis submitted the ostraca to a chemical examination in the summer of 1935.³³ Lewis made two series of

²⁸ Lachish 22–35 are today held in different museums in Jerusalem (Catalogue B).

²⁹ Lemaire 1977: 155–184; 2004: 2099–2132.

³⁰ Pardee et al. 1982: 67–114.

³¹ *AHI*: 1–11; Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005: 8–41.

³² *HAE*, II: tables XLIX–LVI; III: 405–440; Aḥituv 2005: 82–111; 2008: 56–91.

³³ Lewis 1937.

experiments for the first 18 ostraca: one to determine the nature of the ink, and the other to intensify the inscriptions on the illegible sherds.³⁴ Most chemical examinations were based on Lachish 18, on samples of material a few hundredths of a millimetre in size. The components of the ink include carbon, ferric iron, sepia, and the various black pigments used in ancient Egypt, and although “not essentially clear cut in appearance, these components can exist in various shades of brown to black, and in varying states of inertness”.³⁵ Moreover, the brownish tint of the writing on the Lachish ostraca does not definitely exclude this being an ink purely based on carbon, since there is the possibility of brown carbon, and colloidal forms are sometimes brown.³⁶ Most of the writing on Lachish 2 and 18 turned out to be a brownish stain almost transparent in parts, and therefore, although containing carbon, the ink’s primary constituent is iron.³⁷ Ostraca 1, 2, 6, and 8 had the appearance of a mixture of iron and carbon, while the more eroded or faded 4, 5, 9, 11, 16, and 17 were mainly carbon – it was generally concluded that the better preserved the writing, the browner the stain of the ink mark, and it is reasonable to suppose that iron was an original constituent of the ink.³⁸

³⁴ Cf. reports in Lewis 1938a; 1938b; 1938c. See also Marston’s (1938) letter to the editor of the *Times*; yet note that the script of the “Lachish Letters” was still described as Phoenician Hebrew.

³⁵ Lewis 1938a: 189. Noth (1966: 220) remarked that the ink of the Lachish ostraca was produced from gall-nut extract and soot.

³⁶ Cf. Lewis 1938a: 189 and references there.

³⁷ Lewis 1938a: 190.

³⁸ Lewis 1938a: 190; 1938b: 195. Also, since a number of the ostraca were retrieved in a destruction layer of ash and burnt debris (the 16 “guardroom” ostraca, and ostrakon 20 in Room L12:1065), it is possible that the presence of ash and especially incomplete burnt carbonaceous material in reducing environmental conditions (the decrease in oxygen) would have preserved the ink’s carbon constituents better. Once the ostraca were excavated and retrieved from their buried conditions, the oxidizing environment (the increase in oxygen) led to the fading of carbon and the oxidation of the iron constituents (Fe[II]), turning the ink to red-brown (Fe[III]). Soil bacteria, whether in an oxidizing or reducing environment, may have also contributed to what remained visible on the surface of the ostraca or otherwise (Daniel A. Vella [University of Malta], emails to A. Zammit dated 24 May 2016 and 28 May 2016 respectively).

2.3 Script and style: a palaeographic summary

The overall script of the Lachish ostraca is a very cursive form of the Judaeian alphabet, and is considerably more developed than the cursive script of the Samaria ostraca, which have been dated to from the mid 9th to the mid 8th centuries B.C.E. (albeit not without their fair share of controversy).³⁹ The general script of the “Lachish Letters” is similar to that of the contemporary (late 7th–early 6th century) Ophel ostraca from Jerusalem (Ophel 1, a list of PNN, and the fragmentary Ophel 2) and those from Arad Stratum VI (with a *terminus ad quem* dated 595/4 B.C.E.). A few exceptions (e.g. Lachish 1 and 8) bear similar palaeographic traits to those of the ostraca from Arad Stratum VII, the ostraca of Ḥorvat ‘Uza (Khirbet Gharrah, south-east of Tel Arad) and other Negev sites, and the Mešad Ḥashavyahu ostrakon, all of which have been dated to the (second half of the) 7th century B.C.E.⁴⁰

In this section I present an overview of the letter forms of the 21 Lachish ostraca. I will discuss the respective forms of each of the letters that are legible or visible on the various ostraca, with comparative analyses to other corpora of ostraca where applicable. I would like to underscore the fact that this exercise leads us to no significant conclusion with respect to a more precise dating of the script and of its development, especially to the precise dating of the ostraca’s composition. The abstract typology of letter forms is an ineffectual exercise when divorced from reliable stratigraphic conclusions, and the cross-dating of scripts could be as fallacious in establishing dating as cross-dating of ceramic repertoires, as Frenzo and Mizzi correctly note in their recent

³⁹ See discussions in Kaufman 1982; Rainey 1988; Noegel 2006, with references to earlier literature. See also Mendel and Grosman 2013.

⁴⁰ *Lachish I*: 30–31, 129; Harding 1938: 185. Cf. Aharoni 1981: 128–139; Yardeni 2002: 19, 20, 21; Rollston 2010: 68.

compendium of the Tas-Silġ Punic inscriptions in Malta.⁴¹ Our 16 “guardroom” ostraca and ostrakon 20 were retrieved from the destruction layer of Lachish Level II, which has been given a *terminus ad quem* of ca. 588/6 B.C.E. The dating of the actual composition of the inscriptions, however, will remain unanswered. Our approximate dating of the ostraca based on the overall script coupled with the dating of Lachish Level II has been accepted to range from the second half of the 7th century till the early 6th century B.C.E., or ca. 588/6 B.C.E. In view of this and of the fact that a few inscriptions bear some older stylistic idiosyncrasies carried on from the 8th–7th centuries B.C.E., not to mention that several ostraca are highly faded to the point of being virtually illegible, I will not affix a 6th-century date to the 21 Lachish ostraca under study, *contra* the general view and especially *contra* Renz and Röllig’s labelling system in which they assigned specific century dates to the different inscriptions they discuss (e.g. Lak6 = Lachish 6th century B.C.E.).⁴² This kind of labelling system can turn out to be obsolete in view of any future developments and revision of dates.

In the *editio princeps* Harding remarked that the writing of the ostraca “appears to have been done with a reed or wood pen, the nib part being broad but not thick”.⁴³ He added that the evidence and the general appearance of the writing does not indicate whether the nib was split. I beg to differ, since several letters bear split downstrokes (cf. the shapes of the second ’aleph and

⁴¹ Frenzo and Mizzi 2015: 528. The “pitfalls” of script typology have been ably demonstrated by Kaufman (1986) and Lipiński (1990) with respect to the dating of the Semitic script in the Tell Fakhariyah inscription. Lipiński’s arguments on the latter and other early inscriptions applies to the development of scripts in general, as “many of the letter forms persisted for a period of at least 200 years. So it is impossible to tell on the basis of those letter forms alone when the [Tell Fakhariyah] inscription was made – whether in the 11th century or the ninth century” (Lipiński 1990: 42). The inherent weaknesses of dating script typologies are perhaps best highlighted in Lipiński’s remark on p.43: “West Semitic paleography is at a crossroads. It must either admit that it alone has too meager means for dating early inscriptions with a higher degree of precision than within the limits of two or even three centuries, or question the historical, iconographic and factual evidence”.

⁴² Cf. *HAE*.

⁴³ Harding 1938: 185.

the second *resh* in Lachish 2.6, several letters on the reverse of Lachish 3, and some letters in Lachish 6 and 18). Moreover, Lehmann is convinced that the writing on the Lachish ostraca (as well as those of Samaria and Tel Arad, to name a few examples) was typically done with a rush pen, which had been worked into the shape of a calligraphic pen, and which would further explain the above-mentioned downstrokes that indicate the stylus had a split nib and/or fine hairs.⁴⁴

As mentioned above, Lachish 1 and 8 bear characteristics typical of older scripts, such as those of the 8th-century Samaria ostraca, and the 7th-century Negev ostraca. For the rest of the Lachish ostraca, Torczyner observed that: the scripts of Lachish 2, 3, 6, 12, and 18 resemble each other (with 2, 3, and 6 probably having been written by the same hand); Lachish 4 does not warrant enough evidence to manifest similarities with any of the other ostraca; and Lachish 5 and 9 seem to share the same scribe but differ from the rest, owing to the breadth of the letters and the space between them, and some nuances in the shapes of the letters (see discussion in §4.2).⁴⁵

The following palaeographic summary builds largely upon Harding's comments in the *editio princeps*, Rollston's studies, and Birnbaum's observations.⁴⁶ Contrary to Harding, however, I will refrain from making comparisons with Palaeo-Hebrew lapidary inscriptions, since we are dealing with handwritten scripts and not the craft of engraving. Examples of the scripts

⁴⁴ Reinhard G. Lehmann, personal communication, 2013. The rush plant (*Juncus maritimus*) grows in marshy areas, and was typically used by Egyptian scribes to make pens to write on papyrus.

⁴⁵ Cf. *Lachish I*: 43, 73, 87, 99, 119, 153, 183.

⁴⁶ Cf. Harding 1938: 185–187 and the alphabetic chart there; Rollston 2006; 2010; Birnbaum 1971: 60–62, figs. 23–26, chart 36. Although Birnbaum's observations are stated to apply not only to Lachish 2, 3, and 4 (the ostraca featured in his study), but also to the rest of the Lachish ostraca (pg. 60), his palaeographic survey remains, nonetheless, too general and does not necessarily apply to all of the Lachish ostraca, given the diverse handwriting styles observed in the Lachish corpus, not to mention that several of the inscriptions are faded or illegible, thus making their individual palaeographic styles (near) impossible to discern.

reproduced hereunder belong to all 21 ostraca under study. All letter types have been created by Kris J. Udd (Grace University, Nebraska) via digital scanning of various facsimile drawings of the respective ostraca to convert samples of recognized letter types into fonts.⁴⁷ Virtually all of the letter samples presented in this section are based on Harding's facsimiles in *Lachish I*, unless stated otherwise. A few exceptions are based on the facsimiles by Aḥituv and those by Renz and Röllig (listed as *HAE*), while a few other letters are based on facsimiles or alterations made by the present author, as indicated below.⁴⁸ The 1st, 2nd, or 3rd references appearing in the brackets indicate the number of the letter occurring in the respective lines, when more than one letter of the same type is identified or legible. A comparative chart of the fonts is reproduced in Fig. 22. Bibliographic references for the ostraca from Israel, Judah, Jerusalem, and the Negev that will be mentioned below are provided here in this footnote.⁴⁹

'aleph





























The *'aleph* maintains the same shape throughout the Lachish ostraca as it does in the Arad corpus. During the 8th century B.C.E. (cf. some of the Samaria examples) the key feature of the *'aleph* was an increase in the length of the vertical shaft, which is consistently longer than the top

⁴⁷ Twenty-one fonts were created, one for each ostrakon, and each letter was given a maximum of two variants (with an exception for the *aleph* of Lachish 2, the most legible ostrakon) that were set up to particular key-strokes. It was therefore not possible to provide all letter variants within each inscription, but mere samples of letter variants for the benefit of the discussion. Moreover, any hieratical numerals observed in Lachish 9, 19, 20 and the additional Lachish 22 and 29 were also created as part of the above fonts or new fonts altogether, for the purposes of the discussion (see §2.5). I thank Kris J. Udd for the reproduction of these fonts and for his permission to use them in my doctoral thesis.

⁴⁸ Aḥituv 2008; *HAE*.

⁴⁹ For Samaria see Kaufman 1982; Rainey 1988; Noegel 2006, with references to earlier literature; for Meşad Hashavyahu, see Naveh 1960; 1962; 1964; Pardee 1978a; Aḥituv 2008: 156–163; for Ophel see Albright 1936: 14 and references there; Aḥituv 2008: 32–34, 34–35; Faigenbaum-Golovin et al. 2015; for Tel Arad see Aharoni 1981; for Ḥorvat 'Uza see Beit-Arieh 2007a; Aḥituv 2008: 166–179; for Ḥorvat Radum see Beit-Arieh 2007b; for Tel 'Ira see Beit-Arieh 1999; Aḥituv 2008: 179; for Tel Masos see Aḥituv 2008: 164–165 (Aḥituv's Ostrakon 1 is Tel Masos 1, and his Ostrakon 2 is Tel Masos 3; cf. Fritz 1983; Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005: 379).

horizontal crossbar (or transversal).⁵⁰ The trend of the vertical shaft becoming shorter than the top transversal persists during the late 7th and early 6th centuries B.C.E., as in the Lachish examples, Ophel 1 and 2, the ostraca from Arad VII–VI and from other 7th–early 6th-century ostraca from the Negev, including Ḥorvat ‘Uza.⁵¹ In the Lachish ostraca, the left end of the upper transversal usually seems to connect with the corresponding end of the lower one. The third example of Lachish 2 below shows a split downstroke indicative of the split nib of the stylus.

- 1:  (line 1);  (line 3)
- 2:  (line 1, 2nd);  (line 3, 2nd);  (line 6, 2nd)
- 3:  (obv. line 5);  (obv. line 7, 2nd)
- 4:  (obv. line 2, 1st);  (rev. line 1)
- 5:  (line 5);  (line 7, 2nd)
- 6:  (line 1, 1st);  (line 3, 2nd)
- 8:  (obv. line 1, 2nd);  (obv. line 3)
- 9:  (obv. line 1, 1st);  (obv. line 1, 2nd)
- 11:  (line 2)
- 12:  (line 1);  (line 6)
- 13:  (line 1);  (line 3, 2nd)
- 14:  (line undetermined – *HAE*)
- 16:  (obv. line 5);  (rev. line 3)
- 17:  (line 2)
- 18:  (line 1)
- 21:  (obv. line 4 – *HAE*)





























beth

The *beth* has a sharply angular tail only in Lachish 1, and Harding observed that it is very similar to the common form in the 8th-century Samaria ostraca. In the Arad ostraca, the angular tail is

⁵⁰ Rollston 2006: 54; see also Mendel and Grosman 2013: 177.

⁵¹ See Rollston 2006: 54.

occasional (as in Arad 10, 16 and 18), and is also observed in Tel ‘Ira 1. The second Lachish example of *beth* that Harding gives in his chart of letters is from the name *hgb* in Lachish 1.3, and he calls it “curiously malformed and is not repeated”.⁵² This is because the *beth* in question joins with the following word-dividing dot, which Harding did not recognize in his readings, and neither did Torczyner for that matter. The rest of the *beth* forms in the other Lachish ostraca are pretty much similar, the common forms being the examples shown below, similar to the form in Ophel 1.





- 1:  (line 1);  (line 4)
 2:  (line 3);  (line 5, 2nd)
 3:  (obv. line 6, 1st);  (obv. line 14)
 4:  (rev. line 1, 1st);  (rev. line 1, 2nd)
 5:  (line 3);  (line 10)
 6:  (line 3, 1st);  (line 3, 2nd)
 7:  (line 2 in *HAE*);  (line 4 in *HAE*)
 8:  (obv. line 2);  (obv. line 4)
 9:  (obv. line 5)
 12:  (line 1);  (line 7)
 16:  (obv. line 4); ? (obv. line 5 – Harding)⁵³
 17:  (line 1)
 18:  (line 1, 1st);  (line 1, 2nd?)
 19:  (line 1);  (line 3)
 20:  (line 1, 1st);  (line 1, 2nd)

⁵² Harding 1938: 185.

⁵³ On my counterarguments on this reading of *beth* in Lachish 16.5 see §§3.1.16 and 5.7. Cf. *nun* for Lachish 16.5 below.











gimel

The *gimel*, just like the *tsade*, is a rare letter in the Lachish ostraca, and even in those of Arad. The common shape is that of a top slanting stroke and a longer downstroke descending from the right tip of the slanting stroke and having an almost vertical stance.












- 1:  (line 1);  (line 3)
3:  (obv. line 2);  (obv. line 10)

daleth

The *daleth* is fairly consistent in form, at times with or without the top overlap, as in the Arad ostraca. The development of the letter form was as follows: during the 8th century the letter was “delta-shaped” or triangular, but normally with a short leg and a minute overlap on the right side of the head; by the late 8th–early 7th centuries, the leg and the top overlap sometimes lengthen, and persist throughout the 7th century; and by the late 7th–early 6th centuries, both the leg and the overlap are slightly longer, with the long overlap being a diagnostic feature of this final period (as in Arad 1.5 and 18.1, and Lachish 4.5 [first example below]).⁵⁴ Some Lachish examples might be confused for ‘*ayin* (as in Lachish 3.1, in the very first word, ‘*bdk*) or *resh* (as in Lachish 6.7, 2nd, in the fragmentary word *yd*‘?), but overall, the downstroke (and leg) is generally too definite for confusion with ‘*ayin* and too short for *resh*. The example of Lachish 18 again indicates the stylus’ split nib and/or hairs.











- 2:  (line 1);  (line 6)
3:  (obv. line 8, 1st);  (obv. line 8, 2nd)
4:  (obv. line 5, 2nd);  (rev. line 4, 1st)
5:  (line 3);  (line 7, 1st)
6:  (line 4, 1st);  (line 7, 2nd)

⁵⁴ Rollston 2010: 98–99.





















- 8:  (obv. line 1);  (rev. line 2)
 9:  (obv. line 1);  (obv. line 5, 1st)
 12:  (line 1);  (line 6)
 14:  (line undetermined – *HAE*)
 17:  (line 2);  (line 3)
 18:  (line 1, 1st – author’s edit)
 21:  (rev. line 6 – line 3 in *HAE*)

he

The shape of *he* consists of a vertical stroke and three horizontals or transversals pointing downwards to the left, with the top horizontal stroke being of typological significance, since it becomes more extensive during the late 7th and early 6th centuries B.C.E. (as in the Lachish and Arad examples), with the form sometimes varying in shape and size in the Arad ostraca.⁵⁵ The *he* in the Lachish examples has little to no variation, except in Lachish 6.5 and 6.8 (not reproduced here), where they might be smeared. Each of the two lower transversals tends to become shorter than the preceding one, and the size of the angle between them and the top horizontal tends to decrease. The respective examples with just two transversals for Lachish 8.2 and 13.2 below are based on what Harding was able to identify on each faded ostrakon. Also, and again depending on the legibility of the letters, the examples of Lachish 1, 12.1, 16.2, and 21.5 have a short upper transversal, whereas the example of Lachish 14 has a long vertical stem.




















- 1:  (line 1, 2nd);  (line 1, 3rd)
 2:  (line 5, 1st);  (line 5, 3rd)
 3:  (obv. line 1, 1st);  (rev. line 3, 2nd)
 4:  (obv. line 3, 2nd);  (rev. line 4)
 5:  (line 8, 2nd);  (line 9, 2nd)





⁵⁵ Rollston 2006: 55.

- 6:  (line 2, 2nd);  (line 2, 3rd)
7:  (line 3 in *HAE*);  (line 4 in *HAE*)
8:  (obv. line 2);  (obv. line 3)
9:  (obv. line 1, 1st);  (obv. line 1, 2nd)
11:  (line 4)
12:  (line 1);  (line 3)
13:  (line 1);  (line 2, 1st?)
14:  (line undetermined – *HAE*)
16:  (obv. line 2);  (obv. line 3)
18:  (line 1, 1st);  (line 2, 1st?)
21:  (obv. line 2 – *HAE*);  (rev. line 5 – line 2 in *HAE*)

waw



















The *waw* does not vary much in the Lachish corpus, with a top fork and downstroke, sometimes with a slanting line cutting through between the fork and the top of the downstroke (e.g. Lachish 1.4 and 4.7). Some examples comprise a fork attached to the top of the downstroke in zig-zag fashion (e.g. Lachish 1.1, 1.4, 2.1, and 2.5). Similar variants are observed in Tel ‘Ira 1.

- 1:  (line 1, 2nd);  (line 4, 1st)
2:  (line 1);  (line 5)
3:  (obv. line 16);  (rev. line 3, 1st)
4:  (obv. line 2);  (obv. line 7, 2nd)
5:  (line 1);  (line 10)
6:  (line 9);  (line 12)
7:  (line 3 in *HAE*)
8:  (obv. line 1 – after Harding)
9:  (obv. line 1);  (obv. line 3)
10:  (line undetermined – *HAE*)
11:  (line 4 – after Harding’s line 3)
12:  (line 3 – after Harding)


- 13:  (line 2, 2nd?)
 16:  (obv. line 4);  (rev. line 4)
 21:  (obv. line 4 – *HAE*)

zayin

The *zayin* presents several variations. Examples in Lachish 6.2 and 6.10 have the central stroke, and in Lachish 5.10 the bottom line is straight. In Lachish 1.2, 1.3, 2.4, and 20.1 both lines curve back at the ends, which resemble the forms in the Samaria ostraca. The shape in Ophel 1 resembles very much the one in Lachish 4.12 (example below [rev. line 4]). In the Arad ostraca, the *zayin* is rare (e.g. Arad 6 and 16), but the form is similar to that of Lachish 1.2, 1.3, and 6.10, and to that in the Samaria ostraca. A similar form can be observed in Tel Masos 1.1, which was retrieved from an archaeological context dated to the 2nd half of the 7th century B.C.E.⁵⁶




















- 1:  (line 2);  (line 3)
 2:  (line 4)
 3:  (obv. line 5);  (obv. line 7)
 4:  (rev. line 4)
 5:  (line 5);  (line 10)
 6:  (line 2);  (line 10)
 8:  (obv. line 1)
 18:  (line 2 – Harding) or without middle stem 
 19:  (line 1) (Udd's edit after Harding's )
  (author's version, separate from the following *resh*⁵⁷)
 20:  (line 2)
 21:  (rev. line 4 – line 1 in *HAE*)

⁵⁶ Ahituv 2008: 164.

⁵⁷ A number of scholars identified the single grapheme  that was interpreted either as a *tsade* (see below) or a ligature of a *zayin* and a half-faded *resh*. I noticed and reproduced two separate graphemes, *zayin* and *resh* (§2.4).

ḥeth











The *ḥeth* is consistent throughout, with three thin, horizontal strokes (or transversals) on top of each other, flanked and enclosed by two thick vertical downstrokes. Sometimes the top tip of the left vertical stroke and the leg of the right vertical stroke are lengthened or project only a little (as in Lachish 1.3, 1.4, and 4.8). The apparent two strokes of the letter in Lachish 6.12 are the result of the merging of the second and third strokes. The example of Lachish 1.3 may either be an idiosyncratic form or else an instance where either the second or third stroke merged to the other or was smeared. The general form is similar to most of the forms in the Arad ostraca.

- 1:  (line 3);  (line 4)
- 3:  (obv. line 4);  (obv. line 7)
- 4:  (obv. line 4, 2nd);  (obv. line 8)
- 6:  (line 3);  (line 12)
- 8:  (obv. line 5)
- 9:  (obv. line 3);  (rev. line 3)
- 10:  (line undetermined – *HAE*)
- 16:  (obv. line 1);  (obv. line 3)
- 18:  (line 1);  (line 2)
- 19:  (line 2)
- 20:  (line 2)
- 21:  (rev. line 4 – line 1 in *HAE*)

ṭeth













The *ṭeth* is usually composed with a cross enclosed within a circle open at the top, with a few exceptions of the closed circle type in Lachish 1.4 and 8.2. In the Arad ostraca, this letter is rare, with a closed circle in Arad 3, and a slightly open circle in Arad 24. The example in Lachish 3.19 (rev. line 3 below) was initially identified as two separate graphemes (*nun* and *daleth*) by

Torczyner, resulting in the name *ṭbyhw* in that line being read as *ndbyhw* (see discussion in §3.1.3). The *ṭeth* in Ḥorvat ‘Uza 24.2 is comprised of a small *x*-shape sign within a circle from which it is largely detached.⁵⁸



















- 1:  (line 2);  (line 4)
 3:  (obv. line 4 – Aḥituv);  (rev. line 3)
 4:  (obv. line 2)
 5:  (line 10);  (line 8 – Aḥituv)
 6:  (line 6);  (line 7)
 8:  (obv. line 2)

yod

The *yod* comprises a horizontal stroke connecting at its right tip with a downstroke, the latter being, at times, cut right through by a horizontal stroke smaller than the top one. The letter also presents two variations: with or without the (bottom) tail. The former is the archaizing shape of the Samaria ostraca, Ḥorvat ‘Uza 23 and 24, and Ḥorvat Radum 1.2, and occurs almost throughout Lachish 1, possibly 7, 8.8 (rev. line 2 below), and 17.2. On the other hand, the shape without a tail occurs in the rest of the legible “guardroom” ostraca, and can be observed also in Ophel 1 and most of the early 6th-century Arad ostraca, but with varying size (as in Arad 19 and 110).
















- 1:  (line 2, 2nd);  (line 4, 1st)
 2:  (line 1, 1st);  (line 5, 2nd)
 3:  (obv. line 6, 2nd);  (obv. line 9)
 4:  (obv. line 3);  (obv. line 5, 1st)
 5:  (line 1, 1st);  (line 3)
 6:  (line 1, 2nd);  (line 6)

⁵⁸ Aḥituv 2008: 169.



- 7:  (line 3 in *HAE*)
 8:  (obv. line 1, 1st);  (rev. line 2)
 9:  (obv. line 1, 2nd);  (obv. line 2)
 11:  (line 3 – Harding’s line 2);  (line 4 – Harding’s line 3)
 12:  (line 3, 1st);  (line 4)
 14:   (lines undetermined – *HAE*)
 16:  (obv. line 4)
 17:  (line 2);  (line 3)
 18:  (line 2)
 20:  (line 1, 1st);  (line 1, 2nd)
 21:  (rev. line 6 – line 3 in *HAE*)

kaph

Just as in the Arad corpus, the *kaph* varies in shape throughout the Lachish ostraca, all of them different from the shape in the Samaria ostraca. The form evolved from a main shaft with two oblique strokes connecting into it (early 8th century B.C.E.) to a curving downstroke with an oblique stroke joining either at or just below the top, and a short vertical stroke attached to the middle of the oblique stroke (late 7th–early 6th centuries B.C.E.); sometimes this vertical stroke connects the oblique one with the downstroke.⁵⁹




























- 2:  (line 3, 1st);  (line 4, 3rd)
 3:  (obv. line 7, 2nd);  (rev. line 3)
 4:  (obv. line 4);  (rev. line 3, 1st)
 5:  (line 4, 1st);  (line 6)
 6:  (line 3, 2nd);  (line 4)
 8:  (obv. line 2);  (rev. line 1)
 9:  (obv. line 5)
 11:  (line 3 – Harding’s line 2);  (line 4 – Harding’s line 3)

⁵⁹ Rollston 2006: 55; 2010: 99–100.

- 12:  (line 1 – Harding) - uncertain
 13:  (line 1)























lamed

The *lamed* comprises a small horizontal or slightly slanting stroke connected at its left tip with a significantly long upstroke, slanting rightwards, that thickens towards the top. The form is consistent throughout the Lachish and Arad corpora, and has an angular base, contrary to the round base examples of the 8th-century Samaria ostraca. The variant of Tel ‘Ira 1 is similar although more akin to the 8th–7th-century B.C.E. script, but not as curved as the ones in Tel ‘Ira 2. The Lachish corpus bears several examples of ligatures between *lamed* and other letters (see §2.4).

- 1:  (line 1);  (line 2)
 2:  (line 2);  (line 4)
 3:  (obv. line 5);  (obv. line 11, 2nd)
 4:  (obv. line 2, 1st);  (obv. line 3, 3rd)
 5:  (line 3, 2nd);  (line 3, 3rd)
 6:  (line 2);  (line 9, 2nd)
 7:  (line 4 in *HAE*)
 9:  (obv. line 2);  (obv. line 3)
 10:  (line undetermined – *HAE*)
 11:  (line 2 – Harding’s line 1)
 12:  (line 1)
 13:  (line 1, 1st);  (line 1, 2nd)
 16:  (obv. line 3 – with Udd’s reconstruction);  (rev. line 3)
 18:  (line 1, 2nd?);  (line 2)
 19:  (line 3)
 20:  (line 2)
 21:  (obv. line 1 – *HAE*)

mem


























The *mem* is sometimes angular and sometimes curved, but the general form appears to have two small upper ticks, curling rightwards, the second of which curls downwards at a sharp angle into a curving sinistroke. The same form occurs in the Samaria and Arad ostraca, and in Ophel 1. The angularity of the downstroke is sometimes a key diagnostic feature for this letter as is the morphology of the top ticks, and it is during the late 7th–early 6th centuries, particularly in the Lachish and Arad examples, that the letter’s stance shifts radically in cursive script, with the downstroke curving at angles ranging from 20 to 35 degrees (as in Arad 1.5 and 17.6, and Lachish 1.1, 1.4, and 2.3).⁶⁰ Some forms bear a seemingly small third upper tick (as in Lachish 2.3 [first letter] and 6.4; cf. also the two examples of Lachish 9), whereas the form in Lachish 11 is quite crudely executed in an apparent older style.

- 1:  (line 1);  (line 4, 2nd)
- 2:  (line 3, 1st);  (line 3, 3rd)
- 3:  (obv. line 3, 1st);  (rev. line 4, 3rd)
- 4:  (obv. line 8);  (rev. line 2)
- 5:  (line 9);  (line 10)
- 6:  (line 2, 2nd);  (line 4)
- 7:  (line 4 in *HAE*)
- 8:  (obv. line 1, 1st)
- 9:  (obv. line 2, 2nd);  (obv. line 3)
- 11:  (line 3 – Harding’s line 2)
- 16:  (obv. line 1);  (obv. line 6)
- 19:  (line 3);  (line 4 – with Udd’s edits)
- 21:  (rev. line 4 – line 1 in *HAE*)

⁶⁰ Rollston 2006: 56; 2010: 100.

nun

The *nun* has a curving downstroke and is written with or without the top tick; the angularity of the latter is best observed especially in Lachish 1, 17, 19, and 21, the examples of which are similar to the forms in the 7th-century Arad ostraca and in Tel Masos 1.3 and 3.2 (second half of the 7th century B.C.E.). The old form in the Samaria ostraca, on the other hand, has two top ticks, which can also be observed in Lachish 1.3.

- 1:  (line 3, 2nd);  (line 5, 1st)
2:  (line 1);  (line 3)
3:  (obv. line 8);  (rev. line 4, 1st)
4:  (obv. line 3);  (rev. line 4)
5:  (line 1);  (line 7)
6:  (line 1);  (line 2)
8:  (obv. line 1);  (obv. line 3)
9:  (obv. line 3);  (rev. line 2)
12:  (line 1);  (line 6)
16:  (obv. line 5, 1st?);  (obv. line 5, 2nd? – author's edit)⁶¹
17:  (line 2);  (line 3)
18:  (line 2)
19:  (line 1)
21:  (rev. line 4 – line 1 in *HAE*)











samekh

The three horizontal dextrograde strokes in the *samekh* sometimes join with the bottom vertical stroke via ticks on the right side of the horizontals.⁶² The vertical stroke is sometimes also joined with the return stroke at two points (Lachish 3.9, 4.6, 11.4, and possibly 12.2), or joined with the return stroke only (Lachish 3.19 [rev. line 3 below], 4.9 [rev. line 1 below], 5.6, 6.4, 6.14, and

⁶¹ *Contra* Harding's *beth* (cf. *beth* for Lachish 16.5 above); see discussion in §§ 3.1.16 and 5.7.

























⁶² Rollston 2010: 100–101.

18.1). This letter is rare in the Arad ostraca, but some of the forms are similar to the ones in Lachish (e.g. Arad 2, 3, possibly 16, 18, and 111), while Arad 24 displays pronounced return strokes, with the third one being cut off.

- 3:  (obv. line 9, 2nd);  (rev. line 3)
 4:  (obv. line 6);  (rev. line 1)
 5:  (line 6)
 6:  (line 4);  (line 14)
 11:  (line 4 – Harding’s line 3)
 12:  (line 2)
 18:  (line 1)



‘ayin


The *‘ayin* is fairly consistent in the Lachish ostraca, having an almost circular form (sometimes with angular edges), whilst in the Arad corpus it varies from triangular to circular in shape.


- 2:  (line 1);  (line 6)
 3:  (obv. line 5);  (obv. line 6)
 4:  (obv. line 3, 1st);  (rev. line 4)
 5:  (line 9);  (line 10)
 6:  (line 3);  (line 7, 2nd)
 8:  (obv. line 2, 1st);  (obv. line 2, 2nd)
 9:  (obv. line 1);  (rev. line 2)
 12:  (line 7)
 13:  (line 1)
 16:  (obv. line 3);  (rev. line 2)
 17:  (line 1)
 18:  (line 1, 1st);  (line 1, 2nd)
 19:  (line 1);  (line 4)
 20:  (line 1)



pe

The *pe*, similar to *gimel* but with a slanting stance, is also quite consistent in shape in the Lachish corpus, be it in older scripts (cf. the debated late-8th-century Lachish 19) or the “guardroom” ostraca below. At times *pe* displays angularity in its downstroke (cf. Lachish 6.4). The letter is rare in the Arad corpus, but similar to Lachish, with a simple downward stroke, which at times has an upper tip. Similar forms of *pe* are also observed in Ḥorvat Radum 1.1 and 2.1 and Tel ‘Ira 1.1.



3:  (obv. line 9);  (obv. line 10)


4:  (obv. line 5)


5:  (line 6)

6:  (line 4);  (line 6)

12:  (line 2)

13:  (line 2);  (line 3)



18:  (line 1)

19:  (line 2)


tsade


The *tsade* comprises a short vertical stroke connected on its right to two sinistrograde arched strokes, the latter of which sometimes display angularity. Unlike the Arad ostraca, the form of the “Lachish Letters” has noticeable variations.

1:  (line 1)

3:  (obv. line 14);  (obv. line 16)



5:  (line 8 – Aḥituv)



11:  (line 5 – Harding’s line 4)

21:  (obv. line 4 – HAE)



qoph


The shape of *qoph* during Iron Age II consists of a vertical shaft and two semicircular downstrokes forming the head. During the 9th–early 8th centuries, the semicircle was always closed, but by the mid and late 8th century and the beginning of the 7th century, examples of *qoph* display both a closed and an open head (cf. Lachish 19 below). By the late 7th–early 6th centuries, the head normally continues to be open, sometimes very broadly so, but it sometimes continues to be closed in formal cursive.⁶³ In the Lachish corpus the *qoph* is varied (contrast the forms in Lachish 3, 4.9 [rev. line 1 below], 6.7, and 13 with those in 4.13 [rev. line 5 below], 5, and 6.5). These two main forms of *qoph* are found in the contemporary Arad and Ophel ostraca, some of the Samaria ostraca, Tel ‘Ira 1.3 (the open type), and Ḥorvat ‘Uza 23.3 (the closed type). Other variants of *qoph* can be observed in Tel ‘Ira 1.1 and Ḥorvat Radum 1.2.

3:  (obv. line 9);  (rev. line 2)

4:  (rev. line 1);  (rev. line 5)

5:  (line 8 – Aḥituv)

6:  (line 5);  (line 7)


























13:  (line 1)

19:  (line 2)

resh









The *resh* does not vary in the Lachish corpus, just as in the Arad ostraca. The downstroke is shortish to medium long. The top part consists of either a long, flat triangle, or, more often, a medium wide one. The forms of *resh* in Lachish 2 display long downstrokes, and wide and flat, triangular heads/loops. Some long downstrokes are observed also in Lachish 3, 4, 8, and 9, as well as in Arad 7, 14, and 110.

⁶³ Rollston 2006: 56–57; 2010: 101–102.













- 1:  (line 4);  (line 5)
- 2:  (line 4);  (line 6, 2nd)
- 3:  (obv. line 5, 2nd);  (obv. line 11, 1st)
- 4:  (obv. line 5, 2nd);  (rev. line 3, 2nd)
- 5:  (line 6);  (line 10)
- 6:  (line 5);  (line 14)
- 8:  (obv. line 4);  (obv. line 5)
- 9:  (obv. line 6);  (rev. line 2)
- 12:  (line 2)
- 13:  (line 2)
- 16:  (obv. line 4);  (rev. line 4)
- 18:  (line 1, 1st – author’s edit);  (line 1, 2nd?)
- 19:  (line 1 – author’s version, separate from the preceding *zayin*; *contra* Harding’s )
- 21:  (rev. line 5 – line 2 in *HAE*)

shin/sin

The *shin/sin* is consistent throughout the Lachish ostraca, and the form is the same as that in the Samaria and Arad ostraca. The Palaeo-Hebrew cursive *shin/sin* normally consists of four (down) strokes forming a *w*-shape, with slightly changing angles of the internal strokes over the centuries that become more vestigial by the late 7th–early 6th centuries.⁶⁴ Out of the legible ostraca, it seems only the *shin* in Lachish 3.7 is formed of just three strokes.























- 1:  (line 2)
- 2:  (line 1, 1st);  (line 1, 2nd)
- 3:  (obv. line 7);  (obv. line 11)
- 4:  (obv. line 2, 2nd);  (obv. line 8, 2nd)
- 5:  (line 5)

⁶⁴ Rollston 2006: 57; 2010: 102–103.

- 6:  (line 1);  (line 10)
 7:  (line 4 in *HAE*)
 8:  (obv. line 1, 1st)
 9:  (line 1);  (line 2, 2nd)
 13:  (line)
 18:  (line 1, 3rd?);  (line 2)
 19:  (line 4);  (line 5)
 20:  (line 1)

taw

The *taw* is also consistent throughout the Lachish ostraca, with a form very much similar as that in the Samaria and Arad ostraca, and in Tel Masos 3.2. The grapheme maintains its *x*-shape throughout, with a fairly thin NE-SW oriented stroke and a much thicker NW-SE stroke (the latter sometimes leaning towards a vertical stance).

- 1:  (line 5)
 2:  (line 4);  (line 5)
 3:  (rev. line 3);  (obv. line 8)
 4:  (obv. line 2, 2nd);  (rev. line 3, 1st)
 5:  (line);  (line)
 6:  (line 2, 1st);  (line 2, 3rd)
 8:  (obv. line 1);  (obv. line 2, 2nd)
 9:  (line 1);  (line 3, 2nd)
 12:  (line 4, 1st);  (line 4, 2nd)
 13:  (line 1);  (line 3, 1st)
 14:  (line undetermined – *HAE*)
 20:  (line 1, 1st);  (line 1, 2nd)

2.4 Word division, *scriptio continua*, and ligatures

Word division was normal amongst the majority of West Semitic scribes, and *scriptio continua* was not the practice of the Classical Hebrew scribes.⁶⁵ Word division was systematically practised in formal West Semitic writing from its infancy, sometime in the mid 2nd millennium B.C.E., although it was often neglected in short texts and informal scripts, with the exception of the later Phoenician scribes, who preferred continuous writing even in longer texts and formal scripts, the latter essentially comprising lapidary inscriptions.⁶⁶ The word-divider initially took the form of a vertical stroke during the 2nd millennium B.C.E. until it became increasingly shorter and eventually a dot by the early 1st millennium. The Canaanite script was the most conservative; it followed the older tradition and separated the words by dots, as observed in Hebrew lapidary inscriptions (e.g. the Siloam tunnel inscription). Dots are also observed in the Moabite Mesha stele. Word division therefore seems to have been used consistently in formal writing (lapidary) but was often neglected or used sporadically in shorter and non-formal writings (handwritten documents, usually on ceramic sherds) of the 8th–early 6th centuries, such as Jerusalem 23, Kuntillet ‘Ajrud 14, Meşad Ḥashavyahu 1, and the ostraca of Samaria, Lachish, and the Negev.⁶⁷ Moreover, scribes who were not sensitive to the national scribal tradition might have been strongly influenced by Aramaic scripts, thereby allowing themselves freedom to introduce spacing.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Millard 1970: 12, 14.

⁶⁶ Naveh 1973: 206.

⁶⁷ See Dobbs-Allsopp 2012: 37–38.

⁶⁸ See Naveh 1973: 206–208.

Word division and scriptio continua

Word-dividing dots and *scriptio continua* are used irregularly in the “Lachish Letters”, individually per ostrakon, or a mix of both features. Still, can it be attributed to the scribes’ carelessness? This does not seem to be the case. Paragraphs (in the sense of portions of text) and/or sentences are not indicated, but dots sometimes follow especially after *bn*, *’l*, *’l*, and *’t*, and a few words or certain compound expressions (e.g. *’l’dny* “To-my-lord”) or formulae (e.g. *my’bdk klb ky* and *’t kym ’t kym*) are occasionally separated by dots. Part of the difficulty in establishing the usage of the dot in the longer inscriptions is due to the fragmentary status or washed out ink of most ostraca. Even so, word-dividing dots are used with a certain frequency after most of the names in PNN lists 1 and 19, which are said to indicate listings of names, as in the following examples:⁶⁹

gmryhw . bn hšlyhw . (Lachish 1.1);
y’znyhw . bnṭbšlm . (Lachish 1.2);
hgb . bn . y’znyhw . (Lachish 1.3);

Dots are also used in listings of names followed by hieratic numerals, and they separate PNN from numerals:

bn . ’zr . 10 (Lachish 19.1);
pqh . 10 1 (Lachish 19.2);
mbl . 20/50 (Lachish 19.3);
šm ’yhw . 20/50. (Lachish 19.4).




In addition, dots are especially noticeable in construct forms:

šr . hšb’ (Lachish 3.14);
wspr . tbyhw’bd . hmlk (Lachish 3.19);
[’tsp]r . hmlk[w’t]spr . hšrm (Lachish 6.3–4);
dbry . h[šrm?] (Lachish 6.5).

⁶⁹ Reinhard G. Lehmann, personal communication, 2013.

Due to the fragmentary state of Lachish 20, I cannot discern whether dots were used in this particular jar label. However, the jar labels Lachish 25, 29, and 30, recovered in the 1970s, all display the use of dots (see Catalogue B).

Ligatures

Ligatures (i.e. the joining of graphemes into a single glyph) are evident and numerous in the cursive style of several of the Lachish ostraca, especially 1 to 6, 8, 9, possibly 19, and 20.⁷⁰ The most frequent ligatures are: *h+w* (especially in Yahwistic names) (e.g.  in Lachish 20.1), *'+l* (notably in the preposition *'l*), *k+l* (as in the word *klb*), *š+l* (namely, in the word *šlm*), *p+r* (namely, in the word *spr*), and *n+y* (noticeable in the archaizing scripts of Lachish 1.2 – the name *Y'znyhw*, and Lachish 8.8 – the word *'dny*, where the angular *nun* joins with the tail of *yod*). Another *n+y* ligature is evident in the sequence *bn yd'* in Lachish 3.20, which transgresses the word boundary, as Gibson pointed out.⁷¹ Scholars have argued for a further possible ligature in Lachish 19.1. Owing to the faded ink, it has been disputed whether the second letter () is a *tsade* or a *z+r* ligature (with the expected leftward loop of the *resh* being barely visible at the time of discovery), which created a dilemma in reading the name as *'š* or *'zr*. After looking closely at the ostrakon and an old photograph of the latter (Fig. 64), I noticed that there are two separate graphemes, *zayin* and *resh*. I have thus reproduced them as two single graphemes in my drawing () and opt to read the disputed PN as *'zr* (see §3.1.19).

⁷⁰ Cf. Gibson 1971: 34.

⁷¹ Gibson 1971: 34. Gibson mentioned another supposed word-boundary transgression in the sequence *'dm wsmkyhw* in Lachish 4.6, but if he meant a joining of the letters *mem* and *waw*, I cannot see it as a ligature. I am rather noticing an overlapping (or accidental touching) of brush strokes with *lamed* in the word below in line 7, i.e. the tips of the downward strokes of both *mem* and *waw* meet with that of the slanting stroke of *lamed* from the following line.

2.5 Hieratic numerals

The extant epigraphic evidence demonstrates that Israelite scribes, at disparate sites in pre-exilic Israel and Judah, were capable of using a complicated, (originally) foreign numeric system, namely Egyptian, which would likely have taken substantial periods of formal, standardized training to master (see also §4.1).⁷² Israelite and Judaeans developed a distinct numeric system with striking differences from the Egyptian system of the 9th–early 6th centuries B.C.E.⁷³ The use of hieratic numerals is attested at several different Iron Age sites of the period, among them Samaria, Lachish/Tell ed-Duweir, the Meşad Ḥashavyahu fortress (Yavneh Yam)⁷⁴, Tel Arad, and Kadesh-Barnea⁷⁵.

A few of the Lachish ostraca bear hieratic numeral graphemes, which are reproduced in the Table 2.1 below. The fading Lachish 9 likely comprises a request for food rations. In line 4 there appear two pairs of strokes leaning in different directions, but most scholars tend to translate the second pair as the numeral 2, and ignore the first, which I confirmed to be mere surface stains (see §3.1.9 and Catalogue A).⁷⁶

The PNN in the Lachish 19 list are accompanied by numerals: line 1 bears the numerical sign for 10 (which is similar to the one in Lachish 9.3).⁷⁷ The numeral at the end of both lines 3 and 4, however, has generated disagreement among scholars, who have read it either as 20⁷⁸ or as 50⁷⁹.

⁷² Rollston 2002: 420.

⁷³ Rollston 2015: 88.

⁷⁴ Meşad Ḥashavyahu 3 and 4 bear numerals (see Naveh 1962).

⁷⁵ See Aḥituv 2008: 207–213.

⁷⁶ Michaud (1958: 88–89), by contrast, interpreted the supposed first pair of strokes (and included them in his drawing) and ignored the second.

⁷⁷ Cf. Albright 1938: 16; Ginsberg 1940: 12.

⁷⁸ Lemaire 1977: 132; 2004: 2112.

⁷⁹ *HAE*, I: 435.

Since we are not given any indication of what the numerals stood for, the function of this PNN list remains unknown (see §3.1.19 and Catalogue A). Word-dividing dots seem to follow all the listed legible PNN, again denoting listings of names.⁸⁰ Moreover, it seems that Lemaire, Renz and Röllig, and Gogel, who all read nine lines of text in total, identify an alleged numeral 11 in their line 9, which nonetheless turned out to be a surface stain during physical examination of the ostracon.⁸¹

The contemporary ostracon Lachish 22, recovered in a Level II storeroom below the Level I Solar Shrine atop the mound, includes two measuring symbols noticeable in lines 6 (*homer* or *kor*) and 7 (*ephah*), according to Lemaire’s identification. The ostracon has been argued to stand for a distribution list, although its faded state inhibits sound conclusions (Catalogue B). The contemporary jar label Lachish 29, recovered by Ussishkin from Room 4084 in the Level II destruction layer, includes the numeral 1 in line 3 for a *bath*-measure (Catalogue B). Other fragmentary lists, either unstratified or belonging to an earlier date, also recovered by Ussishkin, include numerals for 1 (Lachish 33) and 2 (Lachish 34) (Catalogue B).

<i>Numerals</i>	Lachish 9	Lachish 19	Lachish 20	Lachish 22	Lachish 29
1		∪	∪		∪
2	∪				
10	∪	∪∪∪			
20/50?		∪∪			
<i>homer/kor?</i> , <i>ephah</i>				∪∪	

Table 2.1 Hieratic numerals in the Lachish ostraca (reproduced by courtesy of Kris J. Udd).

⁸⁰ Reinhard G. Lehmann, personal communication, 2013.

⁸¹ Lemaire 1977: 132; 2004: 2112; *HAE*, I: 435–436; Gogel 1998: 421.

2.6 *Matres lectionis* in epigraphic Hebrew

To this day the use and development of vowel markers remains a highly debated topic in epigraphic Hebrew orthography. The consonants that represent vowels (*'aleph, he, yod, waw*) are known as *matres lectionis* (singular *mater lectionis*, hereafter *m.l.*).

Gogel provides an overview of the positions taken by scholars (namely Cross and Freedman, Bange, and Zevit) on the system of *m.l.* in epigraphic Hebrew and on when final (external) and medial (internal) *m.l.* were first used or diphthongs reduced, at least from the 8th to the 6th centuries B.C.E.⁸² Our current epigraphic evidence for the 10th and 9th centuries B.C.E. is scanty.⁸³ Hence, as Gogel correctly observes, the date of the introduction of the *m.l.* in epigraphic Hebrew cannot be determined without the discovery of further texts of the 10th and 9th centuries (see below).⁸⁴ I should underscore the fact that Gogel's 1998 monograph is a publication of her thesis of 1990, and her data has not been updated since. This means that other epigraphic discoveries (and publications thereof) that happened in the *interim*, such as the various ostraca from different fortresses in the Negev, as well as the rest of the ostraca from Lachish recovered during Ussishkin's excavations, to a name a few, are not treated in her study. Gogel's observations are thus limited to data known until around 1990, and unfortunately our current epigraphic evidence still remains scanty for earlier centuries. In fact, in my opinion, an updated study on *m.l.* in epigraphic Hebrew in light of recent discoveries and advances is long overdue. Given these limitations and the controversial nature of *m.l.*, I will limit the present section to a cursory summation of Gogel's arguments and those of other scholars on the development,

⁸² Gogel 1998: 49–74; see works by Cross and Freedman (1952); (1997); Bange (1971); Zevit (1980).

⁸³ See survey of 9th-century B.C.E. inscriptions in Lemaire 2007.

⁸⁴ Gogel 1998: 74; see also comments by Gibson (2001: 142); Grabbe (1998); Long (2001: 280); Rainey (2001: 421); Sivan (2003: 134); Zevit (2001b: 347).

characteristics, and use of *m.l.* Since the subject matter remains inconclusive, I shall not attempt any new conclusions. This section serves only as a brief guide to the subject of *m.l.* in relation to some occurrences in the Lachish ostraca that are mentioned in Chapter 3.

In their study of 1952, Cross and Freedman held the following view. During the 9th century B.C.E., epigraphic Hebrew developed the final *m.l.*, when the practice was adopted by the Aramaeans, while the practice of the medial *m.l.* was introduced much later, during the 6th century.⁸⁵ With the deciphering of the Siloam tomb inscription, their ideas for the medial *m.l.* had to be dismissed, as the lapidary inscription gave evidence for internal *m.l.* during the late 8th–early 7th centuries.⁸⁶ Nevertheless, despite the scanty Hebrew epigraphic record for the 10th and 9th centuries, Cross and Freedman suggest that Hebrew did in fact employ final *m.l.* before it included internal *m.l.*, a view accepted as completely valid, as is their argument about a geographical distinction between the Northern and Southern dialects with regard to diphthongs.⁸⁷ Cross and Freedman noted that in the North, the contraction of the diphthong took place with *ay* > *ê* and with *aw* > *ô*, while in the South, the diphthong remained uncontracted with *yod* (=ay) and *waw* (=aw) retaining their consonantal/etymological character.⁸⁸

In 1971 Bange agreed with the general theories put forth by Cross and Freedman, yet his time scheme differed significantly. He proposed that final and medial *m.l.* were introduced at the same time, during the 6th century B.C.E., after the system underwent three stages of vowel letter development: (1) full consonantal orthography (ca. 1700–1000 B.C.E.); (2) full and semi-

⁸⁵ Cross and Freedman 1952: 56–57.

⁸⁶ Gogel 1998: 50.

⁸⁷ Gogel 1998: 50, 51.

⁸⁸ Cross and Freedman 1952: 57.

consonantal orthography (ca. 1000–600 B.C.E.), characterised by what Bange calls “off-glide” use of *he*, *waw*, and *yod* in long, accented open syllables⁸⁹, and by the use of *'aleph* as a glottal stop in short, accented open syllables; (3) the first appearance of both final and medial *m.l.* (ca. 600 B.C.E. and onwards).⁹⁰ In the mean time, precisely in 1975, Cross and Freedman revised their time scheme, and remarked that final *m.l.* first appeared in Hebrew not later than the 9th century, while medial *m.l.* occurred irregularly, not later than the second half of the 8th century, and were still used sporadically by the 6th century B.C.E.⁹¹

Zevit’s 1980 monograph attempts to trace the development of *m.l.* from the 8th to the 6th centuries B.C.E. He deems Bange’s ideas “inconsistent” in light of more recent discoveries since the completion of Bange’s dissertation in 1961 (including the Tel Arad ostraca). In addition, Zevit views Bange’s “off-glide” theory suitable for orthographic changes between stages 1 and 2, but not between 2 and 3.⁹² Zevit also criticises Bange’s rejection of comparative analysis with cognate Semitic languages on the subject.⁹³ In fact, in his re-examination of past tenets, Zevit cites both Ugaritic and Phoenician examples of final and medial *m.l.*⁹⁴ Nevertheless, some inherent weaknesses lie in his methodology, especially in instances where he draws conclusions based on too little evidence owing to scarcity of epigraphic material, and certain valid criteria he applies are not strict enough.⁹⁵ Sometimes Zevit uses single examples which he claims show undisputed proof of the use of *m.l.*, but which not only lack support from other examples, but

⁸⁹ Bange (1971: 43) explains his “off-glide” terminology as the diphthongization and indication of semi-consonants by former full consonants (*he*, *waw*, *yod*) in Ya’udic, Moabite, early Aramaic, and early Hebrew during 1000–600 B.C.E.

⁹⁰ Bange 1971: 139–140.

⁹¹ Cross and Freedman 1997: 22–23.

⁹² Zevit 1980: 8, n. 32.

⁹³ Zevit 1980: 7–8; see also Gogel 1998: 53.

⁹⁴ Zevit 1980: 3–5.

⁹⁵ See examples cited by Bruton (1983: 163–165).

could also be the result of scribal error, and therefore do not constitute unequivocal evidence of phonetic change.⁹⁶

On the topic of diphthongs, Zevit's conclusions on the dates for the contraction $aw > \hat{o}$ in the North are contestable and based on flimsy evidence.⁹⁷ Gogel brings together the crucial examples of possible epigraphic diphthongs and treats them in their chronological and geographic relationships.⁹⁸ She remarks that the contraction of the diphthong $aw > \hat{o}$ occurred in Israel during the 8th century (as in the example of Tell Qasile⁹⁹), but it remains unclear whether this diphthong contracted in Judah by the 8th–7th centuries, as suggested by Ammonite evidence.¹⁰⁰ The diphthong aw was preserved in Ammonite, and was likely expressed in writing by waw , in contrast to the diphthong ay , which contracted to \bar{e} and left no residual in Ammonite orthography.¹⁰¹ Although Zevit cites Palaeo-Hebrew examples written without waw (in the forms tld , ytm , ym , and ql) to prove that the contraction of the diphthong had occurred in Judah in the 8th–7th centuries, there are cases where the waw is written in the forms from this period (e.g. $b'wd$ in Siloam 1.1; 1.2; $mw\bar{s}'$ in Siloam 1.5; the PN $hw\bar{s}'yhw$ in Mešad Ḥashavyahu 1.7).¹⁰² Bruton remarks that, except for a few examples, all words from Hebrew epigraphs dating from the 8th to the 7th centuries that contain an etymological waw are written with waw and that the use of non-etymological waw as a *m.l.* for \bar{o} does not seem to have been widespread.¹⁰³ She adds that, “in order to conclude that the sound change had occurred in an area, we would need more examples

⁹⁶ See e.g. Bruton's argument (1983: 163–164) *contra* Zevit's conclusions (1980: 13–14) on the use of *yod* as *m.l.* for medial \bar{i} in the Samaria ostraca.

⁹⁷ Bruton 1983: 164.

⁹⁸ Rainey 2001: 421.

⁹⁹ Zevit 1980: 11–12.

¹⁰⁰ Gogel 1998: 65–67.

¹⁰¹ Gogel 1998: 67; see Sivan 1982: 225.

¹⁰² See Gogel 1998: 66 with other examples; see also Bruton 1983: 164.

¹⁰³ See Bruton 1983: 164 with examples; see also Gogel 1998: 66–67 with examples and references there; Cross and Freedman 1952: 50, 53. Cf. arguments in Zevit 1980: 11–15, 17–25.

of forms with etymological *waw* which are not written with *waw* and/or examples of contraction mixed with examples spelled with *waw* in the same text or in the same corpus of texts”.¹⁰⁴ The syllable containing *waw* in the above examples, among others, may have been pronounced *aw* (in this case, the diphthong would not yet have contracted) just as plausibly as *ō* (in which case the diphthong would have contracted).¹⁰⁵ I should point out that neither Bruton nor Zevit nor Gogel refer to the early 6th century B.C.E. in this argument, as they do not include the PNN *hwš’yhw* in Lachish 3.1 and *hwdwyhw* in Lachish 3.17, to name a few examples of medial *waw* occurring towards the end of the pre-exilic period.¹⁰⁶ The same arguments for the disputed medial *waw* in the 8th–7th centuries most probably apply to the early 6th century B.C.E., since the medial *waw* in the above Lachish examples may have been consonantal just as plausibly as a vowel marker.¹⁰⁷ Gogel only mentions that, by the 7th century, the medial *waw* may have been represented by long *ō*, although this is uncertain, as she states.¹⁰⁸ This statement automatically implies the possibility of this orthographic form carrying on into the early 6th century, but it is only considered a possibility, and unfortunately Gogel does not treat any Lachish examples in her discussion. Cross and Freedman did include the above Lachish examples in their study and vocalised *hwš’yhw* with a consonantal *waw* (*hawši’yahū*) (Lachish 3.1), whereas *hwdwyhw* was vocalised as *hōdawyāhū* (Lachish 3.17), but was deemed of uncertain vocalisation (see further discussions in §3.1.3).¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Bruton 1983: 164.

¹⁰⁵ Gogel (1998: 66) remarks that the form *’wd* is disputed, but plausibly *ā* > *ō*, if not, **’awd* (n. 109), and the root of the PN *hwš’yhw* is Verbs I-weak: *wš’*, therefore the *waw* may be consonantal (n. 107); see also the examples cited by Gogel on pp. 68–70 and references there.

¹⁰⁶ The Lachish ostraca are generally regarded as early 6th-century inscriptions.

¹⁰⁷ Zevit (1980: 29–30, nos. 92–106) lists 15 *m.l.* cases for the “Lachish Letters”, which will be mentioned or discussed in passing in Chapter 3. Zevit’s treatment covers the 21 ostraca together with Lachish 22, recovered by Aharoni, and specifically mentions cases for *m.l.* in ostraca 2–4, 6, 20, and 22.

¹⁰⁸ See examples and references in Gogel 1998: 68.

¹⁰⁹ Cross and Freedman 1952: 53 (no. 55), 54 (no. 67).

When dealing with proper names in epigraphic Hebrew, the orthographic conventions that are followed are doubtful. This applies when trying to determine whether, for example, the *waw* or *yod* in any given form is historical, rather than a *m.l.*, as in the case of theophoric names with the preformative *yw-*, affirmative *-yhw*, or elements comprising *waw/yod* which derive from Verbs-I weak or Verbs-II weak.¹¹⁰ Gogel remarks that no *-yhw* PNN are certain examples of forms containing *m.l.* (*waw* = \bar{u}) in the strictest sense, as *-yhw* may have been vocalised *yahwē* (where the *waw* is etymological), rather than *-yahu*, whilst the preformative *yw-* may have been pronounced *yô* (with *waw* as *m.l.* for \bar{o}), or *yaw-* (the *waw* is etymological and not a *m.l.*).¹¹¹ Cross and Freedman argued that the affirmative *-yhw* is pronounced *-yahu* (with *waw* as *m.l.* for \bar{u}), but as stated above, this assumption is not certain.¹¹² Diringier pronounced the preformative *yw-* as *yô* (with *waw* as *m.l.* for \bar{o}).¹¹³ Zevit pronounces the affirmative *-yhw* as *-yahu* (with *waw* as *m.l.* for \bar{u}), and the preformative *yw-* as either *yaw* or *yô*.¹¹⁴

As Gogel explains, “in dealing with *m.l.* in epigraphic Hebrew, one must be careful to separate out the historical writings from true innovative use of a consonant which is not part of a historical lexeme or morpheme to represent a pure long vowel”. She adds that Zevit does not always separate out such forms on this basis, and also appears all too willing to accept the notion of *m.l.* in words in which the status of the consonant as true consonant or *m.l.* is questionable.¹¹⁵ The question of the introduction of internal *m.l.* is presently unanswerable owing to the lack of sources for the 10th and 9th centuries, and while Gogel thinks internal vowel letters were

¹¹⁰ Gogel 1998: 57–58.

¹¹¹ Gogel 1998: 58.

¹¹² Cross and Freedman 1952: 48, 51, 53, 54–55, 57; cf. Gogel 1998: 58.

¹¹³ Diringier 1934: 46.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Zevit 1980: 12–13 and references there.

¹¹⁵ Gogel 1998: 55.

introduced earlier than Cross and Freedman allow, she nonetheless remarks that the case cannot be proved beyond doubt.¹¹⁶ She notes that the 8th century marks the earliest certain date for the use of *m.l.* in epigraphic Hebrew, and any future discoveries of the 10th and 9th centuries could alter this picture.¹¹⁷ All in all, Gogel's long section on *m.l.* in epigraphic Hebrew is lucid and offers a critique on what has been written on the subject, but adds nothing new to it.¹¹⁸ The general scholarly consensus agrees that there is not enough evidence for certainty on any of the points made,¹¹⁹ and Gogel does not fall victim to extravagant theories in her thorough discussion.¹²⁰

In summary, the following arguments can be outlined:

- The Palaeo-Hebrew epigraphic record for the 10th and 9th centuries is feeble, while that of the 8th century is more abundant, with texts from Samaria, Tell Qasile, Kuntillet 'Ajrud, and Beth Shean, examples of which produce evidence for final *m.l.* representing long vowels: *yod* = \bar{i} , *waw* = \bar{u} , *he* = \bar{a} , *he* = \bar{e} , *he* = \bar{o} , *'aleph* = \bar{a} .¹²¹ Inscriptions become more abundant during the 7th century and up until the early 6th century B.C.E., most notably in the form of seals and bullae, and especially in several corpora of handwritten ostraca: e.g. from Northern Israel (Samaria); from Judah and the coast (Jerusalem and the Ophel, Meşad Hashavyahu, Lachish/Tell ed-Duweir); and from the Negev (Tel Arad, Ḥorvat 'Uza, Ḥorvat Radum, Tel Malḥata, Tel 'Aroer, Tel Masos, and Tel 'Ira). The Lachish corpus has been updated, and the Arad ostraca underwent re-evaluation in recent years,

¹¹⁶ Grabbe 1999: 198.

¹¹⁷ Gogel 1998: 56, 74; see comments by Long (2001: 280); see also Rainey 2001: 421; Sivan 2003: 135.

¹¹⁸ Fassberg 2000: 648; Sivan 2003: 134. See also reviews by Chatonnet 2001; Davies 2007; Zevit 2001.

¹¹⁹ Gibson 2001: 142.

¹²⁰ Rainey 2001: 421; Sivan 2003: 135.

¹²¹ See examples in Gogel 1998: 58–61.

not to mention that the rest of the Negev ostraca have been published in the last two decades or so. A thorough reappraisal on the use and development of the *m.l.* in light of the updated epigraphic record is therefore due.

- The evidence in Hebrew epigraphy for internal *m.l.* during the early and mid 8th century is uncertain and insufficient. Nevertheless, there are a few forms which contain internal *m.l.*: *waw* = \bar{o} , *yod* = \bar{i} .¹²²
- The general scholarly consensus recognises the reduction of the diphthongs *aw* and *ay* in Israelite Hebrew. The contraction of the diphthong *aw* > \hat{o} occurred in Israel during the 8th century, but it remains unclear whether this diphthong contracted in Judah by the 8th–7th centuries, as suggested by Ammonite evidence. The syllable containing *waw* in 8th–7th-century inscriptions may have been pronounced *aw* (uncontracted diphthong) just as plausibly as \bar{o} (contracted diphthong).
- During the late 8th–7th centuries, there was a wider use of *waw* for medial \bar{u} (such as in the Siloam and Arad inscriptions), and of *yod* for medial \bar{i} (including the Tel Arad ostraca, and seals from Beersheba and Gibeon), and possibly even *'aleph* for medial \bar{a} during the 7th–6th centuries B.C.E., although for the latter Gogel brings up the example of the PN *my'mn* (*miyāmin*) known from two Hebrew seals, one of which is of uncertain reading (Seal 4:2 in *Lachish V*).¹²³
- By the 7th century (and perhaps carrying on into the early 6th century), the medial

¹²² See examples and arguments in Gogel 1998: 61–73.

¹²³ See examples in Gogel 1998: 70–72; for *my'mn* see p. 72–73, n. 130. For the Lachish seal see Aharoni 1968: 166. Rainey (2001: 629–630), *contra* Zevit (1980:4), deems the inclusion of *'aleph* as a vowel marker as misleading, since in Hebrew *'aleph* is a quiescent consonant and never appears as a vowel sign for \hat{o} except where its quiescence has caused the lengthening of *a* to \hat{a} which shifted to \hat{o} . The *'aleph* never becomes productive for \hat{o} in other words and positions, and thus *'aleph* in *rô(')š* (“head”), *šô(')n* (“small cattle”), *zô(')t* (“this” [f.]), and *lô(')* (“no, not,”) is an historical spelling only, not a vowel sign. Therefore, Rainey remarks that it is incorrect to say that, even in Phoenician, the *'aleph* is *m.l.*

etymological *waw* may have been represented by long \bar{o} , although this is uncertain.¹²⁴

- By the early 6th century there was a wide use of *yod* for medial \bar{i} : cf. e.g. Arad 24 (lines 12, 14–15, 17, 18);¹²⁵ Lachish 3.9–10 ($\bar{y}\bar{s}$); Lachish 4.7 ($h\bar{y}rh$); Lachish 20.1 ($ht\bar{s}\bar{y}t$). Attestations for *waw* as internal \bar{u} come from Tel Arad and possibly Khirbet Beit-Lei. Such uses of *m.l.* seem to have become common practice by the 6th century B.C.E.¹²⁶

To conclude with Bruton’s remark, “one must always take into account the fact that all our conclusions about the orthography of Hebrew epigraphs are conditioned by the scarcity of material and its scattering in time and place (not to mention problems of interpretation)”.¹²⁷ Until further studies are carried out on the system of *m.l.* in light of recent epigraphic discoveries in Palaeo-Hebrew and cognate Semitic languages, our current arguments on the development and use of vowel markers, and the retention and/or reduction of diphthongs, remain inconclusive.

2.7 Concluding remarks

The “Lachish Letters” are written in late pre-exilic Palaeo-Hebrew cursive script, in iron-carbon ink. Aside from the anomalous ostraca found in secondary contexts (Lachish 16, 17, 19 and 21), the “guardroom” ostraca, Lachish 20, and the contemporary ostraca recovered by Aharoni (Lachish 22) and Ussishkin (Lachish 24–31) archaeologically date to the late 7th–early 6th centuries B.C.E. and display nuanced differences in palaeographic form of the time. The handwriting varies on the legible ostraca, which indicates that different scribes were responsible for the variety of extant inscriptions. The ostraca also display alternating uses of continuous

¹²⁴ Gogel 1998: 68.

¹²⁵ Cf. Aharoni 1981: 46–49.

¹²⁶ Cf. examples in Gogel 1998: 73.

¹²⁷ Bruton 1983: 164.

script and word-dividing dots, and a few inscriptions make use of (Egyptianizing) hieratic numerals. A number of words and PNN in the Lachish ostraca display *m.l.* that may be consonantal and etymological or denote diphthongs or represent vowels. A line-by-line philological discussion of all 21 ostraca follows in Chapter 3.

3. A Philological Discussion

This chapter discusses the philological content of the 21 ostraca, incorporating a line-by-line commentary on the readings of each inscription. For each ostrakon and whenever possible, I have included my transcriptions and their corresponding English translations, which have also been compiled in Catalogue A for easy reference, alongside selected photographs and drawings of the ostraca (for the full compendium of images, see the Figures section in Volume II). Note that in my drawings I have included *only* the most legible and fairly visible graphemes, and avoided reproducing doubtful traces. Nevertheless, certain parts of the readings below have been reconstructed after close observation and in combination with other judicious scholarly readings. For any symbol conventions used in my transcriptions and translations below, consult Catalogue A. Moreover, note the following:

- sections of the commentary include separate lines from the inscription depending on the discussion (hence the title ‘Line/s’);
- whenever different sentences/clauses within the same line of writing are discussed, small Roman letters (a/b) will distinguish such sentences (e.g. Lachish 2.5b–6a);
- a black and grey gradation effect has been applied to the sentences in ostraca 2, 3, 4, and 5, in order to differentiate chunks of text: black to indicate text under discussion, and grey to mark off the rest of the text surrounding the corresponding lines under discussion, for contextual purposes.

Moreover, note that whenever I refer to PNN occurring in seals/bullae/seal impressions, I will only cite such artefacts recovered from serious excavations and/or held in museums, and not unprovenanced seals held in private collections, or bought or acquired from dealers and antiquities markets, lest they are forgeries.

3.1 The content: military correspondence, lists, and other documents

In Torczyner's words, the Lachish ostraca were "the first real personal documents in pre-exilic Hebrew writing found in Palestine" at the time,¹ before the discoveries of the Tel Arad ostraca, the Meşad Hashavyahu judicial plea, and the rest of the Negev ostraca, among others. Following the discovery of the "Lachish Letters", much interpretation and controversy revolved around the content, grammar, style, and syntax of the inscriptions, which *prima facie* seem to parallel biblical passages that reflect the political situation in Judah during Zedekiah's reign, and the imminent Babylonian invasion by Nebuchadnezzar II (Chapter 6).

3.1.1 Lachish 1

This inscription is complete and clearly written; in fact, it is one of the few ostraca that are still legible up to this day (Figs 23–24). It comprises five lines, and forms a list of names of nine or ten people (since one PN appears twice, although it could stand for two different persons), followed by their individual patronyms. Seven of the PNN bear the suffix *-yhw* and seven appear in the Hebrew Bible, six of which in the Book of Jeremiah alone (see §4.7).² The function of this list remains elusive and the document itself does not indicate any further information.³

¹ *Lachish I*: 15.

² *Lachish I*: 27–28; Reider 1939: 229–230.

³ Rollston 2010: 70.

Line 1 *gmryhw . bnḥšlyhw .*

G^emaryāhû son of *Hiṣṣilyāhû*

gmryhw: This PN (“YHWH has accomplished/fulfilled”) is attested five times in the Hebrew Bible, all in the Book of Jeremiah (*g^emaryāh*, Gemariah son of Hilkiyah – Jer. 29:3; *g^emaryāhû*, Gemariah son of Shaphan, a high official under King Jehoakim – Jer. 36:10,11,12,25). This PN is common in late 7th–early 6th-century inscriptions, featuring the same consonantal spelling (*gmryhw*) in a handful of Arad ostraca (31.8, 35.4, 38.3 – 7th century; Arad 40.1 – 8th century, the name in which is reconstructed).⁴ The name also occurs on a couple of bullae.⁵ The name carries on in the post-exilic period, in a legal document at Elephantine (as *gmryh*), and in the Babylonian records of Nippur of the 10th year of the Persian King Darius II (423–405 B.C.E.), where it appears as *Gemaryāw*.⁶ The situation of Judaeans in both Babylonia and Elephantine was similar: in both areas, the persistence of Yahwistic names is “most likely to be interpreted as attachment to a traditional onomastic repertory”, with the transmission of traditional names happening within families and perhaps even by scribes.⁷

hšlyhw: This PN is non-biblical, but features with the same consonantal spelling in Ḥorvat ‘Uza 10.4, 14.2, and possibly even 3.5 and 4.2.⁸ Other seals bear this PN.⁹ The name can be vocalised either as *Hiṣṣilyāhû* (“YHWH has delivered”) or *Haṣṣelyāhû* (“Deliver, oh YHWH”), a compound name with the Hiphil form of the verb *nšl* and the element *-yhw*.

⁴ See Arad 31 (the “Wheat” ostrakon) (Aharoni 1970: 32–38; 1981: 56–59); Arad 35 (Aharoni 1981: 66); Arad 38 (Aharoni 1981: 67); Arad 40 (the “Nehemyāhû” ostrakon) (cf. Aharoni 1981: 70–74, and note the different reconstruction of the PN in Aharoni [1970: 29], who writes *’mr[yhw]* instead of *gmryhw*, which Aharoni himself states was “by mistake” [1981: 71, n. 2]).

⁵ Seals 469 and 470 (Avigad and Sass 1997).

⁶ *Lachish I*: 24.

⁷ Beaulieu 2011: 253.

⁸ Beit-Arieh 2007a: 129–130, 139–143, 146–147; on Ḥorvat ‘Uza 10, see also Aḥituv (2008: 166–168) and Mendel (2011).

⁹ Seals 681, 682A, and 683 (Avigad and Sass 1997).

while *šlm* does not appear in Israel, it is a characteristic element in PNN from Judah but not unique to them, since it appears in Edom and Philistia, as well as in Aramaic and Phoenician names.¹⁶

Line 3 *ḥgb . bn . y'znyhw* Ḥagab son of Ya'azanyāhû

ḥgb: This PN (“grasshopper/locust”) is attested once as a family name in Ezra 2:46 (חגב – Ḥagab), and twice with the spelling חגבא (Ḥagabāh) in Ezra 2:45 and Neh. 7:48. Even though the name occurs in biblical books pertaining only to the post-exilic period, the PN *ḥgb* is found on other late 7th-/early 6th-century inscriptions, such as engraving VI from the burial caves of Khirbet el-Qôm (biblical Makkedah, ca. 11km east-south-east of Lachish),¹⁷ the Ḥorvat ‘Uza 21 list.¹⁸ Moreover, the names *ḥgby*, *ḥgbn*, and *ḥgbt* feature in Ugaritic.¹⁹

y'znyhw: Once again in line 3 is the PN *y'znyhw* (cf. line 2 above), which may suggest that this man is either the same person, and therefore the son of Ṭobšalom, or he was a different man entirely, the father of one Ḥagab, with no family connections or genealogy between the men mentioned in lines 2 and 3.

Line 4 *mbṭhyhwbnymyhw* *Mibṭahyāhû* son of Yirm^eyāhû

mbṭhyhw: This PN (“Trust/security is YHWH”) is unattested in the Hebrew Bible, but is prominent in the Elephantine documents, where it is a feminine PN: *Mibṭahyah*, daughter of G^emaryāh; and *Miptahyah*, daughter of Maḥseyāh.²⁰

¹⁶ See Golub 2015, esp. pp.572–575.

¹⁷ Aḥituv 2008: 229–230.

¹⁸ Beit-Arieh 2007a: 157.

¹⁹ Blenkinsopp 1988: 90; cf. PTU 134–135. See also Cathcart 1979: 246.

²⁰ *Lachish I*: 27.

yrmyhw: Yirm^eyāhû is of course attested mostly in the Hebrew Bible, namely the Book of Jeremiah, yet it does not necessarily refer to the prophet. The name is also attested in the late 7th–early 6th-century Arad 24.15–16,²¹ and several seals.²² The PN probably means “YHWH has lifted up” (Hiphil of *rwm*) or “Let YHWH be exalted” (Qal jussive of *rwm*), as in the Ugaritic *yrmb ʿl* (PTU 393).²³

Line 5 *mtnyhw . bn . nryhw* Mattanyāhû son of N^eriyāhû

mtnyhw: This PN (“Gift of YHWH”) (Mattaniah) occurs sixteen times in the Hebrew Bible, and features during the 7th–early 6th-centuries and the post-exilic period.²⁴ In 2 Kgs 24:17, Mattaniah is Jehoiakim’s uncle, who took the throne name Zedekiah, and in whose reign most of the Lachish ostraca are argued to have been written, or at least were held in the “guardroom” during this time (see §6.3). The name is also attested on several bullae from Jerusalem,²⁵ as well as on a recently discovered damaged stone seal bearing the inscription: *lmtnyhw bn hw*[...], “Belonging to Mattanyāhû, son of *Ho-/Haw*-[...]”, which was discovered near the Western Wall of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem in the summer of 2012, and was dated to the 8th–6th centuries B.C.E.²⁶

nryhw: This PN (“[My] light is YHWH”) (Neria) is found perhaps three times at Lachish, i.e. on the present ostrakon, on Lachish 26 with certainty, and possibly on Lachish 28

²¹ Aharoni 1966a: 16–28; 1981: 46–49.

²² Seals 205–206, 530, and 670 (Avigad and Sass 1997).

²³ *AHI*: 604; Avigad and Sass 1997: 531.

²⁴ Three times as *Mattanyāhû* – 1 Chr 25:4,16; 2 Chr 29:13; thirteen times as *Mattanyāh* – 2 Kgs 24:17; 1 Chr 9:15; 2 Chr 20:14; Ezra 10:26,27,30,37; Neh. 11:17,22; 12:8,25,35; 13:13.

²⁵ See Avigad 1986.

²⁶ See weblinks in Israel Antiquities Authority, 1 May 2012; Vinter, 2 May 2012.

(Catalogue B). The name is known in the Hebrew Bible only in the Book of Jeremiah, and is common in contemporary ostraca from Arad (31.4)²⁷ and Ḥorvat ‘Uza (19.2,3)²⁸.

3.1.2 Lachish 2

This inscription is *prima facie* almost complete and consists of six lines (Figs 25–27). It is the best preserved and best written ostrakon from the Lachish corpus, which shows the skill of the scribe responsible for the elegant cursive. Following the conventional numbering, this ostrakon is the first actual message of the corpus. The content is essentially made up of blessing and deference formulae. It starts off with the introductory address typical of ancient Hebrew letters, which includes the name of the recipient (Yā’ûš), followed by the customary blessing where the sender wishes immediate peace for his superior, typical of the epistolary genre of the Lachish corpus (see §4.5.1).²⁹ Next is a self-abasement formula recurrent in the El-Amarna Letters and the Hebrew Bible, where the servant abases himself as a dog unworthy of his superior’s consideration (see §4.5.2). The final two lines contain a cryptic phrase which has given rise to considerable controversy, but which is nevertheless the actual message in Lachish 2.

Lines 1–3a

- | | |
|------------------------------------|---|
| 1. ’l’dny . y’wšyšm’ . | To my lord Yā’ûš. May |
| 2. yhw’h ’t’dny . šm ’tšl | YHWH let my lord hear tiding(s) of peace |
| 3. m . ’t . kym . ’t . kymmy . ’bd | today, this very day! Who is your servant |

y’wš: In line 1 we encounter the PN y’wš, which appears to have been the name of a commanding officer (whether he was stationed at Lachish or elsewhere is discussed in

²⁷ Aharoni 1970: 32–38; Aharoni 1981: 57–59.

²⁸ Beit-Arieh 2007a: 152–156; Aḥituv 2008: 177–179; Na’aman 2012: 219. Note that the two popular yet unprovenanced “B^crekyāhû son of Neriyāhû the scribe” seals (415 and 417 – Avigad and Sass 1997) have been lately dismissed by Goren and Arie (2014) as modern forgeries.

²⁹ Aḥituv 2008: 60.

§§5.10 and 5.11). The name is also read with certainty in Lachish 6.1, with *y'wš* again being the addressee. Scholars in general and myself have further read the name on Lachish 3.2 (§3.1.3). The PN *y'wš* is made up of a 3.m.s. Qal indicative or jussive form. The name is not attested in the Hebrew Bible, although it could be a hypocoristic form of the biblical PN *Yō'sšyāhû* (Jer. 27:1) (“YHWH grants”).³⁰ Gogel remarks about the difficulty of classifying epigraphic Hebrew verbal forms, since only a few forms are morphologically distinctive as indicatives or jussives, and names such as *y'wš* and *[y]gwr* (Arad 42.1) may be vocalised as indicatives or as jussives based on their morphology: as imperfects (*yā'ûš* and *yāgûr*), and as jussives (*yā'ôš* and *yāgôr*).³¹ Both verbs derive from middle weak roots (**'wš* “to give [a present]” and **gwr* “to dwell, sojourn”), but since the first form is a proper name, and the second is a proper or perhaps a place name, “semantics are not a criterion for distinguishing the indicative from the jussive”, although examples from biblical Hebrew indicate that *m.l. waw* would be more likely to stand for *û* than for *ô* in the middle weak roots (e.g. *yšwb* – *yašûb* – in Hosea 11:5).³² Cross and Freedman suggested that *waw* in *y'wš* is consonantal,³³ although it is more likely a *m.l.* for *û* or *ô*.³⁴ Furthermore, Gogel points out Zevit’s error of giving his first vocalisation for the form *y'wš* as *yā'ûš* and then explaining it as Qal jussive instead of indicative.³⁵ Wrong vocalisation aside, Zevit follows Cross and Freedman, and explains *y'wš* as Qal

³⁰ Ahituv 2008: 481–482; *HAE*, II/1: 68.

³¹ Gogel 1998: 93.

³² See examples in Gogel 1998: 93, n. 41.

³³ Cross and Freedman 1952: 51–52.

³⁴ Zevit 1980: 29, no. 93 and references there.

³⁵ Gogel 1998: 94, n. 46; cf. Zevit 1980: 29, no. 93.

jussive, to be hence vocalised as $yā'ôš$.³⁶ Pardee and colleagues, on the contrary, argue by inference that $y'wš$ is likely to be the indicative (with *m.l. waw* for \bar{u}).³⁷

In fact, the conclusion is that one can only draw inferences from biblical Hebrew, in forms such as $y'wš$ and $ygwr$, beyond pointing out that epigraphic Hebrew evidence for the pronunciation of an internal *m.l. waw* in an accented syllable is likely to be \bar{u} , and therefore indicating the indicative.³⁸ The claim that the same *m.l.* in an unaccented syllable more likely represents \bar{o} is not supported by epigraphic Hebrew evidence, except perhaps for the (likely) Egyptian name $ḥwrš$ ($ḥôrēš$), but a single example cannot alone support this assertion.³⁹ In summary, on the basis of biblical Hebrew, if *m.l. waw* in such forms as $y'wš$ and $ygwr$ was to be vocalised as \bar{u} , they should be classified as indicatives rather than jussives.⁴⁰

šm't: The noun *šm't* could either be singular construct or the plural construct (i.e. “tiding[s]-of peace”). The idiom *šm't šlm* literally means “report(s) of peace, health/well-being”, which is repeated in Lachish 3.3, 5.2, and 9.1–2, and is somewhat parallel to the idiom *šm't ṭb* “report(s) of good (fortune)” (Lachish 4.2; 5.2; 8.1–2; and possibly 3.4) (see §4.5.1).

t't kym: The form *t* (“now”) in line 3 is attested in Hebrew inscriptions a total of 27 times, ten times in the Lachish ostraca alone. The longer biblical form עתה, on the other hand, does not turn up in inscriptions. The form תע is attested (as Ketiv) in Ps. 74:6 and Ezek. 23:43. The expression *kym* translates to “this very day, now” (as in 1 Sam. 9:27 – “at this time, at once”), and the repeated formula *t kym t kym* could stand for emphasis, meaning

³⁶ See also Kahle 1938: 273.

³⁷ Pardee et al. 1982: 80.

³⁸ Gogel 1998: 94.

³⁹ Gogel 1998: 94–95 and references there.

⁴⁰ Gogel 1998: 95.

“immediately”.⁴¹ Since the expression *’t kym* is used again in ostraca 4, 5, and 6, Torczyner (in his entry to Lachish 6) stated his suspicion that this phrase may have once been a classical Hebrew formula that fell out of use (written in full as עתה כיום), which stood for the expression “just now”.⁴²

Lines 3b–5a

- | | |
|---|--|
| 3. <i>m . ’t . kym . ’t . kymmy . ’bd</i> | ...e today, this very day! Who is your servant |
| 4. <i>kklb . ky . zkr . ’dny . ’t .</i> | (but) a dog, that my lord remembered |
| 5. [<i>]bdh . ybkr . yhwh ’t’</i> | his [se]rvant? May YHWH promptly bring (to) my |

my ’bdk klb ky: In Lachish 2 we encounter for the first time the self-abasement expression “Who is your servant (but) a dog?”. The other two statements of self-abasement occur in Lachish 5.3–4 and 6.2–3, and to date nothing similar has turned up in the rest of the extant Palaeo-Hebrew epigraphic evidence. This self-abasement formula is not uncommon in the Hebrew Bible and extra-biblical sources (see §4.5.2). In Lachish 2, the subordinate is thankful towards his superior for “remembering” him for something known only to both protagonists.

Lines 5b–6

- | | |
|--|--|
| 5. [<i>]bdh . ybkr . yhwh ’t’</i> | his [se]rvant? May YHWH promptly bring (to) my |
| 6. [<i>dn]y . dbr . ’sr . l’ . yd ’th</i> | I[or]d information which which you (<i>or</i> I) do not know! |

The final clause Lachish 2 raised controversies among scholars for three principal reasons: (i) the fragmentary state of the ostracon on the bottom right corner; (ii) the verb *ybkr* in line 5; (iii) and the various ways one can translate lines 5b–6. I have recently discussed these issues in a separate paper, a summary of which I will provide below.⁴³

⁴¹ See Driver, S. R. 1890: 59; Aḥituv 2008: 60, 62.

⁴² See discussion and references in *Lachish I*: 109–111.

⁴³ Zammit forthcoming.

[*ʾbdh*]: The interpretation of lines 5b–6 hinges significantly on the fragmentary state of the ostrakon. Like the majority of scholars today, I am fully convinced that some letters were lost from the bottom right corner owing to a piece that broke off. A closer look at the sherd indicates that the right margin is fairly slanting from lines 1–4 and that it continued to slant at an angle for lines 5–6 as well, but the breakage in lines 5–6 cuts through the text. Consequently, the margin for lines 5–6 is lost⁴⁴ (Fig. 27). The physical examination of the sherd eventually confirmed this. Torczyner restored the inscription by adding the letter *ʾayin* at the start of line 5 to obtain the word [*ʾbdh*], which fits the context perfectly and completes the formula of self-abasement. This is virtually agreed upon by most scholars, including myself.

[*ʾdn*]y: As for the apparent lacuna between the *aleph* at the end of line 5 and the *yod* at the start of line 6, Torczyner proposed the letters *daleth* and *nun* to obtain the word [*ʾdn*]y, which seems plausible, since *ʾdny* is generally “the only noun which the writer compounds with the pronominal suffix of the first person”.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, given the the overall grammatical and interpretative difficulties, Torczyner opted instead to read [*mr*]y as a *verbum dicendi* in connection to *dbr* (“word”), and hence recreated lines 5 and 6 as “May [YHWH] privilege my lord (telling thee) something which you (*or* I) do not know”.⁴⁶ The majority of scholars, however, still favour the reconstruction [*ʾdn*]y, as it falls into the customary blessing formula genre of the Lachish corpus. I agree with the latter, since [*ʾdn*]y is as yet the best contender for the typical divine blessing recurrent in the Lachish

⁴⁴ Hempel (1938: 129–130), Vellas (1939: 11–12); Müller (1970: 236–237), and Gibson (1971: 37–38) were not palaeographically convinced of these lacunae in the text. Nonetheless, their individual interpretations are today obsolete.

⁴⁵ *Lachish I*: 41. Vaccari (1939b: 185) deems *ʾdny* the best contender for the missing letters.

⁴⁶ See discussion in *Lachish I*: 41–43.

corpus, which usually follows this pattern: [Piel jussive] [name of deity – YHWH] [object marker 't] [object 'dny] (cf. Lachish 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, and 9).

ybkr: The verbal form *ybkr* in line 5 has been problematic for both the identification of the first radical and for grammatical reasons. The first radical was initially read as *zayin* by Torczyner (*yzkr* – “May YHWH cause my lord to remember”), but he later insisted on the reading of *beth* (*ybkr*) following the final cleaning of the ostrakon.⁴⁷ Nonetheless, given the difficulty of **bkr*, Torczyner’s only solution was to identify *ybkr* with *ybqr* – “May [YHWH] investigate (and punish) my [saying] something which I did not (even) know!”, owing to the *kaph-qoph* confusion in *bkr-bqr*, the latter being later rejected by scholars, as it is not attested elsewhere in this period.⁴⁸ Scholars today accept the reading of *beth* without a doubt (with a top loop and a downward stroke curving leftwards), so the verb is read as Piel 3.m.s. imperfect of **bkr*. The surface of the sherd in the general area of the word *ybkr* in line 5 (and continuing downwards into line 6) seems to be rough and/or gritty, not to mention that the ink of the first radical suffered a break or scratch on the surface, which is visible on the ostrakon. The physical examination of the sherd has confirmed without a doubt that the letter in question is a *beth*, and so I accept the reading of the verbal form *ybkr*, which still remains difficult to interpret in the general context of the message.

Since the usage of *bkr* as presented in Lachish 2 is not attested in biblical Hebrew, the resulting varied interpretations have been speculative. The form בַּכַּר in the Hebrew Bible

⁴⁷ *Lachish I*: 40; for the reading *yzkr* (translation “cause to remember”), see the initial interpretation by Albright (1936: 12); see also Smelik 1991: 120.

⁴⁸ *Lachish I*: 37, 41–43; cf. counterargument by Pardee et al. 1982: 80; Birnbaum 1939: 93. On the reading *yzkr*, see also Cassuto 1936b: 168–169; Nebe 1996. Further alternative readings were proposed: on the reading *y'kr*, see Ginsberg 1935–1936: 80; 1938: 25; 1940: 10–11; Albright 1938: 13; 1941: 19; Hempel 1938: 129; de Vaux 1939: 187, 188; and Yadin 1984: 183, 184; see also Burrows 1941: 29 §24; Vriezen and Hospers 1951: 31; Galling 1968: 75; and the comment by Stamm (1978: 342) vis-à-vis Müller (1970: 234–237); on the reading *ynkr*, see Reider 1939: 230–232; Chapira 1945: 110–112. All three readings (*yzkr*, *y'kr*, *ynkr*) are today obsolete.

generally means “to bear first-fruits” (Ezek. 47:12 [Piel]; Jer. 4:31 [Hiphil]), “to treat (legally) as the firstborn” (Deut. 21:16 [Piel]), or “the firstling (among animals) that is firstborn to YHWH” (Lev. 27:26 [Pual]). In Syriac *bkr* in the Pael means “to be the first, do (something) as the first”, and in Arabic (in different roots) it means “to arise, do (something early)”.⁴⁹ Given the general etymology of this root in cognate languages, scholars interpreted the verbal root in Lachish 2 accordingly. The issue was to reconstruct the object that follows the object marker *t*, as discussed in the above section. Michaud originally proposed *ybkr* to mean “favour”, with *t* *[dn]y* as direct object, thus making the sender wish for his superior to be favoured in the eyes of YHWH (like a firstborn); hence, “Que Yahweh favorise mon s[eigneur]!”.⁵⁰ Other scholars, including Dussaud, Vaccari, Lemaire, Aḥituv, Pardee and others, propose the translation of “May YHWH give my lord first knowledge of anything you do not know”.⁵¹ In this version, the sender wishes that new information be made available for his superior’s benefit. Aḥituv remarks that *ybkr* can have one of two meanings: (i) either that YHWH would grant priority to some matter; (ii) or that YHWH would give priority to the officer (Yā’ūš) in knowing some matter (hence, “May YHWH make known[?] to my [lor]d a matter of which you do not know”), the latter of which is favoured by Aḥituv.⁵² As shown in my reading and translation above and in Catalogue A, I follow the interpretation given by the scholarly majority, and

⁴⁹ In addition, different languages have mostly one-syllable substantives for “firstborn” derived from this root, which may point towards the central meaning of **bkr* in Hebrew as originally being “firstborn” (Aramaic *bakr*; Hebrew *bekor*; Arabic *bikr*; Ethiopic *bak^wer*), and the Akkadian terms *bakkaru*, *bakru* “young camel, young ass” may be related to this root (see Botterweck and Ringgren 1974: 121–127).

⁵⁰ Michaud 1957: 42. Note that Gogel’s (1998) translations of the verb *ybkr* in Lachish 2 do not match: on pg. 131 she gives the Piel imperfect; “May [YHWH] treat as a first-born”, whilst in her lexicon on pg. 310 she translates it as “May [YHWH] favour...”. I thank Kevin J. Cathcart for pointing this out.

⁵¹ See Dussaud 1938: 261, n. 2; Vaccari 1939b: 186; Lemaire 2004: 2100; Aḥituv 2008: 60, 62; Pardee et al. 1982: 79, 80; cf. Lemaire’s first translation: “Que Yhwh accorde à mon (maî)tre la primauté d’une parole que tu n’as pas connue” (1977: 97).

⁵² Aḥituv 2008: 60, 62.

refer to the etymology of **bkr* in cognate languages (Syriac and Arabic), with the Piel jussive *ybkr* being associated with “earliness, promptness, doing something early”, hence “May YHWH promptly bring...information”.

dbr: As discussed above, some scholars choose to read lines 5b–6 as a full sentence in which the verb *ybkr* governs the object '[*dn*]y, and *ybkr* is understood to mean to grant first knowledge of anything (the second object *dbr*) which the high officer does not know. Even so, the “matter” (*dbr*) that is referred to remains unknown to us. Contrary to this interpretation, Michaud, followed by Renz and Röllig, opted to read the second part of the final clause in lines 5b–6 as a separate sentence altogether, hence: *dbr 'šr l' yd'th* “Speak that which you (*or* I) do not know!” (line 6b), as separate from *ybkr yhw h 't '[dn]y* “May YHWH favour my l[or]d” (lines 5b–6a).⁵³ Citing Modern Hebrew, Michaud chose to read the Piel 2.m.s. imperative *dabbēr* rather than the noun *dābār*.

Lehmann also favours the reading of two distinct phrases in lines 5b–6. Nevertheless, he is not convinced that *dbr* is an imperative form, since there is a clear master-servant relationship attested in lines 1–5, thus making it unlikely that a subordinate would be brusquely direct to his master, asking him to express his ignorance, not to mention that it seems mundane to ask for something that could be easily done through a messenger.⁵⁴

Lehmann instead prefers to interpret *dbr* as “faktivisches Perfekt *dābār*” („Er sagt etwas, das du nicht weißt!”), and if one considers that *no actual message* is included in Lachish 2, then the *ybkr* greeting could perhaps represent part of an expanded duplication of lines

⁵³ See Michaud 1957: 45–46; 1958: 85, n. 2; *HAE*, I: 412. Furthermore, Cassuto (1936b: 168–169) also considered the possibility of reading *'šr* as the PN Ashur, rather than the relative *'ašēr*, hence one of his options is to read the second part of line 6 (6b) as a separate sentence altogether: “La cosa di *'šr* non la conosco”.

⁵⁴ Lehmann 2003: 90–92.

1–3.⁵⁵ The formal language of Lachish 2, argues Lehmann, makes it somewhat similar to Lachish 5, which he describes as an accompanying note or “packing slip” rather than a message *per se*. Lachish 5 is structured similarly to Lachish 2 (*sans* the address), with a *praescriptio* composed of a greeting, followed by a self-abasement formula of appreciation for some letters that the servant received from his superior and which he in turn is returning, and wishful blessings for a good harvest, perhaps to obtain a share of grain, as likely suggested by the final request for grain (according to one interpretation) (§3.1.5).⁵⁶ Together with Lachish 6, which also features a self-abasement formula (§3.1.6), Lachish 2 and 5 stand out from the rest through their excess of formal language, with Lachish 2 being the shortest and most cryptic. Lehmann in fact suspects that Lachish 2 might be viewed as some sort of “pass” or “accreditation letter” with a coded final phrase, especially if the messenger was bearing sensitive military information, and he further suggests that the plain lists of PNN from the corpus (Lachish 1 and 11) might denote accredited messengers arriving at Lachish (§§3.1.1 and 3.1.11).⁵⁷ Lehmann’s thesis is conceivable, given the political setting, yet as it stands, it is just one of the many hypotheses put forward to understand this particular message in its historical and archaeological context.

Translating **dbr* in line 6 as a verb poses some problems, and Michaud’s reading of “Speak/Say what you (or I) do not know!” requires comment. First of all, it would be a strange scenario having the servant ask his superior to say what the superior does not know, albeit we have to understand the sender’s request in terms of “what you do not *yet* know”. The alternative scenario of the servant asking his superior to inform him what the

⁵⁵ Lehmann 2003: 92–93.

⁵⁶ Lehmann 2003: 84–85, 91, 93.

⁵⁷ Lehmann 2003: 92–94; Reinhard G. Lehmann, personal communication, 2013.

servant is unaware of (“I do not know”) would be fitting. In the latter case, then, the servant is admitting ignorance of some matter (and perhaps, as a result, he was unable to get the information requested), and is therefore asking the master to inform him himself. However, as Lehmann remarks, the imperative *dabbēr*, on its own, seems curt and out of place in the master-servant relationship denoted through the foregoing blessing and self-abasement formulae, and in the overall courteous language of the message. One would expect the use of the imperative to be written either with the interjection *n’* or with the transition marker *w’t*, or both: *dbr n’* (*dabbēr-na’*); *w’t dbr* (*w^e ‘attā dabbēr*); *w’t dbr n’* (*w^e ‘attā dabbēr-na’*) (cf. Lachish 3.4b–5a; 6.5; 9.2b–3a). Our sentence on its own, as a final request for the message, is rather abrupt in the overall text without either the interjection *n’*, or else the prefixed *w’t*, which (alongside the prefixed *w-*) is the standard marker of the beginning of the body in Hebrew and Aramaic letters, used to mark the point of transition between the praescriptio (or a preamble of any kind – historical, circumstantial, or causal) and the point of a given statement.⁵⁸ I therefore hold on to these reservations on Michaud’s reading until proven otherwise.

Like the majority of scholars, I translate lines 5b–6 as one sentence, with **dbr* as the noun *dābār*. Most scholars usually render the sentence as “May YHWH grant to my lord first knowledge of anything/a matter which you/I do not know.” I rather choose to translate the indirect object *dbr* as “information” (i.e. “news”), given that *dābār* can also carry the meaning of “message, report, tidings” (e.g. Gen. 37:14; Ex. 33:4; 2 Sam. 15:28).⁵⁹ This translation also fits the historico-archaeological context and the epistolary genre of the Lachish messages, which belong to a time when reports were sent around between

⁵⁸ On *w’t*, see Pardee 1978: 292.

⁵⁹ See further examples in *BDB*: 182.

officials stationed in different outposts in Judah (§§5.11 and 6.3.1). In the other legible ostraca, **dbr* stands for “matter” (Lachish 4.5), “word” (Lachish 9.5–6), and “words” (construct form *dbry* in Lachish 6.5).⁶⁰ Nonetheless, with the exception of the ambiguous example of **dbr* in Lachish 2.6 (which, as indicated above, has been interpreted as a verb by Michaud, Renz, Röllig, and Lehmann), **dbr* does not appear as the verb “to speak, say” in the other legible messages. Rather, **'mr* (“to say”) is generally used to convey something that is or was communicated, especially in the language of the long messages (Lachish 3.8,14,20–21; and 6.4–5), whilst the Hiphil of **ngd* is used when referring to something that was “reported” to someone (Lachish 3.13).

yd'th: The final *he* of the verb *yd'th* remains controversial. In epigraphic Hebrew, a direct object may be suffixed directly to a verb, as in biblical Hebrew.⁶¹ The final *he* in *yd'th* in Lachish 2.6 could very well stand for a 3.m.s. object suffix (*y^eda'tōh* or *y^eda'tāhū*), resumptive of the noun *dbr* (“matter, thing, word”) (see above), as in the similar cases of Lachish 3.21 (*šlḥh*) and 4.6 (*lqḥh*) (§§3.1.3 and 3.1.4).⁶² Alternatively, *yd'th* could be the 2.m.s. perfect *yāda'tāh* (“you knew” or “you know”, since it implies a constant state of knowing), with final *m.l. he* for long *ā*. Hence, some scholars choose to read *yd'th* in Lachish 2.6 as the 2.m.s. perfect *yāda'tāh*.⁶³ Both interpretations seem possible in the present ostrakon, given the problematic syntax of lines 5–6. Cross and Freedman

⁶⁰ Another possible reading of **dbr* is in Lachish 16.10?, but given the fragmentary ostrakon, the reading remains hypothetical.

⁶¹ See Gogel 1998: 162–164.

⁶² Lachish 3.21 reads *šlḥh 'b<d>k 'l 'dny* (“your ser<v>ant has sent *it* to my lord”), while Lachish 4.6 reads *wsmkyhw lqḥh šm'yhw* (“And as for Šmaḳyāhū, Šma'yāhū took *him*...”); see Pardee et al. 1982: 80. Hebrew epigraphic evidence so far proves that *wāw* did not replace *he* as the 3.m.s. object suffix by the end of the 6th century B.C.E. (Gogel 1998: 223). Cross and Freedman (1952: 46) remarked that the final /ō/ is always represented by *he* and never by *waw* in pre-exilic Hebrew inscriptions; see also Cross 1970: 301 on the late 6th-century B.C.E. Khirbet Beit Lei inscriptions.

⁶³ Similarly in Lachish 3.8: *wky 'mr 'dny l' yd 'th qr' spr* (“And with respect to [what] my lord said, “You do not know how to read a letter!”); *contra* Cross 1985: 43 (followed by Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005: 309; Park 2013: 469); see Rollston 2006: 62–63, n. 43.

considered the suffixed *he* (representing \hat{o}) (in both Lachish 2.6 and 3.8) as “retrospective”, hence their translation “thou hast [not] known *it*” ($y^e da 't\bar{o}h$ or $y^e da 't\bar{a}h\bar{u}$).⁶⁴ For the similar cases of Arad 7.6 (*ktbth*) and 40.9 (*yd'th*), Parunak agreed with the views of Cross and Freedman on the regular apocopation of the 3.m.s. object suffix in all its cases, stating that “the apocopated form is expected in the informal material of the Arad corpus”.⁶⁵ Aharoni, in contrast, treated the *he* ending in Arad 7 and 40 as *m.l.* for long \bar{a} , corresponding to the *plene* 2.m.s. verbal suffix *-th*.⁶⁶ Similarly, some scholars are inclined to accept the reading and vocalisation of 2.m.s. perfect $y\bar{a}da 't\bar{a}h$ in Lachish 2.6, rather than 3.m.s. object suffix.⁶⁷ Gogel states that the Arad examples of the 2.m.s. perfect with *he* ending “lend credence to the interpretation which sees the *he* as a *m.l.* and not as a suffix”.⁶⁸ She further argues that the direct object *dbr* is present in Lachish 2.6: *dbr 'šr l' yd'th*, hence, “anything you do not know” (equally, there is a direct object present in Lachish 3.8–9a: *l' yd'th qr' spr* “You do not know how to read a letter”), and she therefore concludes that although the *he* could be a resumptive suffix, in the context of Lachish 2.6 and 3.8–9a it is far from necessary (see §3.1.3).⁶⁹ In addition, Harris remarked that “the suggested objective suffix would not be mandatory after the relative [*'šr*]”.⁷⁰

⁶⁴ Cross and Freedman 1952: 53.

⁶⁵ Parunak (1978: 28) reads Arad 7.6 as [*w*]*ktbth l'pnyk* (“Write *it* before you...”) and Arad 40.9 as *whn yd'th* (“And behold, you knew *it* [...]”); see Cross and Freedman 1952: 65–67.

⁶⁶ Hence, Aharoni (1981: 22, 70–74) reads Arad 7.5–6 as [*w*]*ktbth l'pnyk* (“Write before you...”) and Arad 40.9 as *whn yd'th* (“And behold, you knew [...]”).

⁶⁷ De Vaux 1939: 188–189; Michaud 1957: 45–46; Gibson 1971: 38; Pardee et al. 1982: 80; Schniedewind 2000: 160. A few interpreters also considered *yd'th* as 1.c.s. perfect (“I do not know” – $y^e da 't\bar{a}h\bar{u}$), depending on their individual syntactical interpretations (*Lachish I*: 37, 41–43; Birnbaum 1939: 93; Vaccari 1939a: 224, 225–226; 1939b: 184, 185, 186; Michaud 1957: 45–46).

⁶⁸ Gogel 1998: 85.

⁶⁹ Gogel (1998: 86) applies this view to the case of Lachish 3.8–9a, in which Gogel deems there is a direct object present: *l' yd'th qr' spr*, i.e. “You do not know how to read a letter”; *contra* Rollston 2006: 62, n. 42.

⁷⁰ Harris 1938: 438; see Michaud 1957: 46.

This great divide between the two interpretations is due largely to the fact that there is a general paucity in the present Hebrew epigraphic corpus for 2.m.s. perfect forms with unambiguous *m.l. he*.⁷¹ Moreover, the few occurrences of *plene* ending *-th* in the Hebrew Bible are “clearly exceptional”.⁷² Hence, one reading is inclined to argue in favour of the 3.m.s. object suffix, whereas the other, despite the acknowledgement of the paucity of 2.m.s. perfect *plene* endings, continues to favour this reading by way of the contextual grammar and syntax, as in the case of Lachish 2.6. The question remains open, and while some scholars express their reservations, they still acknowledge both possibilities for the case of Lachish 2.6 and 3.8.⁷³ In summary, the final *he* in the verbal form *yd'th* of Lachish 2.6 can stand for: 1) the *plene* spelling of the 2.m.s. perfect (i.e. *yāda'tāh*, “you [do not] know”); or 2a) the resumptive suffix for the second object *dbr* with the 2.m.s. perfect (i.e. *y^eda'tōh* or *y^eda'tāhū*, “you [do not] know [it]”)⁷⁴; or 2b) the same resumptive suffix, but with the equally conceivable 1.c.s. perfect (i.e. *y^eda'tīhū*, “I [do not] know [it]”)⁷⁵. Given the present meagre epigraphic corpus, which provides little to no support for any hard-and-fast grammatical rules in pre-exilic Palaeo-Hebrew inscriptions, I remain open to whichever possible interpretation for the final *he*, at least for the case of Lachish 2. Hence, lines 5b–6 can denote the servant’s statement wishing for any information to reach the uninformed superior (options 1 or 2a) or the uninformed servant himself (option

⁷¹ Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005: 311.

⁷² Schniedewind 200: 160. Barr (1989: 115, 125) calls them “a small minority” among the thousands of 2.m.s. expressions in the Hebrew Bible. He cites 146 biblical examples with the *plene* ending (*-th*) of 2.m.s. perfect verbs, most of which are in Psalms and in 1 and 2 Samuel (see Barr 1989: 114–127). The phenomenon is common with the verb נתן (“to give”) and the *lamed-he* and *'ayin-waw* classes of verbs, among others, but these observations do not apply to the Lachish examples, as Schniedewind notes (2000: 160).

⁷³ See Pardee et al. 1982: 80; Lemaire 2004: 2100; Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005: 307, 311; Rollston 2006: 62, n. 42; Aḥituv 2008: 62, 67–68.

⁷⁴ Cross and Freedman 1952: 46. Torczyner (*Lachish I*: 40, 56) also considered the possibility of the Aramaic and Phoenician vocalization /ē/ for the final *he*.

⁷⁵ ידעתי is written as ידעת in Ps. 140: 13 [sic for 12] Qere and Job 42:2 ידעת Qere (*Lachish I*: 56); see also Harris 1938: 438.

2b). Be that as it may, whichever reading one chooses, it ultimately does not have any bearing on the reconstruction of the overall inscription of Lachish 2, despite its ambiguity. The only exception would be, perhaps, the choice between second and first person for the verbal form *yd'th*.

3.1.3 Lachish 3

This inscription is the longest, consisting of 21 lines running on the outer and inner sides of the sherd (Figs 28–32). Unfortunately, most of the ink on the outer surface had already faded badly at the time of the *editio princeps*, not to mention that the surface also bears noticeable scratches. The curving sherd originally formed part of the body of a (round) ceramic vessel. From the physical examination of the ostrakon, I noticed that the burnishing provided a waxy writing surface and preserved much of the writing on it, as the ink seems to have adhered nicely to this polished surface, whereas the ink on the rough surface areas faded badly (Fig. 30). As a result, several lines or letters on the outer surface can only be read with difficulty or restored tentatively. Conversely, the ink is surprisingly very well preserved on the inner surface, where the rills are particularly defined, i.e. the grooves and ridges that result from the potter's thumb marks during manufacture of wheel-thrown pottery. Upon examining the ostrakon's reverse, I noticed that the scribe must have made use of a brush or a flexible writing instrument (a rush pen) rather than any harder or sharper medium (such as a reed pen), since the cursive script is, despite the undulating surface, still beautifully executed and the letters neatly written.⁷⁶ Scholars have thus far reconstructed most of the inscription on the obverse, especially the right half of lines 2 to 7.

⁷⁶ Reinhard G. Lehmann confirms that scribes made use of rush pens (personal communication, 2013).

Some of the very illegible letters that happen to form parts of lines denoting standard epistolary formulae were reconstructed by inference.

Lachish 3 is known for its exculpating character and the overall message takes a different turn than the other legible messages. The interpretation of several aspects of the inscription remains controversial. Firstly, Lachish 3 is the only one of the legible inscriptions to feature the sender's name, who clearly indicates that he is of lower rank than that of the recipient of the message, and is "sick at heart" after he apparently received a reprimand or unjust comment from his superior. One theory suggests that this reprimand is questioning the subordinate's literacy and his alleged inability "to read a letter", or that he needs the services of a scribe in order to understand his superior's instructions or previous communication. Another though obsolete interpretation suggests that the reprimand is actually being directed at the subordinate's indiscretion in getting hold of highly confidential information, i.e. letters or messages that he should not have read.⁷⁷ These contrasting theories centre on varied grammatical interpretations one can obtain from the inscription, as in the ambiguous Lachish 2 (§3.1.2). Moreover, this is the first ostrakon in the corpus to bear names of persons and descriptions of events that may or may not strike similarities with personages and events narrated in the Book of Jeremiah (see §6.3).

Line 1–4a

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. 'bdk . hwš'yhw . šlh . l 2. hgdl'dny ַ [y]'[w]š . yšm' . 3. yhw[h't]'dny . šm't . šlm 4. w[šm't . ꜥb]w'thpqh | <p>Your servant Hôša'yāhû sends to
 repo[rt] to my lord [Y]ā'[û]š. May
 YHW[H let m]y lord hear tiding(s) of peace
 and [tidings of good (fortune)!] And now open,</p> |
|--|--|

⁷⁷ Torczyner's original interpretation (*Lachish I*).

hwš'yhw and [y]ʹ[w]š: This is the only message where both sender and recipient are mentioned by name, which as a result has led scholars over the decades to refer to the legible letters in the corpus as communication by the servant and sender Hoša'yāhû to his lord and recipient Yā'ûš (hence one of the commonly known labels “Hoshaiah Letters”) (§5.11).⁷⁸ Owing to the badly preserved lines at the start of this letter, the recipient's name, appearing also in Lachish 2.1 and 6.1, has been reconstructed as [y]ʹ[w]š.⁷⁹ Most of the obverse of Lachish 3 is badly faded, and as a result I could only make out the *aleph* and *shin*, and reconstructed the *yod* and *waw*. I therefore enhanced one of the IAA photographs of Lachish 3 and retraced the visible ink (Fig. 31).

hwš'yhw: This PN (“YHWH has saved”) is written with the same spelling in Meşad Ḥashavyahu 1.7 and Ḥorvat 'Uza 24.8 (and possibly even in the fragmentary PN *hw*[..... in Ḥorvat 'Uza 23.9?, the latter having similar content to that of ostracon 24). The PN also appears spelled as *hš'yhw*, lacking the *waw*, in Ḥorvat 'Uza 10.3. The vocalisation of *hwš'yhw* is uncertain. The name appears in Jer. 42:1; 43:2; and Neh. 12:32 (הושעיה – Hôša'ayāh), but we cannot be sure whether the contraction of the diphthong *aw* > *ô* occurred in Judah by the 8th–7th centuries B.C.E. (§2.6).⁸⁰ For the sake of consistency, I have vocalised the name as Hôša'yāhû in the present study, but given that this is the Masoretic vocalisation, we cannot be sure of the original pre-exilic vocalisation. The internal *waw* could very well be consonantal as well as *m.l.* for long vowel *ô*. For the different orthography in Ḥorvat 'Uza 10.3 (*hš'yhw*), Aḥituv argues that it seems to reflect “the actual

⁷⁸ For example Aḥituv 2008: 58.

⁷⁹ See *Lachish I*: 50–51.

⁸⁰ See Gogel 1998: 65–70 and references there.

pronunciation of the name, at least here, while [hwš'yhw] might be [an] historical orthography, reflecting the derivation from עשר/עשׂי (*yš'/wš'").⁸¹

'*bdk...šlh lhgd l'dny...*: The introduction in lines 1–4 steers away from the standard epistolary style, as this is the only message bearing the sender's name, not to mention that starting the "letter" off with the sender's name may reflect a special emphasis on the sender himself, as noted by Schniedewind, as if it was intended to explicitly exclude the use of the scribe, and instead, "Your servant [Hôša'yāhû] *himself* sends to inform you".⁸² Whenever the sender is mentioned in the address, this detail precedes that of the recipient, as observed in Lachish 3, Arad 16, 21, 40, and the fragmentary Tel 'Ira 2.⁸³ Schniedewind further points out some idiosyncracies throughout Lachish 3 that may reflect the possible rudimentary scribal training of the writer of this message. For example, the idiom *šlh lhgd* ("he sent to inform PN") (lines 1–2) is also otherwise unknown in the epistolary corpus, since typically, the epistolary genre simply employs the verb *šlh* ("he sent to PN"), while the addition of *lhgd* ("to inform") serves to stress the physical and verbal (i.e. oral) expression of a message (as in the one example in the Hebrew Bible – Gen. 32:4–6).⁸⁴ Other examples pairing both verbs are 2 Sam. 11:5,18; 17:16; and 1 Kgs 20:17, and Schniedewind interestingly remarks that even though the contexts of these stories suggest that messengers carried around oral communiqués rather than written messages, in Lachish 3 we have Hôša'yāhû (who was perhaps the author

⁸¹ Ahituv 2008: 168.

⁸² Schniedewind 2000: 159. See also Pardee et al. 1982: 87.

⁸³ See arguments in Pardee et al. 1982: 148. For the Tel 'Ira fragmentary ostrakon, see Beit-Arieh 1999: 405–406. Despite the missing names of sender and recipient, 'Ira 2 starts off with '*bdk* followed by what presumably is the first letter of the subordinate's name, whilst in line 2 is *lhg[d]*, which recalls part of the Lachish 3 formula. This ostrakon is likely to have had a very similar formula pattern to the Lachish example, which suggests that such formulaic usage was familiar also in the Negev.

⁸⁴ Schniedewind 2000: 159; see Pardee et al. 1982: 15.

himself) apparently making claims of defence of his literacy skills.⁸⁵ I further add to this comment that, apart from Lachish 3, we find references to various letters (always appearing with the nominal **spr*) being sent around (cf. Lachish 4, 5, 6, 9, and 18). This may reflect that messengers might have carried around written correspondence, but they would still have been able to know and recite the contents of the messages they were carrying. The idea of verbal communiqués is all the more attested in the fact that later on in Lachish 3.13b, Hôša‘yāhû tells his superior, “and it was reported to your servant that...” *wl’bdk hgd* (with the use of the Hophal of **ngd*), so it is possible that Hôša‘yāhû received a verbal message.⁸⁶ Otherwise, a similar system of written reports as at Lachish could have been equally possible (§§5.10 and 5.11).

šm ‘t šlm w[šm ‘t ṭb]: The letter proceeds with the typical introductory greeting. The left half of the text in the first seven lines is fairly legible from the IAA photographs, so the reconstructions proposed by scholars over the decades are quite plausible. The original reading of line 4 by Torczyner and Harding was very much different from other subsequent interpretations,⁸⁷ and although Torczyner later revised his reading, he still did not read a second part (“tidings of good [fortune]”) to the blessing formula.⁸⁸ This is understandable, since this rough part of the sherd’s surface bears faded traces of ink, so it is very much a hopeless endeavour to scrutinize the writing on the ostrakon with the naked eye alone. I however stick to the most common reconstruction of *šm ‘t . ṭb* based on the IAA photographs, from which I notice the space available for the smudged parts just

⁸⁵ Schniedewind 2000: 159–160.

⁸⁶ Schniedewind 2000: 160.

⁸⁷ *Lachish I*: 50–51.

⁸⁸ Tur-Sinai 1987: 53.

after the visible *waw* in the beginning of line 4, and the faded shapes of the respective graphemes written in wide stances.

Lines 4b–13a

- | | |
|---|--|
| <p>4. <i>w[šm't . t̄b]w'thpqh</i>
 5. <i>n't'zn'bdklspr . 'šr</i></p> <p>6. <i>šl̄hth'l'bdk'mš . ky . lb</i></p> <p>7. <i>'bdk dwh . m'z . šl̄hk . 'l . 'bd</i></p> <p>8. <i>kwky'mr . 'dny . l' . yd 'th .</i></p> <p>9. <i>qr'spr̄hyhwh . 'm . nsh . '</i></p> <p>10. <i>yšlqr'lysprln̄š . wgm .</i>
 11. <i>kl̄spr'šryb' . 'ly'm .</i>
 12. <i>qr'ty . 'thw'wd . 'tnnhw</i>
 13. <i>'l . m'wm[hw]l'bdk . hgd .</i></p> | <p>and [tid]ings [of good (fortune)!] And now open,
 I beg you, the ear of your servant about the letter
 which
 you sent to your servant yesterday evening.
 For/Behold your servant
 has been sick at heart since you sent (=your sending)
 (the letter) to your servan-
 t, and because/with respect to (what) my lord said,
 “You do not know
 how to read a letter!” As YHWH lives, has anyone
 ever
 tried to read me a letter or, for that matter,
 every letter which comes to me? If
 I read it, th(e)n I (can) recount/repeat it
 down to its (smallest) det[ail. Now,] it has been
 reported to your servant,</p> |
|---|--|

w't: The body of the letter starts off with an introductory presentation particle *w't* “And now” (cf. Lachish 4.2 and 9.2–3). This epistolary format is mirrored in the Aramaic expressions in Ezra 4:11,17, and the Akkadian adverb *anumma* (“now”) has the same function when introducing sentences in epistolary forms.⁸⁹ Most of the pre-exilic letters have this one-word marker of transition from *praescriptio* to body (omitted, where verifiable, only in Arad 4 and 12, and in Lachish 2, 5, and 6). In the Lachish examples *w't* is omitted only when the phrase *my 'bdk klb ky* is present. The latter’s semantic content was considered “transitional” enough to replace *w't* in each case.⁹⁰

hpqh n' 'zn: Hôša‘yāhû then proceeds to ask his superior for an explanation as to why he received an apparently scathing message from him (which is mentioned in the following lines).

⁸⁹ Aḥituv 2008: 66; see Civil et al. 1968: 147–148; Pardee and Whiting 1987: 22.

⁹⁰ Pardee et al. 1982: 149–150.

The volitive *hpqh n'* (lines 4–5) is composed of the Hiphil imperative and the particle of entreaty *n'*, although Davies points out that *hpqh* “is more likely a Niphal imperative, in view of biblical usage, than a Hiphil”.⁹¹ The pairing of this verbal root with “ear” recurs in Isa. 42:20, as well as **pqh* with a synonymous meaning in Isa. 35:5; 48:8; 50:5.⁹² The particle of entreaty or exhortation *n'* is attested twice at Arad (21.3 and 40.9 – both spelled as *hn*),⁹³ and is perhaps to be considered as an interjection, although in Arad 40, the line is fragmentary, which makes this hypothesis uncertain.⁹⁴ In Lachish 3.4–5, the particle *n'* follows an imperative, and directly follows the blessing. Sequences with the particle *נ* following an imperative are especially common in biblical Hebrew, and it is here illustrated in epigraphic Hebrew as well, together with Lachish 6.5 below, and perhaps in the (restored) Meşad Ḥashavyahu 1.12.⁹⁵

lb 'bdk dwh: Line 6 onwards makes up the portion of the letter in which Hôša'yāhû expresses frustration and exculpation towards his superior. Hôša'yāhû claims that he has been sick at heart owing to his superior's unfair message (lines 6–8). The expression *lb dwh* is found in Lam. 5:17 and Isa. 1:5. The conjunction *ky* in line 6 is introducing an explanatory clause: *ky lb 'bdk dwh m'z šlḥk 'l 'bdk* – “for (because) your servant has been sick at heart since you sent (=your sending) (the letter) to your servant”. The same use of *ky* can be seen in Lachish 4.12–13 (“for we cannot see ‘Azeqah”) (§3.1.4). Comparatively, the *ky* in Lachish 3.8 (*wky'mr*) introduces a fronted subordinate clause, in the sense of “with regards to/in regard to, and seeing that, since”,⁹⁶ and this conjunction is

⁹¹ Davies 2007: 228.

⁹² Aḥituv 2008: 67.

⁹³ See Aharoni 1981: 42–43; 70–74.

⁹⁴ Gogel 1998: 230, n. 302.

⁹⁵ Gogel 1998: 231. For the Meşad Ḥashavyahu ostrakon, see Naveh 1981: 129–139; Aḥituv 2008: 156–163.

⁹⁶ Gogel 1998: 229 and references there, 340.

also observed in Lachish 4.4b–5a. Alternatively, *wky'mr* could stand for the 3.m.s. imperfect, i.e. “and behold... (my lord) says” (*wkyy'mr*), in which case it would indicate a dropping of a *yod* through haplography.

šlḥth; yd'th: In the verbal forms *šlḥth* (line 6) and *yd'th* (line 8), we notice again the final *he*, which might stand for a final /a/- or a final long vowel /ō/ on the 2.m.s. suffix of the verbal form (“you sent” and “you knew [=know]”), as stated for the case in Lachish 2.6 (§3.1.2). Following the analysis in that section, I am inclined to read *šlḥth* and *yd'th* in the context of Lachish 3 as the long spelling of the 2.m.s. perfect, since the context is clear that the servant is addressing his superior directly. Gogel furthermore considers it unlikely that the *he* ending on *yd'th*, grammatically, syntactically, or stylistically, would be a pronominal suffix (“You know *it*”), as the predicate is directly followed by the infinitive construct and then by the direct object *spr* which is clearly stated (line 9).⁹⁷ Schniedewind further observes the internal consistency of this longer spelling within the text of Lachish 3, in which there are only the above-mentioned two cases of the 2.m.s. verbal suffix and both are spelled *-th*.⁹⁸

hyhwh: The oath-taking formula that is common in the Hebrew Bible (“As YHWH lives!”) is usually spelled as two separate words – *hy yhwh* (הי יהוה).⁹⁹ The orthography in Lachish 3 is *hyhwh*, which could be a case of haplography.¹⁰⁰ Otherwise, the contraction *hyhwh* could represent a different vocalization altogether, which may have been due to the fact that the *yod* occurs twice in the combination with the Divine Name, and therefore “the haplographic writing is certainly owing to a rapid pronunciation of the idiom leading to its

⁹⁷ Gogel 1998: 86.

⁹⁸ Schniedewind 2000: 160.

⁹⁹ Cf. Ruth 3:13; 1 Sam. 14:45; 19:6.

¹⁰⁰ Diringer 1958: 77.

being perceived as a unit”.¹⁰¹ Schniedewind comments that this contraction is more likely to be viewed as the influence of vernacular pronunciation on the spelling, as well as an indicator of the rudimentary level of the writer’s scribal training.¹⁰² The same oath formula occurs in Lachish 6.12 and possibly 12.3 as *hy yhw* (§§3.1.6 and 3.1.12). Even so, given the slovenly written Lachish 3, which bears another error of hurried writing in *’bk* for *’bdk* (line 21), I am inclined to view *hyhw* as a case of haplography, as was strongly defended by Torczyner.¹⁰³ Equally, Vaccari deems both instances in Lachish 3 “un semplice lapsus”.¹⁰⁴ The use of the oath-taking formula in Lachish 3 is justified, since the sender is vigorously protesting his innocence of whatever charge is made against him, and is taking a solemn oath that he is blameless.¹⁰⁵

’mš: Generally interpreted as “yesterday evening”.¹⁰⁶

l’ yd’th qr’ spr: Lines 9–13a have undergone different interpretations by scholars. The content has been generally understood by some to be a junior officer’s defence of his literacy, which apparently has been challenged by his superior. Cross interpreted *spr* in lines 9 and 11 as “scribe” rather than “letter”. In his interpretation, the superior ordered his subordinate to “call a scribe!” (*qr’ spr*) if he was unable to read, which prompted Hôša’yāhû to express his refusal to summon a scribe for assistance, or to pay a scribe if

¹⁰¹ Pardee et al. 1982: 86. Ahituv (2008: 68) suggests that the contraction *hyhw* perhaps served to distinguish between a reference to YHWH and a reference to other personages, such as Pharaoh in Gen 42:16 (*hy pr’ h*).

¹⁰² Schniedewind 2000: 160–161.

¹⁰³ See arguments between Orlinsky (1944: 43, n. 34; 1945) and Torczyner (1945a; 1945b), both of whom ultimately agree on *hyhw* in Lachish 3 as a case of haplography, as do van den Oudenrijn (1942: 41) and Rowley (1945: 11).

¹⁰⁴ Vaccari 1939b: 199.

¹⁰⁵ Weingreen (1972: 122) deemed this necessary action, given the circumstances, as opposed to the blasphemous uttering of God’s name, which is objected to in the third commandment of the Decalogue.

¹⁰⁶ See Cassuto 1975: 231; Lemaire 1977: 102 and references there; 2004: 2101.

the latter would turn up to help him.¹⁰⁷ Other scholars, including De Vaux, interpreted Hôša‘yāhû’s message as a passionate defence of his literacy and his ability to read any letter that comes to him and to repeat it down to its details.¹⁰⁸ Young points out that the Hebrew expression of the idea “to be literate” (cf. Isa. 29:11–12) was in the phrase *yd’ spr* (“to know book”), with its reverse in the same passage being “not to know book”. Thus, Young suggests that this is the very same formula used in Lachish 3 (in a more prosaic form with the explicit addition of the word for reading *qr’*), and therefore translates the superior’s charge as simply, “You are illiterate!” Hôša‘yāhû’s response with an oath would be strange if the subject of the dispute was confined to his literate ability, and his “ever” in line 9 could very well be an exaggeration for the sake of effect. The subject in dispute may have been some issue known to both writer and recipient.¹⁰⁹

Aḥituv, conversely, reads the final part of this defence as, “And as for every letter that comes to me, if I read it. And furthermore, I will grant it as nothing”, and remarks that its enigmatic meaning must have been known to both the sender and the receiver.¹¹⁰ Yadin, followed by Borowski, suggested Hôša‘yāhû was in fact accused of getting hold of “‘classified’ information”, such as the information about the departure of the commander to Egypt, to which Hôša‘yāhû in fact replies that “it had been reported to your servant” rather than he himself having read a confidential letter (see lines 13b–21 below).¹¹¹

Yadin’s interpretation goes hand-in-hand with his reading of Lachish 2.5–6, which he translates as, “May the Lord afflict the utterers of a thing of which I was not aware”

¹⁰⁷ Cross 1985: 43: “As [YHWH] lives, no one has tried to read a letter to me ever, and furthermore, any scribe who might have come to me, I did not summon him and further, I would pay him nothing!” Seow (2003: 212–215) follows Cross’s reading (“You did not understand it! Call a scribe!”).

¹⁰⁸ See De Vaux 1939: 191–192; Lemaire 1977: 101, 102–103; 2004: 2101, 2102; *HAE*, I: 417–418.

¹⁰⁹ Young 1998: 410.

¹¹⁰ Aḥituv 2008: 63, 68.

¹¹¹ Yadin 1984: 184; see Borowski 1984: 75.

(apparently following Torczyner’s original reading closely with slight differences), as well as the many references to letters and communiqués mentioned in Lachish 5, 6, and 12, and the superior’s instructions referred to in Lachish 4.¹¹² Following Torczyner’s outdated proposal, Yadin argued that the Lachish ostraca overall were in fact drafts of a single message which Hôša‘yāhû was composing as a satisfactory reply to his superior’s false accusations (§§5.2.4 and 5.6).

kl spr 'šr yb' 'ly 'm qrt'y 'th w'wd 'tnnhw [']l m'wm[h]: Lines 11–13 form a complex sentence, the construction of which in epigraphic Hebrew is as follows: a noun phrase (the subject) precedes an independent verb/noun sentence in which there is reference to the principal subject by means of a pronoun (cf. other complex sentences in Lachish 3.19–21 and 4.6b–7a).¹¹³

'tnnhw: The verb *'tnnhw* was originally reconstructed by Ginsberg, and although it is the best guess yet to fill the lacuna in the partially damaged line 12,¹¹⁴ it is not devoid of problems. The verb has been interpreted differently: (1) it either derives from the verbal **tnn* (“to repeat”), with the 3.m.s. pronominal suffix (hence, “I could repeat it”, i.e. the letter – *spr*); (2) or from the verb *ntn* (“to give”) with the same pronominal suffix (hence lines 12–13 would be interpreted as, “I would not give him anything”, i.e. Hôša‘yāhû would not pay a scribe – *spr* – anything for his services). The first reading’s spelling is typical of Aramaic, while Biblical Hebrew usually uses the verb שָׁנָה (“to repeat, recite”) with the exception of Judg. 5:11 and 11:40 (in which תָּנָה is used). The second reading is also problematic for it cannot easily account for the extra *nun*, since in Biblical Hebrew it is spelled either as אֶתְנָנוּ or as אֶתְנָהוּ (cf. Judg. 20:28; Ezek. 31:11; Ps. 89:28; 2 Chr. 7:20).

¹¹² Yadin 1984: 183–185; see *Lachish I*: 37, 43.

¹¹³ Gogel 1998: 284–285.

¹¹⁴ Ginsberg 1938: 26; see Schniedewind 2000: 161.

Schniedewind remarks that, whether the form *'tnnhw* arises from Aramaic influence or reflects an orthographic idiosyncrasy, it seems appropriate to view it as indication of the rudimentary level of the writer's scribal training.¹¹⁵

'm: (lines 9 and 11): The *'m* in the oath-taking formula (line 9) introduces an emphatic negative, and thus this passage is illustrating the function of *'m* in the context of an oath, as the marker of a negative oath (originally, a conditional clause). In contrast, *ky* would mark a positive main clause in the context of an oath. The *'m* in line 11 precedes a perfect and marks a subordinate clause.¹¹⁶ Lately, Park has revised the question of Hôša'yāhû's literacy through her thorough analysis of considering polar *'m/𐤌𐤍* clauses in oaths as rhetorical questions rather than as conditional protases that elide a self-curse.¹¹⁷ Park reads both *'m* clauses in Hôša'yāhû's oath (lines 9–13a) as rhetorical questions that find parallels in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Gen. 14:22–23; 1 Sam. 24:22; 30:15; 2 Kgs 3:14; Isa. 62:8; Jer. 38:16; Ps. 132:2–4; Cant. 2:7; 3:5; Neh. 13:25). She further argues against Schniedewind's interpretation of the oath as beginning with *hyhwh* (line 9) and ending with *lnšḥ* (line 10), separating the second *'m* clause (beginning with fronted *wgm*) from the oath.¹¹⁸ Schniedewind considers the second *'m* clause as a positive assertion, yet Park remarks that when *'m* clauses occur in a series in the Hebrew Bible (see biblical references above), they always express the same type of polarity, so in the case of Lachish 3, the second *'m* clause cannot be deemed as a positive assertion.¹¹⁹ Moreover, when *wgm* occurs as a component of an interrogative (rhetorical) sentence, it does not involve

¹¹⁵ Schniedewind 2000: 161.

¹¹⁶ Gogel 1998: 225, 228 and references there.

¹¹⁷ Park 2013.

¹¹⁸ Schniedewind (2000: 158–159; 2004: 101–102) reads: “As [YHWH] lives, never has any man had to read the letter to me. And also every letter that comes to me, surely I read it and, moreover, I can repeat it completely!”

¹¹⁹ Park 2013: 471.

fronting, and therefore *wgm* can only be attached to the first *'m* clause.¹²⁰ As a result, Park's interpretation changes Hôša'yāhû's oath from a passionate defence to a straightforward acknowledgement of his inability to understand the letter from his superior. Therefore, her reading is as follows: "As surely as YHWH lives, has anybody ever tried to read me a letter, or for that matter any letter that has come to me? [Certainly not!] Was I able to read it [=the most recent letter from Hoshayahu's superior] or recite anything from it? [Certainly not!]"¹²¹ Furthermore, following Schniedewind's reading of the expression *pqh 'ynym* (lines 4–5), Park remarks that this expression, which sometimes means "to cause someone to become aware of something' by means of supernatural insight",¹²² clarifies why the troubled Hôša'yāhû is asking for clarification from his superior ("to open [his] eyes"). Then again, Park's analysis does not interpret Hôša'yāhû's request as demanding some clarification for his superior's unfair comment on and allusion to his alleged illiteracy, but rather for Hôša'yāhû's helpless situation that he truly cannot understand the letter and a professional scribe was unavailable at the time to assist him (hence his sickness in heart).¹²³

Following Park's analysis, I personally agree with her approach to consider both *'m* clauses in lines 9–13a as rhetorical questions, with the *wgm* clause being attached to the first *'m* clause rather than being fronted to the second. Hence, my translation for lines 9–11 follows her interpretation, and therefore Hôša'yāhû asks his superior, in a rhetorical manner, whether anyone had ever tried to read him any letter he receives. However, I need to add further remarks to both her considerations and Schniedewind's reading, which

¹²⁰ Park 2013: 471–474.

¹²¹ Park 2013: 470, 473.

¹²² See Clines 1974: 11 and examples there.

¹²³ Park 2013: 475.

she follows. In line 5 I can definitely make out the word *'zn* (“ear”) not *'yn* (“eye”) by observing the IAA photographs.¹²⁴ The noun is definitely in the singular, and is followed by the word *'bdk*. Therefore, the idiom used here is “to open the ear(s)” (cf. biblical examples above), which is usually applied to a situation when a person needs to pay attention. In the case of Lachish 3, Hôša‘yāhû is requesting his superior “to cause him to pay attention” (i.e. to give an explanation) regarding his (unfair) remark (“open, I beg you, the ear of your servant”, in other words, “kindly explain to your servant”). Lemaire notes that *pqh' zn* is similar to Akkadian *uznā puttû*, meaning “let understand, explain”.¹²⁵ Although this reading contrasts with that of Park, her argument would still be sound in this case, since the change in idioms does not affect Hôša‘yāhû’s request for explanation at all.

Even so, I have slight reservations about Park’s interpretation of Hôša‘yāhû actually admitting that he cannot understand the letter sent to him, and that the service of a professional scribe was unavailable at the time, as a result placing him in a helpless situation and feeling all the more distressed with his master’s remark. Grammatically speaking, Park reaches this conclusion by arguing that *lnšh* (line 10) and the use of *kl* in lines 11 and 13 form an expression of absolute negation, and that *wgm* in the first *'m* clause and *w'wd* in the second *'m* clause are each connecting the two syntactic units, a normal one and an emphatic one with *kl*.¹²⁶ However, Hôša‘yāhû’s absolute negation about ever receiving professional help with the letters he receives could equally mean a

¹²⁴ Apart from Schniedewind (2000: 158–159) and Park, other scholars have also read *'yn* (see e.g. De Vaux 1939: 189; *HAE*, I: 417). Other commentators, however, read *'zn* and, in fact, Lemaire (2004: 2102) deems this reading “practically certain”; see also Lemaire 1977:100, 102; 2004: 2101, 2102; Cross 1985: 45; Aḥituv 2008: 63, 66–67.

¹²⁵ Lemaire 2004: 2102; see also Biggs et al. 2005: 345–346, 354.

¹²⁶ Park 2013: 474.

passionate defence of his capability to read any letter that comes to him *without* the need of professional help.

Moreover, granted if we are treating this document as an actual sent communiqué that was written on a piece of pottery, I suspect that Hôša‘yāhû is truly defending his level of literacy in reply to his master’s unjust remark. The simple yet straightforward introduction to the letter starting off with the statement that the servant Hôša‘yāhû himself “sends to inform” his lord may reflect that: (a) the message may have actually been written by Hôša‘yāhû himself (as Schniedewind suggests), with all its errors or idiosyncracies as proof of this, and yet showing adequate literacy skills; and (b) that this particular message (which slightly differs from the rest) was perhaps a direct communiqué between Hôša‘yāhû and his superior to, first and foremost, treat this personal matter (and get it out of the way, as they say), and then move on to update his superior (in the form of a routine report) with the knowledge of apparently crucial military procedures and messages being sent around. Moreover, the word-dividers in line 1 – *’bdk . hwš’yhw . šlh . lhg[d* – seem to clarify who is the person reporting to the high official, perhaps one of their typical uses.

Sanders argues that Lachish 3.11–13 exemplifies not only Hôša‘yāhû’s literacy, but also a set of values far more complex than the mere ability to decipher and create written messages, since Hôša‘yāhû not only berates his superior “in forceful rhetoric and increasingly ragged script” for doubting his literacy, but asserts a kind of mastery over the circulation of messages by stating that he can proclaim (*qr*) the letters he receives, hears them well, and repeats their details, and he also ends his message by referring to another letter carrying a message of warning (lines 19–21 below), which all the more emphasizes

his role and power in the circulation of messages.¹²⁷ In addition, the fact that the subordinate still writes well-wishes (blessing formulae) to his master and actually requests rather than demands an explanation from his lord (through the use of the particle of entreaty *n'*) indicates that Hôša'yāhû is still maintaining a level of politeness. Still, he does not include a self-abasing expression by comparing himself to a dog, possibly because Hôša'yāhû feels he has already been treated unfairly enough and wants to maintain some level of dignity and justly defend himself. Indeed, as Bridge correctly points out, Hôša'yāhû dispenses completely with deference throughout the message of Lachish 3, and the change in language indicates how emotional or passionate Hôša'yāhû is about his superior's unjust remark: the sender does not make use of a self-abasement expression, and instead makes 1.c.s. references in lines 9b–13a (e.g. *ly* – line 10; *'ly* – line 11; *qr'ty* – line 12); the word *'bdk* is used consistently in lines 5–8, in his introduction to his criticism and self-defence, and in the routine report of lines 13–21 (cf. below); on the contrary, the word *'dny* is used less frequently than would be expected in lines 5–8, and is replaced by the 2.m.s. perfect (*šlḥth*) and infinitive with 2.m.s. suffix (*šlḥk*) in lines 6–7.¹²⁸

Lines 13b–18

<p>13. 'l . m'w[mhw]l'bdk . hgd .</p> <p>14. l'mryrđsr . hšb'</p> <p>15. kny[hw]bn'lnnlb' .</p> <p>16. mšrymh . w't</p> <p>(reverse)</p> <p>17. hwdwyhwbn'hyhww</p> <p>18. 'nšwšlḥ . lqḥt . mzh .</p>	<p>down to its (smallest) de[tail]. Now,] it has been reported to your servant, saying, “The commander of the army Konyā[hû], son of 'Elnatan, has come down to go to Egypt. And as for Hôdawyāhû, son of Aḥīyāhû, and his men, he has sent to take (them) hence/from (t)here.</p>
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¹²⁷ Sanders 2011: 143–144.

¹²⁸ Bridge 2010: 526, 528, 530–531.

kny[hw] bn 'lntn: From the middle of line 13 onwards, the sender goes over other matters entirely. He informs his superior about the departure of an army commander, by the name of Konyāhû, son of 'Elnatan, to Egypt, the latter having the *he*-locale as an adverbial marker (*mšrymh*) (cf. *h'yrh* in Lachish 4.7). The PN *knyhw* (“YHWH has established”) is found in Arad 49.4¹²⁹ and a few seals¹³⁰. The obverse of this ostrakon is very much in bad condition, and a couple of letters of the PN in question are reconstructed by inference, namely the *ḥēṭ* and *waw*. The name Konyāhû appears three times in the Book of Jeremiah as one Coniah, son of Jehoiakim (Jer. 22:24,28; 37:1). The message in Lachish 3.13b–16a has in fact also been connected with the biblical passage in Jer. 26:20–23, in which the prophet Uriah flees to Egypt, and one Elnathan, son of Achbor, is sent to Egypt to capture Uriah, whereas in Lachish 3, Konyāhû, son of 'Elnatan, goes down to Egypt. The PN *'lntn* (“God/'El has given”) occurs in Lachish 11.2, as well as in lists Ḥorvat 'Uza 23 (possible reconstruction) and 24,¹³¹ Arad 110.1, the 8th-century Arad 69.6,¹³² and several seals.¹³³ In addition, the name appears in 2 Kgs 24:8; Jer. 26:22; 36:12,25; and Ezra 8:16. It remains controversial whether the biblical Elnathan and the Lachish 3 'Elnatan are one and the same.¹³⁴ For outdated readings of the PN in line 15, see Harding's autograph in Fig. 31, and the discussions in §§5.6 and 6.3.3.

lb' mšrymh: In lines 15–16 the inflectional suffix *he* determines the forms as locative, combined with the verb *bw'* (בוא) (cf. Lachish 4.7,8 and 8.8).¹³⁵

¹²⁹ See Aharoni 1981: 80–84.

¹³⁰ Seals 74, 219–220 (Avigad and Sass 1997).

¹³¹ Beit-Arieh 2007a: 161, 162, 164; Aḥituv 2008: 168–173.

¹³² See Aharoni 1981: 122–123; 94.

¹³³ Seals 76, 440–441, and 680 (Avigad and Sass 1997).

¹³⁴ Mykytiuk 2004: 204, 231, n. 70.

¹³⁵ See also Rezetko and Young 2014: 393; Gogel 1998: 206, 207.

hwdwyhw: This PN remains of uncertain vocalisation (§2.6). For the sake of consistency, I chose to vocalise it as Hôdawyāhû (“Praise YHWH”) in the present study, as it is vocalised in the Masoretic texts, since we are not sure of the actual pre-exilic vocalisation. The internal *waw* could very well be consonantal or else a long *ô* (cf. the PN *hwš’yhw* in Lachish 3.1). The PN appears with the same spelling in Ḥorvat ‘Uza 19.9.¹³⁶ It also features in 1 Chr. 3:24 (הדויהו – Hôdawyāhû), and in 1 Chr. 5:24; 9:7; Ezra 2:40 (הדויהו – Hôdawyāh); and Neh. 7:43 (הודיה – Hôd^owāh).

’hyhw: This PN (“My brother is YHWH”) is also found on the late 8th–early 7th-century Ramat Raḥel 1.1 (ancient Beth Haccerem, south of Jerusalem), the contemporary Ophel 1.2, and a seal.¹³⁷ The name appears as אהיה in 1 Kgs 14: 4, 6, 18; and 2 Chr. 10:15.

Lines 19–21

19. <i>wspr . tbyhw ‘bd . hmlk . hb’</i>	And the letter of Ṭôbîyāhû, the servant of the king, which came
20. <i>’l . šlm . bnyd’ . m’t . hnb’ . l’m</i>	to Šallūm, son of Yādā’, from the prophet, saying,
21. <i>r . hšmr . šlḥh . ‘b<d>k . ’l . ’dny .</i>	“Beware!”, your ser<v>ant has sent it to my lord.

Lines 19–21 form another example of a complex sentence like Lachish 3.11–13 and 4.6b–7a, where one sentence is preceded by a noun phrase referred to by a pronoun in that sentence.¹³⁸

wspr tbyhw ‘bd hmlk: Lachish 3 ends with the mention of another matter. Hoša’yāhû reports that he had previously sent another letter to his superior. This letter was of a certain Ṭôbîyāhû, the servant of the king, and was sent to a certain Šallūm, son of Yada’, by an unnamed prophet. The verb *hb’* can be read either as a Qal participle with the prefixed

¹³⁶ Beit-Arieh 2007a: 152–156; Aḥituv 2008: 177–179.

¹³⁷ For Ramat Raḥel 1, see Aharoni 1961: 107; for Ophel 1, see Cook 1924: 183–186; Gibson 1970: 25–26; Lemaire 1977: 239–244; see seal 450 (Avigad and Sass 1997).

¹³⁸ Gogel 1998: 284–285.

article (see translation), or else as a Hophal 3.m.s. perfect (“was brought”). On the anonymous *nb*’ and the warning see §§5.8, 6.3.2, and 6.3.3 (cf. also §5.6). Whoever these individuals were and whatever their relationship was remains enigmatic and disputable, not to mention that we cannot discern their location or station. First of all, the title ‘*bd hmlk*’ can mean a house servant of the king, but could also stand for a high ranking official within the royal household. Moreover, the chance that Ṭôḇîyāhû is one and the same with the individual mentioned in Lachish 5.9 (§3.1.5) is slim at best. The PN Ṭôḇîyāhû (“YHWH is good”) appears in 2 Chr. 17:8 in its full form (טוביהו – Ṭôḇîyāhû), and in Zech. 6:10,14; Ezra 2:60; Neh. 2:10,19; 4:3,7; 6:1,12,14,17,19; 7:62; 13:4,7,8 in its abbreviated form Ṭôḇîyāh (טוביה).

- šlm*: This PN is found on the fragmentary Arad 35.3.¹³⁹ The name is either a hypocoristic form of *šlmyhw* (Š^clemyāhû) (“YHWH has recomposed”), which is found in Lachish 9.7 (§3.1.9), or an independent descriptive name.¹⁴⁰ Just as with the compound name *ṭbšlm* in Lachish 1.5 (§3.1.1), the pronunciation of *šlm* is here unknown. In the Hebrew Bible, it varies between Šallûm/Šallûm and Šillēm.¹⁴¹ The PN is also common on several seals.¹⁴²
- yd*’: This PN is a hypocoristic form of either *yd’yhw* (Y^cda’yāhû) or *yhwyd*’ (of unknown vocalisation, perhaps Y^chûyādā’) (“YHWH knows”).¹⁴³ The PN ידע (with the vocalisation Yādā’) is found in 1 Chr. 2:28,32, while the vocalisation Yaddûa’ is found in Neh. 10:22; 12:11,22. The full name *yd’yhw* is found in Arad 31.7, 39.4, and 39.5,¹⁴⁴ and on

¹³⁹ Aharoni 1981: 65. Arad 44.1 is, on the other hand, very fragmentary, so we cannot know the use of the word *šlm* read on this ostrakon (*šlm*[]) (Aharoni 1981: 77).

¹⁴⁰ HAE: 621.

¹⁴¹ For Šallûm/Šallûm cf. 2 Kgs 15:10,13,14,15; 22:14; Jer. 22:11; 32:7; 35:4; 1 Chr. 2:40,41; 3:15; 4:25; 5:38,39; 6:12–13; 7:13; 9:17,19,31; 2 Chr. 28:12; 34:22; Ezra 2:42; 7:2; 10:24,42; Neh. 3:12; 7:45; for Šillēm cf. Gen. 46:24; Num. 26:49.

¹⁴² Seals 361, 631, 666, 705A–E, and 706 (Avigad and Sass 1997). See also Golub 2015.

¹⁴³ HAE: 600.

¹⁴⁴ Cf. Arad 31 (Aharoni 1970: 32–38; 1981: 56–59); Arad 39 (Aharoni 1981: 68–69).

Jerusalem 25.3.¹⁴⁵ The PNN *yd'yhw* and *yd'yw* are found on a couple of seals, and the latter spelling also recurs in some Samaria ostraca.¹⁴⁶

'b<d>k: There is an obvious scribal error in line 21, where the scribe left out the *daleth* in the word *'b<d>k*, “your servant”.¹⁴⁷ On the contrary, Schniedewind is convinced that this detail enforces the hypothesis that Hôša'yāhû had rudimentary scribal training and required the service of a professional scribe, although I deem it unlikely, as stated above.¹⁴⁸

3.1.4 Lachish 4

This document, another message, consists of 13 legible lines written on the outer and inner sides (Figs 33–35). The message contains a series of brief reports: the completion of all assigned tasks; a notice written on the *dlt*; a fact about a place called *bythrpd*; information about one S^cmaḳyāhû; and a declaration that the sender and his men are watching the signals of Lachish, but cannot see (the signals of) 'Azeqah. Upon its decipherment in 1935, the ostrakon seemed to be, *prima facie*, the last in the chronological order of the actual messages, given the statement about Azekah, a fortress around 17.7km northeast of Lachish. The common interpretation was that the stronghold of Azekah was already destroyed by the enemy, and Lachish was about to meet the same fate. In addition, this message has also been a key feature for many interpreters on whether to determine or not the identification of Tell ed-Duweir with Lachish, although the reasoning behind it is misguided and unwarranted (see also §§5.2.4 and 5.9).

¹⁴⁵ See Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2006: 784.

¹⁴⁶ Seals 288 and 515 (Avigad and Sass 1997); see Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2006: 784.

¹⁴⁷ Aḥituv 2008: 69.

¹⁴⁸ Schniedewind 2000: 162.

Lines 1–4a

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1. <i>yšm' . yh[wh't'dny] 'tkym .</i> | May YH[WH let my lord] hear this very day |
| 2. <i>šm'ttb . w't . kkl'sr . šlh . 'dny</i> | tiding(s) of good (fortune)! And now, in accordance |
| 3. <i>kn . 'šh . 'bdk ktbty 'hdltkkl .</i> | to all that which my lord sent, |
| 4. <i>'sr šlh['dny]ly . wky šlh'</i> | thus has your servant done. I have written on the |
| | <i>dlt</i> , in accordance to all that |
| | which [my lord] sent to me. And since my lord s- |

šm't tb: The letter opens with a blessing formula similar to the one in Lachish 8, yet with different word order. It is possible that the phrase *šm't tb* can also be read in Lachish 3 and 5, although their texts have been reconstructed (see §4.5.1).

ktbty 'l hdl: The first body of the letter opens with the sender informing his master that he has fulfilled his orders, in accordance with which the servant has also written onto the *dlt*. This notable expression has been disputed by scholars. The cryptic word here is *dlt*. There is no doubt about the reading: the *he* before the word *dlt* is faded but the other letters are unmistakable, so the issue has always been “purely one of interpretation”,¹⁴⁹ as shown below:

1) *dlt* as a column/leaf of a papyrus scroll

- Torczyner argued that the word could very well have been *dēlēt*, in the sense of a column or leaf of papyrus on which the writer of this letter had written something as instructed by his superior.¹⁵⁰ The word occurs only once in the Hebrew Bible with the meaning of sheet, page, or column of papyrus. In Jer. 36:23, Jehoiakim cuts the roll (containing Jeremiah's words) to pieces and burns it after Yehudi reads “three or four *delātôt*”, presumably “columns” or “leaves”.
- Torczyner was inclined to understand the expression as to write down each set of given orders in a *dlt*, i.e. a page or column of papyrus, since the sender of the message

¹⁴⁹ Burrows 1936: 491.

¹⁵⁰ *Lachish I*: 79–80; 1987: 107–109. See also Marston 1969: 133.

is saying that he has written down on the *dlt* “according to all that” which his superior sent him, and thus it would seem unlikely that “all that” should have been written on a door or an ostrakon.¹⁵¹ It is possible, as Torczyner suggested, that the servant had received specific instructions on how and where to write down what his superior requested, and perhaps he even received writing material (such as papyrus) from his superior for this specific purpose.¹⁵²

- In a similar vein, Diringier and Brock argued in favour of the technical meaning of “column of writing on a papyrus scroll”, as it appears in Jer. 36:23 (דלתות; LXX δελίδας), envisaging an official log book into which daily orders were entered, as in the 13th-century B.C.E. Egyptian Papyrus Anastasi III (British Museum, No. 10246), written by an official stationed at a frontier post in the Eastern Delta, illustrating the traffic between Egypt and Asia during Pharaoh Merneptah’s reign, and perhaps in a fragmentary 4th/3rd-century B.C.E. Phoenician papyrus of a similar genre.¹⁵³ Similarly, Eshel argued in favour of the Late Biblical Hebrew meaning of “column”, and argues for a case of Paronomasia in the phrase *lišqod ‘al daltotay* in Prov. 8:34, i.e. a dual meaning being used in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁵⁴

2) *dlt* as a door or gate

- Other scholars preferred the literal meaning “door” (*dēlēt*),¹⁵⁵ and thus what was written was an announcement “in a public place, such as the plaster of the wall in

¹⁵¹ *Lachish I*: 80.

¹⁵² *Lachish I*: 80; cf. Lemaire 1977: 111.

¹⁵³ Diringier and Brock 1968: 42–43; for Papyrus Anastasi III, see Pritchard 2011: 258–259; for the Phoenician papyrus, see *KAI I*, 51.

¹⁵⁴ See Eshel 2000: 185 and references there. Eshel (2000: 187) also pointed out the parallelism in Medieval and Modern Hebrew of words used for describing items in the “house” and in a “book”.

¹⁵⁵ Albright 1936: 13–14; Burrows 1936: 491–493; Gordon 1937: 31; de Vaux 1939: 194; Gibson 1971: 42.

which the city-gate was set”,¹⁵⁶ as in Deut. 6:9 and 11:20.¹⁵⁷ Van Wieringen recently argued that the meaning “hinged wax tablet” is possible for the word *dlt* in Lachish 4 (cf. third option below), stating that a temporary list on wax is more likely for a military officer who usually wrote on ostraca rather than clay tablets, parchment or papyrus, although he does point out the use of the article (*hdlt*) and the possibility that the text was a public announcement that had to be written on the door of the barrack, given the circumstances and the fact that we do not know what the superior wrote or instructed to the subordinate.¹⁵⁸

- In his first discussion of the Lachish ostraca Cassuto did not provide a translation, but pointed out the possibility that *dlt* could be referring to an ostrakon.¹⁵⁹ Cassuto later suggested, following Albright, Burrows, and Gordon, among others, that the word *dlt* is best explained as “gate”, given the ostraca were found in an area near the city gate (what he calls an apparent guardroom or post-office, or both together), and thus assuming that the writer, a subordinate of the addressee, would have carried out his duty in a similar room, and would have affixed the communications to his superior to the gate of his place for public notification.¹⁶⁰

3) *dlt* as a tablet

- Like van Wieringen, Burrows deemed the meaning and function of the enigmatic *dlt* translated as a hinged writing tablet as “only an interesting possibility” yet “certainly more probable” than Torcyner’s interpretation of column in a papyrus scroll, but he

¹⁵⁶ Albright 1936: 14.

¹⁵⁷ Ahituv 2008: 71.

¹⁵⁸ van Wieringen 2011: 2.

¹⁵⁹ Cassuto 1936b: 174.

¹⁶⁰ Cassuto 1939: 236. Similarly Cross (1956: 24–25); van der Toorn (2007: 270–271, n. 18) follows Cross’s interpretation of “(gate) door”, but finds the translation “column [of a scroll]” also possible.

also concluded that the expression probably refers literally to writing on a door (cf. second option above).¹⁶¹ He also argued that the wording *ktbty 'l hdl*t could very well be idiomatic for “I made a note of”.¹⁶²

- The meaning of *dlt* as “tablet” has been accepted by Donner and Röllig. Similarly Galling deems *dlt* a “Klapptafel” (folding tablet).¹⁶³ In addition, it has been argued that the Greek δέλτος (diminutive δέλτιον), a “writing-tablet”, is a borrowing from Semitic *daltu* (namely, Ugaritic, Phoenician and Hebrew).¹⁶⁴ The preposition *'l* in the expression *'l hdl*t seems to denote proximity (English “on” or “by”), whilst in line 5 below and in Lachish 3.13 above *'l* means “concerning, about” (cf. 2 Kgs 22:13).¹⁶⁵

It would seem that any of the above three options fit the meaning of *dlt* in our ostrakon, given the lack of further detail in Lachish 4 on this enigmatic writing surface, and since we are only left with one surviving side of the correspondence between this subordinate and his superior.

Lines 4b–8

4. 'šr ˘ šlh['dny]ly . wky . šlh'	which [my lord] sent to me. And since my lord sent word, concerning the matter of <i>bythrpd</i> , there is no
5. dny . 'l . dbr ˘ bythrpd . 'ynšm'	one (there). As for S ^c ma ^y āhû, Š ^c ma ^y āhû took him, and
6. dmwsmkyhwlqhhšm 'yhww	brought him up to the city. As for your servant, I am n[o-]
7. y'lhwh 'yrhw 'bdk . 'yn[n]	t sending him there ye[t (or agai[n)
8. yšlhšmh 'th 'w[d?	

ky: As in Lachish 3.8, the *ky* in Lachish 4.4b introduces a fronted subordinate clause (“with regards to, regarding”), or “since”.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶¹ Burrows 1941: 185, §121; see also Burrows 1936; van Wieringen 2011: 2.

¹⁶² Burrows 1936: 493.

¹⁶³ Galling 1971: 210–211.

¹⁶⁴ Donner and Röllig 1962: 194; cf. Chantraine 1968–80: 260; Burkert 1992: 30; Probert 2006: 138, n. 24.

¹⁶⁵ Gogel 1998: 213.

¹⁶⁶ Cf. Gogel 1998: 229, 340.

bythrpd: The word *bythrpd* presumably denotes a place name (*byt hrpd*). The last two letters of the word (*pe* and *daleth*) are slightly faded and seem to merge into each other, possibly due to haste in writing the note, but other than that, this reading has been accepted by virtually all interpreters. Torczyner, by contrast, assumed that *bythrpd* referred to a “sleeping house or dwelling house”.¹⁶⁷ The sender reports that “there is no one (there)”. We are not given a hint where this place was located, and whether it was close to the sender’s location, as Begin suggests.¹⁶⁸ Begin also proposes a 4th-century B.C.E. epigraphic evidence that suggests the location of *bythrpd* could have been located close to Mareshah, a Judaeen administrative centre (see §5.9).

wsmkyhw lqhh šm‘yhw wy‘lhw h‘yrh: Just as in Lachish 3.11–13 and 19–21, Lachish 4.6b–7a form another example of a complex sentence, where one independent verb/noun sentence is preceded by a noun phrase referred to by a pronoun in that sentence.¹⁶⁹ The PN Š^emakyāhû (“YHWH has given support”) occurs again in the PNN list Lachish 11.5 (§3.1.11), and is reconstructed in Lachish 13.2 (*smk[yhw]*) (§3.1.13). The PN is also listed on Lachish 22.5 recovered below the Solar Shrine (Catalogue B).¹⁷⁰ It is further found on Ḥorvat ‘Uza 19.2¹⁷¹ and a seal¹⁷². In the Hebrew Bible, the name is mentioned in 1 Chr. 26:7. The PN Š^ema‘yāhû (“YHWH has heard”) occurs again in (the disputed late 8th-century) Lachish 19.4, although the latter is read with some uncertainty (§3.1.19). The name is recurrent in late 7th–early 6th-century Arad ostraca (27.2; 31.5; 39.2; 39.7–8; 69.3)¹⁷³ as well as a few seals¹⁷⁴. The PN is also well attested in the Hebrew Bible as

¹⁶⁷ *Lachish I*: 81.

¹⁶⁸ Begin 2002: 168.

¹⁶⁹ Gogel 1998: 284–285.

¹⁷⁰ Cf. Aharoni 1968: 168–169; 1975: 22–24.

¹⁷¹ Beit-Arieh 2007a: 152–156; Aḥituv 2008: 177–179; Na’aman 2012: 219.

¹⁷² Seal 448 (Avigad and Sass 1997).

¹⁷³ Cf. Aharoni 1981: 56–59; 68–69.

Shemaiah, and the spelling שמעיהו occurs nine times (2 Chr. 11:2; 17:8; 31:15; 35:9; Jer. 26:20; 29:24; 36:12; Ezra 8:16; Neh. 11:15). The spelling שמעיה occurs in 1 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Jeremiah, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

'yn[n]y: In a personal communication to May, Albright shared his conviction that a piece had flaked off the lower left-hand corner of Lachish 4, which would mean the upper left-hand corner of the inner side.¹⁷⁵ Following physical examination of the ostrakon, I concur that some text is missing (on the outer and inner sides) where the sherd apparently breaks off. Half of the last letter at the end of line 7 is missing, and it remains uncertain whether this was followed by further letters. Most interpreters read and reconstruct the last word in line 7 that perhaps continues in line 8 as 'yn[n]y. The particle of negation אֵינִי (which is made up of the particle אֵין and 1.c.s. pronominal suffix, i.e. “I cannot/will not/am not to”) occurs nine times in the Hebrew Bible, and is usually followed by the active participle, in our case *šlh*. I am inclined to follow this reading after analysing the IAA photographs (Fig. 34). The ink is faded, but I can definitely see part of a downstroke similar to that of a *nun* at the very end of line 7, where the sherd breaks off.

h'yrh and *šmh*: Just as *mšrymh* in Lachish 3.16, the words *h'yrh* and *šmh* in Lachish 4.7,8 have the inflectional suffix *he*, which determines the forms as locative: “to the city” and “(to) there” (cf. also Lachish 8.8 [*šmh*]).¹⁷⁶

'w[d: The end of line 8 apparently reads 'w[d, although with some uncertainty. Gibson, Pardee et al., and Renz and Röllig instead propose the reading: 't h'd, i.e. the definite object-

¹⁷⁴ Seals 636–638 (Avigad and Sass 1997).

¹⁷⁵ May 1945: 24.

¹⁷⁶ See Gogel 1998: 206, 207. See also Rezetko and Young 2014: 393.

marker 't followed by “the witness” or “the evidence”, therefore translating lines 7–8 as, “And your servant cannot send the witness there”.¹⁷⁷

Lines 9–13 (reverse)

9. <i>ky'm . btsbthbqr[?</i>	but when morning comes around [I will (send him)?]
10. <i>wyd'ky'l . mś'tlkš . nḥ</i>	and he will know that the (fire/smoke-)signals of Lachish we
11. <i>nwšmrm . kkl . h'tt . 'šrntn</i>	are watching, in accordance to all the signs which
12. <i>'dny . kyl' _ nr'h't'z</i>	my lord has given, for we cannot see Aze-
13. <i>qh .</i>	kah.

ky 'm btsbt hbqr: The conjunctions *ky 'm* are written as separate particles in line 9, i.e. an explanatory *ky* coupled with *'m* to mark the protasis of a conditional clause, hence, “but when morning comes around”.¹⁷⁸ The idiom *btsbt hbqr* (lit. “in the turning of the morning”) is presumed to be a *hapax legomenon* from \sqrt{sbb} , and probably parallel to *t^ešûbat haššānāh* (“the return of the year”) (e.g. 2 Sam. 11:1; 1 Kgs 20:22, 26).¹⁷⁹ The sherd breaks off at this point, but one can suppose the writer says “I will”, understood “send him”, presumably Semakyāhû.

mś't lkš: The mention of *mś't*, a technical term for “fire-/smoke-signal” or “beacon”, which recalls Jer. 6:1 (תאשׁוּב): “raise a fire-signal on Beth-haccherem” (Ramat Raḥel), stirred quite a debate among scholars, who deemed Lachish 4 to bear dramatic news of imminent danger from the Babylonian army (see §§5.9 and 6.3.6).¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ Gibson 1971: 41–43; Pardee et al. 1982: 91, 92–93; *HAE*, I: 421. Gogel (1998: 417) also adopts this reading.

¹⁷⁸ Gogel 1998: 225, 226.

¹⁷⁹ Cf. also 4Q503:III:9 (*DJD* VII: 106 [Ulrich et al. 1995]); Ex. 34:22; Isa. 29:1; see Lemaire 1977: 112; 2004: 2104; *HAE*, I: 422; Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005: 318; Aḥituv 2008: 75–76, *pace* Pardee et al. (1982: 91, 93 and references there) who interpret it as “morning tour” (in the sense of “morning petrol”).

¹⁸⁰ Diringier and Brock (1968: 42) reminded the readers of the similar dramatic use of fire-signals described by Clytemnestra in Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* (lines 281–316).

kkh h'tt 'šr ntn 'dny: This phrase suggests that the superior had given orders or indications, perhaps a military code, to the subordinate and his men to watch for the signals of Lachish.¹⁸¹

'zqh: The mention of the two fortresses, Lachish and Azekah, intrigued scholars from the start. Torczyner was the first to propose that Lachish 4 was written upon Azekah's demise at the hand of the Babylonians, based on the assumption that the sender would not trouble his superior with trivial details of topography or geography, i.e. that Azekah could not be seen from where the sender was stationed, as officials would presumably have had excellent knowledge of such details on their fortresses and stations in the Shephelah.¹⁸² Rather the sender, according to Torczyner, was sending an urgent message to his superior that the signals of Azekah were extinguished because of the Babylonians had stormed the fortress of Azekah. Even so, one cannot exclude the alternative hypothesis that the sender was simply pointing out the topographical situation to his superior (see discussions in §§5.9 and 6.3.6).

3.1.5 Lachish 5

This ostrakon bears another message consisting of ten lines, but is not so well preserved, especially the upper half of the inscription, owing to the sherd's gritty surface (Figs 36–37). The ink was already poorly preserved as observed in Torczyner's *editio princeps*, and today the entire text is virtually faded. As a result, there have been different renderings by scholars. The introductory formulae in lines 1–5 have been reconstructed in the present study, and the proposed reading and translation of the legible letters combines different proposals.

¹⁸¹ See discussions in Elliger 1938: 54; D.W. Thomas 1946: 90–91; Tur-Sinai 1949; Pardee et al. 1982: 94.

¹⁸² *Lachish I*: 85.

Lines 1–7a

1. <i>yšm</i> '[. <i>yhwh</i> 't'd]ny	May [YHWH let my lo]rd hear
2. [<i>šm</i> 't. <i>šl</i>]mw[<i>tb</i> . 't	[tiding(s) of pea]ce and [(good fortune) this
3. <i>kym</i> ' <i>tkym</i> .]my 'bdk .	very day, this very day!] Who is your servant
4. <i>klb</i> . <i>k</i> ₂ [<i>šlht</i>] 'l'bd	(but) a dog, that [you sent] to your servan-
5. <i>k</i> . 'th[<i>sprm</i> . <i>k</i>]z'	t the [letters]? Like-
6. [<i>t</i>]hšb . 'bdk . <i>hspr</i>	wise has your servant returned the letter-
7. <i>m</i> . 'l'dny . yr 'ky	s to my lord. May Y-

[*šm* 't *šl*]m and *my* 'bdk *klb* *ky*: The introductory formulae of blessing and the statement of deference can be reconstructed relatively easily by inference, and because of a few legible letters on the various lines. In the self-abasement formula, the sender makes a reference to something sent to him, the object in question having been reconstructed as *hsprm* in line 5 owing to the mention of “the letters” later in lines 6–7.

kz '[t]: If *kz* '[t] (lines 5–6) is read as an ending to the previous question that the subordinate poses to his lord, then the servant is understood to be asking his superior as to why he sent him the letters “thus”, and goes on to tell him that “Your servant (herewith) returns the letters to my lord”.¹⁸³ If, on the other hand, *kz* '[t] is considered to start a new phrase entirely, i.e. the servant’s reply that follows the above question, then the servant is stating that he is “likewise” sending the letters to his superior, as in Aḥituv.¹⁸⁴ Indeed, the demonstrative pronoun כִּזֶּה occurs 19 times in the Hebrew Bible, translated as “likewise”, and I therefore follow this interpretation in my reading to start off the servant’s next statement after he expresses self-abasement as to the attention given to him, “a dog”, by his superior in sending him letters. The adverb *kz* 't occurs again in Lachish 6.10, but due to the fragmentary state of the inscription, a sound reconstruction in that instance is not possible

¹⁸³ Cf. Lemaire 1977:118; 2004: 2104; *HAE*, I: 424.

¹⁸⁴ Aḥituv 2008: 77.

(§3.1.6). On the other hand, Pardee and others translate *'t hsprm kz't* as “the[se lette]rs”, and thus reconstruct lines 3–5 as “who is your servant (but) a dog, that [you sent] your servant these letters?”, without explaining their choice for the demonstrative “these”.¹⁸⁵ Even so, *kz't* cannot be a demonstrative adjective in agreement with the masculine noun *hsprm*.

hsprm: The sender apparently enquires about some letters sent to him by his superior. On this detail Aḥituv raises the question whether the message of Lachish 5 would have possibly preceded the one in Lachish 3, where letters were mentioned, but given the terse nature of our corpus, such a hypothesis has no solid ground.¹⁸⁶ Torczyner additionally remarked about the cursive of Lachish 5 which seems to strike similarities with that of Lachish 9. The handwriting of both ostraca is characterised by the breadth of the letters, the space between them, the quasi-horizontal downstrokes of *mem*, and the horizontal, angular *'ayin*, and therefore regarded 5 and 9 to be the work of a different hand from those of 1 to 4 (§§2.3 and 4.2).¹⁸⁷

Lines 7b–10

7. <i>m . 'l'dny . yr'ky</i>	s to my lord. May Y-
8. <i>hwh . hqs[r]bṭb</i>	HWH let you enjoy the harves[t] in prosperity
9. <i>hym . h['l . 'bdk.y</i>	today! Wi[l]l Ṭôḥîyāhû br<in>g
10. <i>ṭbyhw . zr'lmk</i>	royal grain to your servant?

yr'k yhwh hqs[r] bṭb: Lines 7b–9a form a desiderative (optative) sentence expressed by the precative mood (jussive) (cf. Lachish 6.1b–2a).¹⁸⁸ This is the only message from the legible Lachish ostraca wherein the Divine Name is strangely split in two separate lines,

¹⁸⁵ Pardee et al. 1982: 96.

¹⁸⁶ Aḥituv 2008: 77.

¹⁸⁷ *Lachish I*: 99.

¹⁸⁸ Gogel 1998: 287.

owing to the limited space: the first *yod* is at the end of line 7, while the letters *he-waw-he* continue at the start of line 8¹⁸⁹ (cf. also Lachish 21). The expression *yr'k...bṭb* has been read as the Hiphil jussive of *r'h* together with an adjective or adverb for “in prosperity, at ease, with good (things)” (cf. e.g. Ps. 25:13; Job 21:13; 2 Chr. 6:41); hence, “May YHWH allow my lord to witness a good harvest”, as suggested by Pardee et al., and agreed upon by Gogel,¹⁹⁰ or “May YHWH cause my lord to see the harvest successfully”.¹⁹¹ Firstly, it should be noted that these translations include and seem to assume that the indirect object of the blessing is “my lord”, when in the actual inscription the verb *yr'k* has the 2.m.s. object suffix attached, and thus a better translation would rather be “you”. Moreover, the latter (“you”), understood as a reference by the sender to his superior, is the direct object of this blessing. The *he* attached to the word *hqṣr* “the harvest” apparently acts as the definite article, yet there is no object marker *'t*. This is perhaps a scribal mistake, which is not surprising in this ostrakon, since there is another scribal error in line 9 (*y'*). Thirdly, the above interpretations suggest the Hiphil of *r'h* to mean “he causes to see (=show)”, but even so, the Hiphil of *r'h* can also be idiomatic, i.e. “to cause to experience (perhaps a vision)” (cf. Hab. 1:3; Ps. 60:5; 71:20), or “to let one see (i.e. enjoy)” (cf. Eccl. 2:24; Ps. 4:7; 85:8).¹⁹² In Eccl. 2:1 the Hiphil of *r'h* is combined with *bṭb* (“I will test you with pleasure. So enjoy yourself.” [NASB]; “I will prove thee with mirth, therefore enjoy

¹⁸⁹ I thank Jonathan Stökl for pointing out this interesting peculiarity. Another instance where such a split of the divine name occurs is in the second silver amulet from the cemetery of Ketef Hinnom (lines 8–9), which dates to the second half of the 7th century B.C.E. (Yardeni 1991; Barkay et al. 2004). Arad 21.2–3 presumably also bears such a split of the Divine Name, although the divine name is mostly reconstructed, as the ink on the left piece of the repaired ostrakon was irreparably brushed off (Aharoni 1981: 42–43).

¹⁹⁰ Pardee et al. 1982: 96; Gogel 1998: 164, 418.

¹⁹¹ See Aḥituv 2008: 77, 79.

¹⁹² Cf. Clines 2010: 359; Robinson 1871: 952; *BDB*: 909; Koehler and Baumgartner 2001, II: 1161.

pleasure” [KJV]).¹⁹³ In conclusion, I propose the reading: “May YHWH let you enjoy the harvest in prosperity today!”

h[]l 'bdk y 'tbyhw zr' lmlk: There is an obvious scribal error in the verb *y*, where the scribe left out the *beth* (cf. the error in Lachish 3.21). Overall, the last two ambiguous lines of Lachish 5 have various interpretations, owing to the obscure letters at the end of line 9. One tentative reading of the phrase *zr' lmlk* as “royal seed”, as Aḥituv suggests, would describe Ṭôḇîyāhû (line 9) as a royal family member (hence, “Will Ṭôḇîyāhû, of the royal family, c<o>me to your servant?”), or else as “the arm of the king”, meaning a very high-ranking official in the royal court.¹⁹⁴ In addition, the hypothesis that this individual is the same one mentioned in Lachish 3.19 is only a mere possibility. Furthermore, Joosten suggests that the clause structure of the interrogative *h (ha) + complement ('bdk) + verb + tbyhw + zr' lmk* suggests a strong focus on the element following *ha* and preceding the verb (cf. Isa. 36:12), i.e. the servant and speaker of the Lachish 5 message. This detail would favour Aḥituv’s suggestion above, and if Ṭôḇîyāhû is of royal blood or the “arm of the king”, then his visit to the servant and sender of the message, “a mere dog”, would be striking, which would explain the strong focus, whereas if “royal seed” is understood as simply “grain”, then the focus on the recipient is strange to understand.¹⁹⁵

Indeed most scholars opt to translate “royal seed” as “grain” (cf. *zr'* = “grain” in Deut. 22:9; Lev. 27:30; Isa. 23:3).¹⁹⁶ For starters, it should be stressed that the phrase in Lachish 5 is precisely written as *zr' + lmlk*, i.e. “seeds/grain” + “belonging to the king”, in

¹⁹³ See Aḥituv 2008: 79.

¹⁹⁴ Aḥituv 2008: 79.

¹⁹⁵ Jan Joosten, email sent to A. Zammit, 17 November 2014.

¹⁹⁶ See Michaud 1957: 48–49; Pardee et al. 1982: 97; *HAE*, I: 424–425; Lemaire 1977: 119; 2004: 2104. Gogel (1998: 418); Dobbs-Allsopp et al. (2005: 320–322), and Na’aman (2012: 224) also accept this reading.

other words, “royal grain”, and not the construct form *zr’ hmlk*, which would mirror e.g. *’bd hmlk* (cf. Lachish 3.19), in which case it would favour Aḥituv’s suggestion above.¹⁹⁷ Like most commentators, I translate *zr’ lmlk* as “royal grain” (see above and Catalogue A). The servant is enquiring with his superior whether a certain Ṭôbîyāhû, known to both the sender and the recipient, will bring royal grain to him. The phrase brings to mind the hundreds of *lmlk* stamped jars discovered at Lachish and other Judaeian sites, which were vessels containing rations reserved for the royal house. These *lmlk* jars went out of use before the foundation of Lachish Level II, and were replaced by other kinds of royal jars.¹⁹⁸ Dobbs-Allsopp and others suggest that *zr’* in Lachish 5 might refer to the portion of grain collected by the royal administration, although they do not rule out the alternative possibility that it refers to rations for the subordinate and his men.¹⁹⁹ In fact, Na’aman suggests that *zr’* here stands for seed dispatched by the royal administration (in royal jars) for sowing the crown fields the following autumn.²⁰⁰ Even so, any of these interpretations is possible, given the terse message. Going by my interpretation above, the context of Lachish 5 does suggest an actual request from the sender of the letter for a supply of grain, especially if this request is preceded by a wishful exclamation for the enjoyment of a prosperous harvest. Hence the translation: “Will Ṭôbîyāhû bring royal grain to your servant?” The same argument applies to Na’aman’s interpretation above, for that matter. If either was the case, then Lachish 5 seems to reflect rather peaceful daily activities and not the tumultuous or agitated atmosphere some of the other messages convey.

¹⁹⁷ Hugh G. M. Williamson, personal communication, 2016.

¹⁹⁸ Lipschits, Sergi and Koch 2010; 2011.

¹⁹⁹ Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005: 322.

²⁰⁰ Cf. Na’aman (2012: 224–225 and references there) on his reading and discussion of Ḥorvat ‘Uza 25 (contra the reading in Beit-Arieh 2007a: 168).

3.1.6 Lachish 6

This inscription consists of about 15 lines, but is badly preserved, with many lacunae in its bottom half (Figs 38–39). Nevertheless, the legible content reveals another letter or message.

Lines 1–7

1. 'l'dnyy'wš . yr' yhw' h'	To my lord Yā'ûš. May YHWH let
2. t'dny'th'thzh . šlm . my	my lord see, at this time, peace. Who is
3. 'bdk . klb . ky . šlh . 'dn[y'tsp]	your servant (but) a dog, that my lor[d sent the lette-]
4. rhmlk[w't]spryhšr[ml'm]	r of the king [and] the letters of the commander [sayin-]
5. rqr'n' yhw' h' . dbry . h[šr(m?)]	g, “Read, I beg you!” And behold, the words of the [commander(s)?
6. l'tbmlrptydyk[...]	are not good. To weaken your? hands [...
7. qtydyh ['.....yd'.....]the hands of the[..... know?]

'l'dny y'wš yr' yhw' h' t'dny t'h't hzh: The letter opens with the customary address, here again with the name of the recipient, Yā'ûš, followed by a rather different blessing of peace – “May YHWH let my lord see, at this time, peace”, with the Hiphil jussive form yr' in the 3.m.s. This is another example of a desiderative (optative) sentence expressed by the precative mood (jussive) (cf. Lachish 5.7b–9a above).²⁰¹ The intent of the greeting is apparently that the superior will receive the letter and it will find him in good state or disposition. Torczyner's original syntactical layout of line 2 causes some grammatical problems, as he reads the full greeting as, “To my lord Ya'ush. May YHWH let see (us) my lord, (while) thou (art) even now in peace”. His division of t'h't hzh in line 2 is 'th zh.²⁰²

my 'bdk klb ky: Once again we have the formula of deference in lines 2–3, and the sender mentions a letter of the king and letters of the commander that his master sent him, but the

²⁰¹ Gogel 1998: 287.

²⁰² Lachish I: 117.

commander's letters supposedly contained news of a negative nature. The end of line 5 is conjectural, since the ink is faded badly, and therefore the word for commander(s) and whatever letters preceded line 6 are hypothetical.²⁰³ Torczyner in fact had restored the last word as “the prophet” *h[nb]*.²⁰⁴ Still, this reading is refused by most scholars, who instead opt to read *h[šr(m)]*, given that *hšr* is already mentioned in line 4.²⁰⁵ The message implies a tense atmosphere, especially when considering the lines that follow (lines 2–7 below), where reference is made to the demoralization of the troops caused by the words of the officer(s) (or less likely the prophet) (see discussions in §§5.8 and 6.3.4).

n': As in Lachish 3.4–5, the particle of entreaty *n'* in Lachish 6.5 follows an imperative, and directly follows the expression to which it belongs (i.e. lines 2–5 that express self-abasement and refer to the sent letters that the servant was requested to read) (cf. Mešad Ḥashavyahu 1.12).²⁰⁶

hnh: The interjection *hnh* (“surely, lo, indeed”) in line 5 (which occurs also in Arad 24²⁰⁷) is deictic,²⁰⁸ and therefore requires contextual information.

lrpt ydyk[...]: The badly preserved content in Lachish 6.6–15(?) especially most of lines 7 and 8, does not permit a sound reconstruction. The expression *lrpt ydyk* “to weaken your hands” (line 6) apparently refers to the “the hands of Yā'ûš”. I read *ydyk*, as do other commentators,²⁰⁹ since I can make out a *kaph*, based on the IAA photographs. De Vaux

²⁰³ Diringier (1953: 334) did not commit himself to restore the end of line 5; Lemaire (2004: 2105) partly reads a *hê* and a *šin* from the alleged last word of this line, and therefore provides the reading «the offi[cials]», so his *šin* would actually be a *šin* in this case; *HAE* (I: 426), Dobbs-Allsopp et al. (2005: 323), and Aḥituv (2008: 80) also restore *h[šrm]*.

²⁰⁴ *Lachish I*: 113, 117; 1987: 138; Gibson (1971: 35–36, 45) follows Torczyner's restoration in view of similarities in the biblical record, particularly the accounts of Jeremiah and Kings.

²⁰⁵ See comments in Stökl 2012: 168–169.

²⁰⁶ Gogel 1998: 231. For Mešad Ḥashavyahu 1, see Naveh 1981: 129–139; Aḥituv 2008: 156–163

²⁰⁷ Aharoni 1981: 46–49.

²⁰⁸ Gogel 1998: 230–231.

²⁰⁹ Pardee et al. 1982: 100–101; *HAE*, I: 426; Aḥituv 2008: 80.

also identified a *kaph*, but he opted to read it separately as: *ydy kśdm* “hands of the Chaldaeans”, on which he is followed with some uncertainty by Lemaire.²¹⁰ Pardee et al.,²¹¹ however, object to de Vaux’s reading for multiple reasons: (1) the lack of any further evidence on or reference to the Chaldaeans from the other ostraca, and the semantic uncertainty of the resulting restoration; (2) the idiom *rph ydym* carries the general sense of “to discourage, lose heart” (cf. Jer. 38:4; Neh 6:9), but letters from Judaeen officials would not be expected to “discourage” the enemy forces and, for that matter, the sender of the present message could only be expected to rejoice at such a prospect, yet the content only gives a sense of pessimistic expectations of (present or upcoming) events; (3) the requirement of “Chaldaeans” to be written as *kśdym* (*kaśdiyyim*) on a par with *ktym* (*kittiyim*, “Kittim” in Jer. 2:10) in the Arad ostraca,²¹² to keep the correct orthography and pronunciation of gentilics at this period, yet this would require further space to restore all letters required (although Pardee et al. confess that emending the reading of the verb at the end of line 6 would, to an extent, solve the problem of length).²¹³ Pardee and others therefore choose to read *ydyk* “your hands”, and I follow their reading, as any letters beyond the *kaph* in line 6 are blurred or illegible (see discussion on the idiom “to weaken the hands” in §5.8; cf. also §6.3.4).

Lines 8–15?

8. <i>p[w].. k[... 'dny]hl '[tk</i>	...[].....[..... my lord], will you not wr-
9. <i>tb '[l...lmh]t[']św .</i>	ite to t[hem saying: “Wh]y are you behaving
10. <i>kz 't[.....w..y.....]hl</i>	this way?”[.....?.....]to the
11. <i>mlk[y]w[.....</i>	king [.....?.....
12. <i>.....]hyyhwh 'lh</i>] As YHWH your god
13. <i>ykk[y...] 'zqr '['b]</i>	lives.....your servant re-

²¹⁰ Cf. De Vaux 1939: 197; Lemaire 1977: 121, 123; 2004: 2105, 2106.

²¹¹ Pardee et al. 1982: 101.

²¹² Cf. e.g. Arad 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 11 and 14 (Aharoni 1981: 12–16, 19, 22–23, 25, 28).

²¹³ Pardee et al. 1982: 101; cf. reconstruction in de Vaux 1939: 197.

14. *dk['t]hspr[m?.....* -ad the letter(s)
15. *l wh.....*

From line 8 onwards the inscription is too damaged and faded to allow a sound restoration. A few words here and there can be read.

hl' tktb: A superimposed *waw* can be observed towards the start of line 8, perhaps a scribal correction attempt. In *hl' tktb* (lines 8–9), the *l'* coupled with the jussive functions as the command “do not”, and *h-* functions as an interrogative, resulting in a question functioning as a positive request (see §4.5).²¹⁴ As in other cases of having either *l'* or *hl'* in pre-exilic inscriptions, the *hl'* in Lachish 6.8 is not written in *plene* form.²¹⁵ For a discussion on the implications of the request in lines 8–10, see §§5.6, 5.8, and 6.3.4.

hy yhw: Unlike Lachish 3.9, the oath formula *hy yhw* is here preserved as two separate words, and written in full as: *hy yhw 'lhyk* (cf. e.g. 1 Kgs 17:12; 18:10) (cf. also Lachish 12.3). For a discussion on the oath formula see Lachish 3 above.

3.1.7 Lachish 7

Originally forming part of the base of the same Type 498 jar as Lachish 2, 6, 8, and 18, this repaired ostrakon is only partially preserved (Figs 40–41). Torczyner originally noticed traces of about ten lines of writing on the outer side, and further stated that four lines of writing were noticeable on the inner side.²¹⁶ However, no autograph whatsoever accompanied S. W. Michieli’s photograph in *Lachish I*, and Renz and Röllig only provide an autograph of the outer surface (Fig. 41). Moreover, scholars in general, including Torczyner himself, produced the

²¹⁴ Bridge 2010: 530, n. 48.

²¹⁵ See Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005: 679, 705; see also Rezetko and Young 2014: 458.

²¹⁶ *Lachish I*: 124.

readings of the obverse only. In fact, Diringier remarked that he could only read a few letters here and there on the outer surface, making interpretation of this document hopeless.²¹⁷ Torczyner's claim of further lines of writing on the inner surface, however, was disproved after close examination of the sherd. The upper pieces of the ostrakon, joined and repaired following excavation, bear dust stains and grit that adhere to the surface, which can be easily mistaken for dark stains of writing. In fact, the other "guardroom" ostraca bear similar dust stains, especially the ostraca belonging to the same vessel. Torczyner, Diringier, and Lemaire remarked that the interpretation of this document is hopeless, with which I agree.²¹⁸ It is possible, though conjectural, that the PN [f]bšlm, the same name that appears in Lachish 1.2,²¹⁹ or else the start of line 7 could simply translate into "in peace" (bšlm), but no further reconstruction is possible.

3.1.8 Lachish 8

Another piece of the same Type 498 vessel as 2, 6, 7, and 18, ostrakon 8 bears traces of writing on both the outer and inner sides (Figs 42–43). This is yet another fragmentary inscription, comprising about eight lines in all, with half of the inscription on the inner surface practically washed out. Torczyner did not provide a translation to his readings. The shapes of the letters *nun* and *yod* in line 8 have archaizing forms, and Torczyner remarked about the handwriting of this ostrakon resembling that of Lachish 1, but also suggested that the Lachish 1 list accompanied Lachish 8, perhaps as a list of witnesses to support Hôša'yāhû's (or the sender's) messages.²²⁰ Be that as it may, this claim remains without sound proof (see §5.6).

(obverse)

²¹⁷ Diringier 1953: 335; in addition, I am convinced that Diringier wrote "Reverse" by mistake atop his readings of lines 3–5 in *Lachish III* (pg. 335), where in all likelihood he had meant "Obverse".

²¹⁸ *Lachish I*: 124; Diringier 1953: 335; Lemaire 2004: 2106.

²¹⁹ Cf. *Lachish I*: 123, 124; Lemaire 1977: 124; 2004: *HAE*, II/1: 428; Gogel 1998: 419.

²²⁰ *Lachish I*: 129.

1. <i>yšm</i> [' . <i>yhwh</i> ' <i>t</i> ' <i>dnyšm</i>	May [YHWH let my lord hear tid-
2.] <i>t</i> [<i>tb</i> .] <i>tkymkymwh</i> [<i>n</i>	ing]s [of good (fortune) thi]s very day, this day! <u>And</u>
3. <i>h</i> [. <i>m</i>] <i>n</i> [' ... <i>lm</i>] <i>lk</i> . <i>m</i> '	ld... [.....to the ki]ng of Mo-
4. <i>b</i> . <i>rh</i> ... <i>y</i> ... <i>kyhwh</i>	ab..... YHWH
5. ... ^d / _r ... [] []
6. ... [] []
(reverse)	
7. <i>lm</i> <i>y</i> ' <i>kzb</i> Achziv
8. <i>wh</i> ' <i>dny</i> . <i>šm</i> [<i>h</i>] my lord the[re].

yšm [' *yhwh* ' *t* ' *dny šm*] *t* [*tb*] *tkym kym*: From the opening formula of blessing in lines 1–2, it is clear that this is another letter or message from a subordinate to his superior. The blessing wishes for good news, as in Lachish 4.1–2a, Lachish 5.1–3a, and perhaps Lachish 3:2b–4a, although they are phrased differently from one another (see §4.5.1). In Lachish 8 we have a slightly different exclamation of time in the blessing, where instead of the typical ' *t kym* ' *t kym* “today, this very day” (as in Lachish 2.3 and the reconstructed Lachish 5.2–3), we have ' *t kym kym* “this very day, this day”.

m ' *b* and ' *kzb*: Much of the inscription is lost from line 3 onwards. Of striking significance is the apparent mention of place names, namely Moab (*m* ' *b*) (lines 3–4) and Achziv (' *kzb*) (line 7). Lemaire reads and restores the name of “Kamosh king of Moab” in line 3.²²¹ The reading ' *kzb* is certain; it can either be a Piel 1.c.s. imperfect of *kzb* (“I have lied”), as Torczyner suggested,²²² or a place-name in the Shephelah, connected with Mareshah (Jos. 15:44; Micah 1:14), most likely identified with Tell el-Beida.²²³ The name appears again, yet written as ' *kzy* [*b*], in the Lachish 22 list (Catalogue B).²²⁴ Lachish 22.10 reads: *lby* *t* ' *kzy* [*b*] ... “To the House of Achziv”, which is also thought to refer to the biblical

²²¹ Lemaire 1977: 124, 125–126; 2004: 2106, 2107.

²²² *Lachish I*: 129.

²²³ See Michaud 1958: 90; Lemaire 1977: 126–127; 2004: 2107; *HAE*, I: 429, n. 3.

²²⁴ Cf. Aharoni 1968: 168–169; 1975: 22–24. The PN is also found in the list of ten names from Ḥorvat 'Uza (cf. Aḥituv 2008: 177–179; Na'aman 2012: 219).

Achziv (Tell el-Beida), and *byt* 'kzyb may allude to a royal workshop at Achziv,²²⁵ discussed by Demsky with regards to Micah 1:14 and 1 Chr. 4:21–23.²²⁶ Gogel lists both 'kzb and 'kzy[b] as possible examples of prothetic *aleph*, which is not common in epigraphic Hebrew, but when it does occur, it seems to precede a two-consonant cluster.²²⁷

3.1.9 Lachish 9

This inscription is a faded message (Figs 44–45). It has been suggested that this is a shortened copy of Lachish 5, for which reason it may be partly completed from it.²²⁸ In Torczyner's edition, the inscription consisted of about nine lines, starting on the outer surface (six? lines) and continuing on the inner side (three? lines), but the state of the ink was very smudged and difficult to discern, leading to dubious readings by scholars. Today the ink is virtually faded on both sides, except for a few very faint letters on the upper right corner on the outer surface. The content differs slightly from those of the other messages. Lachish 9 is similar to Arad 18, since both ostraca belong to the letter types from inferior to superior requesting food stuffs, but their respective *praescriptio* formulae are completely different.²²⁹

(obverse)

- | | |
|-----------------------|--|
| 1. yšm' yhw h' t['d] | May YHWH let [my lo-] |
| 2. nyš[m' t] šlm . w | rd hear t[iding(s)] of peace. And |
| 3. [' ttn . lhm ↗ w | [n]ow give 10 (loaves of) bread and |
| 4. [yyn] // [hšb | 2 [(bath-measures? of wine)]. [Send word |
| 5. l ' bdk[d] | to your] servant |
| 6. brb | by |

²²⁵ Aharoni 1975: 24.

²²⁶ Demsky 1966: 211–215.

²²⁷ Cf. Gogel 1998: 48 and further examples there.

²²⁸ Reider 1939: 237–238.

²²⁹ Pardee et al. 1982: 159, 161; see also Na'aman 2011: 86–87. Arad 18 sticks out from most Arad letters, since the latter corpus comprises a number of letters from superior to inferior ordering distribution of commodities. The legible Lachish letters/messages (2–6, 8, 9, perhaps 12, and 18), on the other hand, are all from inferior to superior.

(reverse)

7. *yds*[*l*]*myhw*'

8. *šrn*['*š*]*h . m*

9. *hr*

means of²³⁰ *Š^elemyāhû*, which/as to what we shall do tomorrow.

yšm' yhw h 't ['d]ny [šm 't] šlm: After the customary blessing that probably parallels that of the reconstructed Lachish 5 (“May YHWH let [my lo]rd hear [tiding(s)] of peace”), the sender asks for rations.

w['*ttn*]: The phrase *w*['*ttn* “And now give” in lines 2–3, which has been proposed by Pardee et al. and Lemaire, among others,²³¹ is probably referring to and ties in with a certain *Š^elemyāhû* (who is mentioned later on in line 9) as the one about to receive and deliver the requested supplies that are to be “given” by the high official (i.e. “And now give [=to *Š^elemyāhû*]”). The use of an imperative form preceded by the transition marker *w' t*, even when addressing someone of superior rank, was perfectly common in the biblical period.²³² Torczyner however read and restored lines 2 and 3 quite differently, and he even included the self-abasement phrase: '*bd*[*k klb ky šlh* “your servant (but) a dog that (my lord) sent”.²³³ Gibson also read this sentence differently: '*l* ('*bd*)*k nšlh*, “and (now – to your servant) there has been sent”, proposing the Niphal form *nšlh*.²³⁴

☞: The sign in line 3 is of Egyptian hieratic origin, and stands for the numeral 10.²³⁵ This sign is recognised again in Lachish 19.1, 19.2, and 19.7 (§2.5).

∥: In line 4 are what appear to be two pairs of strokes leaning in different directions, but scholars in general tend to translate the second pair as the Egyptian hieratic numeral 2

²³⁰ After Ahituv 2008: 85; «*byd*» can be translated as “durch” or “in die Hand von” (Röllig 1995: 70–71).

²³¹ Pardee et al. 1982: 105, 106, 150; Lemaire 2004: 2107.

²³² See Ahituv 2008: 86.

²³³ *Lachish I*: 135, 137.

²³⁴ Gibson 1971: 47.

²³⁵ Aharoni 1966a: 18, 19, fig. 4.

(reproduced here), and ignore the first, which I confirm to be stains on the sherd's surface (§2.5).

šlmyhw: In this second part of the letter, the sender requests a reply by means of *šlmyhw* – *Š^elemyāhû* (“YHWH has recompensed”) (line 7).²³⁶ The PN can also be vocalized as *Š^elomyāhû* (“Pay, oh YHWH”), but PNN with imperative elements are rare, not to mention that it would be a most unusual expression to utter. *Prima facie* *Š^elemyāhû* comes across as being the messenger physically delivering this letter.²³⁷ If true, then this factor also underlines the frequency by which correspondence was being conducted between the sender and the recipient, since the former requests instructions on what is to be done on the following day (see also §6.3.1).²³⁸ The PN *šlmyhw* appears also in the Negev, on Tel ‘Ira 1.4 and Ḥorvat ‘Uza 19.5,²³⁹ and a seal.²⁴⁰ Michaud read a different theophoric PN, owing to the faded state of the first three letters: *qšbyhw* (Q^ešabyāhû) (“YHWH has listened/hearkened”).²⁴¹ Torczyner read lines 7–9 totally differently in both his editions: *yd’[n]k yhw ’šr n’šh mhw* in the *editio princeps*, and *yd qšbyhw ’šr n’šh bhm* in the Hebrew edition (in the latter adopting the PN *qšbyhw*).²⁴²

3.1.10 Lachish 10

This ostrakon, repaired in modern times, was unfortunately already very faded, as can be seen in R. Richmond Brown’s original photograph in *Lachish I* (Figs 46–47). There seem to be traces of

²³⁶ See also Golub 2015.

²³⁷ Aḥituv 2008: 83–86, cf. the discussion for the hypocoristicon *šlm* in Lachish 3.20 above.

²³⁸ Aḥituv 2008: 86.

²³⁹ See Tel ‘Ira 1 (Beit-Arieh 1999: 402–405; Aḥituv 2008: 179–180); Ḥorvat ‘Uza 19 (Beit-Arieh 2007a: 152–156; Aḥituv 2008: 177–179).

²⁴⁰ Seal 111 (Avigad and Sass 1997).

²⁴¹ Michaud 1958: 88.

²⁴² *Lachish I*: 135, 137; Tur-Sinai 1987: 176–182.

several lines of handwriting, which according to Torczyner were 13 in total.²⁴³ Lemaire says that he observes a few *lamed* signs, but “no word can be read with certainty”.²⁴⁴ Renz and Röllig reproduced a facsimile of the few traces of writing they observed, as do I (Fig. 47).

3.1.11 Lachish 11

This is a fragmentary PNN list (Figs 48–49). Torczyner had originally recognized traces of 13 lines, but only a few could be read.²⁴⁵ In this study, I reproduce only those lines and letters that are legible. The ostrakon is repaired but one piece of the original potsherd is missing from the bottom right. *Contra* Torczyner, I deem it a possibility that the top piece only was the actual ostrakon (see §5.2.3).

(top ceramic piece)

- | | |
|-----------------------|------------------------|
| 1. <i>bl</i> (traces) | ?..... |
| 2. <i>'lntn</i> | 'Elnatan |
| 3. <i>mkyhw</i> | Mikayāhû |
| 4. <i>smkyhw</i> | S ^ε makyāhû |
| 5. <i>šdq...</i> | Šidqi[yāhû]? |
| 6. (traces?) | ?..... |

'lntn: This PN occurs in Lachish 3.15, and is found in the contemporary Ḥorvat ‘Uza 24,²⁴⁶ Arad 110.1, and the 8th-century Arad 69.6.²⁴⁷

mkyhw: This PN (“Who is like YHWH?”) occurs in the Hebrew Bible as Mikayah (2 Kgs 22:12; Jer. 26:18), Mikay^εhû (2 Chr. 8:18), and the shortened form Mikah (31 occurrences in

²⁴³ *Lachish I*: 141; Tur-Sinai 1987: 182; cf. Dinger 1953: 336.

²⁴⁴ Lemaire 2004: 2108.

²⁴⁵ *Lachish I*: 147.

²⁴⁶ Cf. Beit-Arieh 1994; 2007a: 159–168; Aḥituv 2008: 170–173.

²⁴⁷ Cf. Aharoni 1981: 122–123; 94.

Judges, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Neh. 11:17, and Micah 1.1) . In 2 Sam. 19:12, the PN appears as מִיכָה. The name *mkyhw* also appears on a couple of seals.²⁴⁸

smkyhw: This PN (“YHWH has given support”) occurs in Lachish 4.6 (§3.1.4) and the reconstructed 13.2, as well as in Lachish 22.5 (Catalogue B).

šdq: This PN could be reconstructed into the PN Šidqi[yāhû] “(My) righteousness is YHWH” (Zedekiah), which appears in the 7th-century Jerusalem 5.4, or else is a hypocoristicon of the latter. In fact, the PN *šdq* is found in the 8th-century Arad 93.1²⁴⁹, and a seal²⁵⁰. The PN *šdq*’ (Šidqâ) appears on a Phoenician jar inscription from Larnaca, in Cyprus²⁵¹ and a seal²⁵².

3.1.12 Lachish 12

This ostrakon bears an eight-line inscription on the outer surface, and Lemaire adds that at least one and a half lines were probably originally present on the inner side (Figs 50–51).²⁵³ At the time of discovery this ostrakon bore very faint traces of writing, which were mostly lost during the cleaning process. The fine surface of Lachish 12 suffered several deep scratches (mostly in a top-left–centre-right orientation). It is unclear whether these scratches were already present when the inscription was written or whether the damage happened during or following excavation. The inscription is today washed-out, following the cleaning process back in the 1930s, yet at the time of the *editio princeps*, the keen eyes of Harding spotted a few words on the sherd that allegedly recall the epistolary formulae appearing in Lachish 2–6, but which nonetheless left the ostrakon’s

²⁴⁸ Seals 541 and 599 (Avigad and Sass 1997).

²⁴⁹ Aharoni 1981:107.

²⁵⁰ Seal 694 (Avigad and Sass 1997).

²⁵¹ See Naveh 1987: 27 and references there.

²⁵² Seal 1066 (found in Ireland) (Avigad and Sass 1997).

²⁵³ Lemaire 2004: 2109.

interpretation conjectural.²⁵⁴ Below I reproduce both the reading of the *editio princeps* and my own, and in my drawing I reproduce the most legible graphemes (Catalogue A; Fig. 51).

(Harding/Torczyner)	(my readings)
1. ... <i>klb</i> . 'dny h.....	[ʔ]l[ʔdn]y..y....
2.[s]pr.....	...h ... ^b / _p ʔ ...
3. [h]yyhwh - - y	[h]y ʔ yhw ^w h ... ʔ ^y / _h ..
4. [qr]ʔty[ʔ]thʔbd	[qr]ʔ[ʔ]y[ʔ]t[h]ʔb ^h / _d
5.
6.'dny'dny
7.h . 'bdk	...- h . 'bdk.....
8.w ... ʔ... ..

First, I shall comment on the *editio princeps* reading. Harding's identification of very few and indistinct letters was based on the first photograph of the inscription when the two (repaired in modern times) sherds were still covered in mud. Torczyner did not provide an English translation but a brief comment on the words he read, and the autograph was essential for his readings.²⁵⁵ The alleged *klb* in line 1 suggests a fragmentary self-abasement expression at the very beginning, yet the few legible words (...*klb* 'dny h...) differ from the usual syntax found elsewhere in the Lachish collection (usually phrased as *my* 'bdk *klb* ky). In line 3 is another oath formula, written again in full as *hy yhw^wh*, as in Lachish 6.12 (cf. Lachish 3.9). What follows is enigmatic, owing to the washed-out inscription, so we are left with nothing much to rely on. Torczyner remarked about the writing of Lachish 12 "strongly [resembling]" that of 2, 3, and 6 (§2.3).²⁵⁶

My reading is based on a combination of what Harding retraced and on a closer look at and edits of the IAA photograph of Lachish 12. In my close examination of the sherd, I could no longer

²⁵⁴ *Lachish I*: 150–153.

²⁵⁵ *Lachish I*: 152, 153; cf. Tur-Sinai 1987: 184; see also Lemaire 2004: 2109.

²⁵⁶ *Lachish I*: 153.

see the letters on the outer surface that Harding identified, least of all Lemaire's alleged letters on the inner side. I cannot confirm the latter, but the IAA photo shows several letters (on the outer surface of the sherd), most of which match what Harding retraced (Fig. 51). I can only confirm that the outer surface originally bore eight lines of writing. If indeed the address in line 1 is correct, then supposedly the name of the addressee followed (cf. Lachish 2.1, 6.1, and the reconstructed 21.1). Nothing much can be deduced from the rest of the text, except that this message is likely another letter/message from a person of lower rank to a high-ranking recipient, with an oath formula and possible references to further correspondence.

3.1.13 Lachish 13

Ostrakon 13 bears traces of a three-line inscription on the inner surface of the sherd, on the basis of which Torczyner proposed that the inscription was actually a copy of the original (Figs 52–53).²⁵⁷ Diringier wrote that “only very faint traces of a few letters can be recognised” on the outer surface,²⁵⁸ while Lemaire adds that “the ostrakon may originally have preserved writing on both sides, but only the end of the text (reverse?) is partly legible”.²⁵⁹ In my close examination of the sherd, I did not see any traces of writing whatsoever on the outer surface. It would be of no surprise if Lachish 13 happened to be written on the inner surface only, as the Lachish 19 list (§3.1.19). At this point, only laboratory tests can determine whether this was a long document starting on the outer surface.

The reverse inscription, on its own, seems to be an instruction or military order from a high official to his subordinates, and thus it is considered different from the other legible “guardroom”

²⁵⁷ *Lachish I*: 159.

²⁵⁸ Diringier 1953: 336.

²⁵⁹ Lemaire 2004: 2110.

messages.²⁶⁰ The ink is very faded, with parts of the inscription barely visible, and thus very little about the content can be made out.

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| 1. <i>qmw l'st ml'kh</i> . | Arise to do work! |
| 2. <i>msm[kyhw....h]prh...w</i> | from S ^c mak[yāhû]? shall dig out..... |
| 3. 't. 'špt |quivers. |

qmw l'st ml'kh: If the first word is read as the imperative form of *qm*, and therefore a command, the tone would then differ from the rest of the ostraca. This observation led Torczyner to consider Lachish 13 as actually a copy of a letter by the commander himself (possibly Yā'ûš) to his subordinate, with instructions to carry out work or military preparations of some sort, and which could have been brought from the archives and kept with the rest of the ostraca.²⁶¹ Contrary to the common reading of the imperative form, however, Gibson restored a line that includes a supposed extra letter that starts line 1, and he thus ended up with the reading of the Hiphil perfect (*h*)*qm*, in the sense of 'to station' (troops, sentinels, and the like) (cf. Jer. 51:12).²⁶² His full reading of line 1 is as follows: *-(h)qm.l'st ml'kh*..... “....(he has) stationed to do work” He added that the above should give reason to regard Lachish 13 as another letter by the subordinate reporting to his officer about work or preparations being carried out. Gibson's readings and explanations require comment.

First of all, reading the (supposed) three letters in question as a Hiphil form of *qm* could equally give us the m.s. imperative form *hqm*, in the sense of a direct command (“Station!”), not to mention that in Gibson's cited biblical example (Jer. 51:12), the verbal form is in fact imperative, but plural rather than singular. Moreover, Gibson does not

²⁶⁰ *Lachish I*: 159; Reider 1939: 239.

²⁶¹ *Lachish I*: 159.

²⁶² Gibson 1971: 48.

recognize a *waw* after the *mem* in his reading of *(h)qm*, but a word-dividing dot, so his interpretation is clearly in the singular. Secondly, a Hiphil perfect of *hqm* would usually require the *yod* of the verbal form as *m.l. (hqym)*. Still, the fact remains that having *hqm* in Lachish 13 as an imperative form would still leave us with an open option to consider Torczyner's observation that this ostrakon could have been a military order that stands out from the rest. Nonetheless, the implied presence of a *he* at the start of line 1 is difficult to accept, since the negatives of high resolution photographs have not revealed any ink traces before the *qoph*, but only a very clear and empty space. I identified the first three letters as presented above – *qoph*, *mem*, *waw* – which form the Qal 2.m.p. imperative *qmw*,²⁶³ or the Qal 3.c.p. perfect *qmw*. It would be otherwise problematic to read it as the 2.m.s. imperative form *qm* followed by *waw* and the infinitive absolute (*wl'st*) (i.e. “Arise (and) to do work”), as Torczyner suggested. If indeed there was an indication of further sentences on the outer surface preceding the ones on the inner side, then it could be possible to read this verbal form as Qal 3.c.p. perfect *qmw* – “They arose to do work...”, thus having a subordinate reporting about the men carrying out their duties. If, on the other hand, we go by this surviving inscription on the inner surface alone, then this ostrakon could have carried a command from some high official, addressing a group of (military) subordinates, hence the Qal 2.m.p. imperative *qmw*.

smk...: The rest of the inscription is fragmentary and the legible parts are dubious to many, but apparently part of the PN S^cmak[yāhû] can be reconstructed in line 2 (cf. Lachish 4.6 and 11.4).

²⁶³ See also Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005: 330–331, 722; Rezetko and Young 2014: 295, 310.

hpr: The verb *hāpar* “to dig, explore, search out” in line 2 might indicate that S^cmak[yāhû] was perhaps given orders to dig trenches, thus referring to the “work” mentioned in line 1.²⁶⁴

špt: On its own, *špt* could mean “dunghill”, although this may not be the case in the context of the inscription. Alternatively, *špt* (only in the plural) may stand for “quivers”. One hypothesis about Lachish 13 is that subordinates or the military were given different orders revolving around battle preparations or military protection.²⁶⁵

3.1.14 Lachish 14

This ostrakon is badly preserved, and traces of several lines of writing (possibly ten or eleven) can be identified, based on S.W. Michieli’s photograph in *Lachish I*, but the ink is very faint and only a few letters can be discerned (Catalogue A; Figs 54–55).²⁶⁶ Lemaire notices traces of “at least nine lines; practically illegible”.²⁶⁷ The few legible letters have been reproduced in both Renz and Röllig’s and my facsimiles (Fig. 55). What is certain is that this ostrakon once bore a long document, perhaps another message or a long list of sorts.

3.1.15 Lachish 15

This repaired, fragmentary ostrakon, the largest ceramic piece of the lot, is widely claimed to be virtually illegible (Figs 56–57). Torczyner could only make out, according to him, a few indistinct letters in the top left. As discussed in §5.2.3, however, Torczyner read the ostrakon upside down, and the ostrakon was photographed and published thus in *Lachish I* (S. W.

²⁶⁴ *Lachish I*: 159.

²⁶⁵ See Torczyner’s discussion in *Lachish I*: 159–160.

²⁶⁶ See *Lachish I*: 162.

²⁶⁷ Lemaire 2004: 2110.

Michieli's photograph). In addition, no drawings of Lachish 15 were ever reproduced. The IAA archive photo of the legible part of Lachish 15 (i.e. the bottom three extant sherds that were repaired during post-excavation) was helpful in identifying any legible writing, which I reproduce in my hand copy (Catalogue A; Fig. 57). Then again, I cannot make out any sensible words, and physical examination of the ostrakon confirmed that the writing has faded beyond recognition. No traces of writing were observed on the inner surface of either the large ceramic piece or the small sherds – if there used to be any, it has today faded beyond recognition.

3.1.16 Lachish 16

This small sherd did not originate from the “guardroom” with the rest of the cache of ostraca (Figs 58–59). This ostrakon was found in secondary context, reutilised in the ballast for the construction of the Persian roadway (Level I), in the area known as E/F.17/18:N of the gateway area (§1.5).²⁶⁸

(obverse)

1.] *hm*^{h/a} [
2.] *hy*^{h/a} [
3.] *šlh*^h [
4.] *pr . bnyk* [
5.] *whnn*^h [
6.] .. *m*... [

(reverse)

7.] *h*^{h/h} ' .. [
8.] *d-h* [
9.] *šlh*^h ' [
10.] *b*^{b/r} . *d*^{d/r} *w*^{h/hw} . [

The fragmentary ostrakon bears traces of six lines on the outer surface and four lines on the inner side. The ink is very faded, especially on the latter. This sherd was originally part of a larger

²⁶⁸ See *Lachish III*: 128–129.

inscription, possibly a “tiny fragment out of the middle of a letter”.²⁶⁹ Further traces of ink can be noticed at the very top edges of the sherd on both the outer and inner surfaces (as gleaned from photographs only). A few letters can be made out but not much information can be reconstructed, since the ostrakon is merely a small piece of a longer inscription. I therefore will not attempt to translate what little has survived. Following Torczyner’s reading and Harding’s autograph, most scholars read part of the suffix of a theophoric PN (*hw* for *yhw*) followed by *hnb*’ in line 5, but the fifth letter’s shape is composed only of a downstroke, similar to an early 6th-century *nun*, and there are no traces of a leftward loop at the top left that would indicate the letter in question is a *beth*. Moreover, if indeed the preceding letters *hw* belonged to a theophoric PN, the possibilities of what that name was are endless, and not necessarily the name of a prophet, such as Uriah or Jeremiah, as has been suggested (see discussion in §5.7). Be that as it may, the fragmentary state of the ostrakon does not permit sound interpretation.

3.1.17 Lachish 17

This is smallest sherd among the inscribed 21 ostraca from the British excavations (Fig. 60). Allegedly, it was recovered during the sieving of the dump heap from the area of the gateway (§1.5).²⁷⁰ The fragmentary sherd bears traces of three words on three separate lines of writing, which definitely belonged to a larger text.

- | | |
|---|------------|
| 1.] <i>bd</i> [|]servant?] |
| 2.] <i>'dny</i> [|]my lord?] |
| 3.] <i>^r/dny ^d/r</i> [|]...?...] |

²⁶⁹ *Lachish I*: 173.

²⁷⁰ Note that Tufnell mistook ostrakon 18 for being the sherd recovered from the dump heap, which is probably an error in the Roman number XVII written as XVIII (*Lachish III*: 129).

Judging from the content, this inscription may have once formed part of a message from a subordinate to his superior. The ink was fairly legible at the time of discovery, but today it is very faded, with lines 1 and 2 barely visible to the naked eye. Torczyner read part of the name Yirmeyāhû in line 3 – *rmy(h)*, the same PN as in Lachish 1.4,²⁷¹ yet in his Hebrew edition, he read line 3 as *(r)ny(h)*.²⁷²

3.1.18 Lachish 18

This is another fragmentary inscription possibly comprising two lines of writing, and which formed part of the same ceramic vessel of Tufnell’s Type 498 as ostraca 2, 6, 7, and 8 (Figs 61–62). Lemaire suggested that it probably is only the end of a longer ostrakon,²⁷³ possibly a letter. In fact, the top left of this ostrakon joins with the bottom edge of Lachish 6 (Fig. 21). Torczyner remarked about the similarity of the handwriting of Lachish 18 with that of 6 and 12 as well as of 2 and 3 (§2.3).²⁷⁴

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. <i>‘d . h ‘rb[]šlmyšlh[]b[dk ‘t?]hspr ‘šr</i> | Until the evening[]šlm [your] |
| | s[ervant] will send the letter which |
| 2. <i>šlh . ‘dny[]zr . h_</i> | my lord sent []?..... |

‘d h ‘rb: This expression occurs in the Hebrew Bible (Lev 11:24,25,27,28,31,32,39,40[twice]).

The missing sherd unfortunately contained whatever preceded the letters *šlm*, perhaps a PN such as *Ṭbšlm*, which occurs in Lachish 1.2 (and perhaps in Lachish 7.5–6).

Torczyner had also mentioned what he deemed an improbable alternative, that of reading

²⁷¹ *Lachish I*: 177.

²⁷² Tur-Sinai 1987: 191, 192. Furthermore in his Hebrew edition, Torczyner commented that this ostrakon was a palimpsest of inscriptions, since other letters are noticeable, especially between lines 1 and 2, which probably made up an older text inscribed when the vessel was still whole, and which concerned its contents (Tur-Sinai 1987: 192; for further suggestions on detected letters in different lines, see Diringier [1953: 338], who remarked that if they were deliberate signs, already by his time the ink had faded leaving a whitish trace). After close inspection of the sherd, I confirm that the alleged markings are scratches in and undulations on the sherd’s surface.

²⁷³ Lemaire 2004: 2112.

²⁷⁴ *Lachish I*: 183.

'l yršlm “to Jerusalem”, which would create syntactical problems especially with his reading of line 1.²⁷⁵ Gibson also chose to read *šlm* as part of the name Jerusalem, or else as a possible “greeting with the word ‘peace’”.²⁷⁶

hspr: This line mentions the sending of a letter, possibly by the servant, although this reading is uncertain as the inscription is very faded. Owing to the faded information before the word *hspr*, one can only reconstruct by inference the definite object marker *'t* preceding *hspr*, and the word *'bdk*, by inference, although there does not seem to be enough space in the gap of faded letters for both the word *'bdk* and the definite object marker *'t*, in which case the scribe possibly forgot the object marker.

šlh 'dny[]zr h'...: In line 2, Torczyner read the letters *zh* just after the space where the missing piece would fit, and suggested with near certainty the reading *[m]zh* “from here”, the same expression found in Lachish 3.18.²⁷⁷ His reading of the second letter after the breakage as *he* is problematic, since the letter in question is composed of a clear long downstroke, and what seems to be a slightly small horizontal stroke at its top jutting out to the left, which unfortunately is not clear as it might as well turn out to be a small loop. Hence, the letter could be either a *resh* or a *gimel*. In his autograph, Harding reproduced a *resh*, and most scholars would in fact read it as such.²⁷⁸ In his Hebrew edition, Torczyner revised his reading of line 2 and suggested instead a PN, reconstructed as *[l']zryhw* “[to ‘A]zaryāhû” (“YHWH has helped”).²⁷⁹ The latter is also suggested by Lemaire and Pardee and colleagues, among others.²⁸⁰

²⁷⁵ See *Lachish I*: 183.

²⁷⁶ Gibson 1971: 48.

²⁷⁷ *Lachish I*: 182, 183; Dinger (1953: 338) followed Torczyner’s first edition reading.

²⁷⁸ *Lachish I*: 181, 182.

²⁷⁹ Torczyner [Tur-Sinai] 1987: 193.

²⁸⁰ See Lemaire 1977: 132 and references there; 2004: 2111; see also Pardee et al. 1982: 113 and references there.

The reading of the second part of line 2 is problematic. Most of the letters are washed out and the inscription is fragmentary as it is. I hence suggest the reading listed above and in Catalogue A. The space of the missing sherd leaves room for one or possibly two letters. After the *resh* I notice a word-divider, followed by a clear *he* and what could be part of the following letter, here suggested as an ‘*ayin*, as some scholars have proposed. It could be that the rest of the writing was brushed off during cleaning. Nevertheless, this small mark is strange and problematic, and unfortunately not much can be further suggested as the rest of the line is virtually faded, and the surface of the ostrakon bears smudges and grit.

3.1.19 Lachish 19

The discovery of ostraca 19, 20, and 21 in 1938 was first reported by Inge.²⁸¹ They were not found in the “guardroom” or anywhere in the gateway area, but in other areas of the site. Moreover, the dating of Lachish 19 and 21 is debated.

Lachish 19 was retrieved among stone heaps at the foot of the south-west corner of the mound (Saddle Area 500), which was later identified as part of the Assyrian siege ramp (§§1.7.1 and 5.1) (Figs 63–65).²⁸² Like Lachish 13, this ostrakon is written on the inner side only. No traces of writing could be observed on the outer surface during the sherd’s examination. The sherd itself differs significantly in its thickness and coarseness from the the rest of the other fine ware ostraca. The ostrakon originally contained about seven lines of writing, of which only the first five are more or less decipherable and the final two bear only traces of ink. The ink is very

²⁸¹ Inge 1938: 254.

²⁸² Note that Ginsberg (1940: 12) mistakenly wrote “S.E. corner of the tell”.

[*resh*]²⁸⁶ After examining the ostrakon and an archive photograph of the latter, I identified two separate graphemes, *zayin* and *resh*, without any ligature (𐤆 𐤑) (Fig. 64), and, like other scholars who decipher the name with a *z+r* ligature, I read the PN ‘*zr*. The vocalisation remains unknown. The name ‘*zr* occurs in the Hebrew Bible in different forms.²⁸⁷ The hypocoristicon is also popular on seals.²⁸⁸ Thomas argued that the name *bn* stands alone in 1 Chr. 15:18, although as a proper name it is textually uncertain.²⁸⁹ The designation of this person as *bn* ‘*zr*, being thus the only one with an apparent patronym, suggests some possibilities: (i) the person may have been relatively young;²⁹⁰ (ii) there were several individuals known by the same name; (iii) or that ‘*zr* was a particularly well-known individual.²⁹¹

𐤀: The hieratic numerical here is clearly the number 10, and is repeated in lines 2 and 7. This numerical sign has already been identified in Lachish 9.3.²⁹²

Line 2 *pqh* . 𐤀 Peqah 11

pqh: This PN is distinct.²⁹³ It could be a whole name, or perhaps a hypocoristicon of a theophoric name composed of the verb *pqh* (“to open [eyes or ears]” - *piqqeah*, Ezek. 13:8) and of a theophoric element (hence, Peqahyah or P^cqahyāhû – “YHWH has opened

²⁸⁶ Albright 1941: 24.

²⁸⁷ See ‘*ezer* (Neh. 3:19; 1 Chr 4:4; 7:21), ‘*azer* (Neh 12: 42), and ‘*azzur* (Jer 28:1; Neh. 10:18; Ezek. 11:1). See also Lemaire 1977: 133 and Diringer 1934: 205–206. Albright (1941: 24) argued that the name ‘*Azzur* is an abbreviation of ‘*Azaryāhû* (*Azariah*), and both the abbreviated form and the full name are found in Jeremiah, as well as in the contemporary Arad 16 (Aharoni 1981: 30–31).

²⁸⁸ Seals 467, 691, 696, and 697 (Avigad and Sass 1997).

²⁸⁹ Thomas, D. W. 1950: 52; see Noth 1928: 239, no. 268.

²⁹⁰ See discussion in Clines 1972: 284–287 and references there.

²⁹¹ Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005: 334.

²⁹² See Albright 1938: 16; Ginsberg 1940: 12.

²⁹³ Albright 1941: 24.

[the eyes]”).²⁹⁴ Ginsberg observed that the name is identical with that of the penultimate king of Israel (2 Kgs 15:25).²⁹⁵

𐤎: The hieratic numerals here are clearly the numbers 10 and 1 (=11).²⁹⁶

Line 3 mbl . 𐤎 Mabal 20/50?

mbl: This PN, first suggested by Torczyner,²⁹⁷ was considered by Albright as “unparalleled and intrinsically improbable”, and called the readings *nbl* and *mkl* “graphically difficult”.²⁹⁸ Driver suggested *mbl* is “identical with the Thamud. *Mbl* = Arab. *mubill*”.²⁹⁹ Lemaire reads *mkl* with some uncertainty.³⁰⁰ Diringier noticed traces of another letter preceding the rest, and thus reads ()*mdl* ([‘Am]midal), supposedly a name composed of the elements ‘*m* and *dl*, in the sense of ‘to save the people’.³⁰¹ If there were indeed traces of a preceding letter before the other three, it is now faded.

𐤎: Diringier’s interpretation of the sign at the end of the line swayed between the letter *qoph*³⁰² and, tentatively, the numerical sign 5³⁰³, the latter also proposed with uncertainty by Ginsberg³⁰⁴. Lemaire, however, insists that the shape of the hieratic sign in lines 3 and

²⁹⁴ See Diringier 1934: 167; Noth 1928: 186; *HAE*, II/1: 82.

²⁹⁵ Ginsberg 1940: 12.

²⁹⁶ See Albright 1938: 16; Ginsberg 1940: 12.

²⁹⁷ Torczyner [Tur-Sinai] 1987: 198.

²⁹⁸ Albright 1941: 24.

²⁹⁹ Driver, G. R. 1943: 34 (note Driver’s error in writing line 13 instead of line 3 for ostrakon 19).

³⁰⁰ Lemaire 1977: 132, 133; 2004: 2112.

³⁰¹ See Diringier 1943: 89, 91 and references there; 1953: 338, n. 3 – strangely, in his note Diringier remarks that both Torczyner and Ginsberg (1940: 12) read *mdl*, when Torczyner (1987: 198) actually read *mbl*. See Gibson (1971: 49) on the PN ‘*ammidal*. See Noth (1928: 76–79) on the element ‘*m*.

³⁰² Diringier 1943: 89, 91.

³⁰³ Diringier 1953:338.

³⁰⁴ Ginsberg 1940: 12.

4 is closer to that of the numeral 20,³⁰⁵ whilst Renz and Röllig, following Aharoni, read the hieratic sign as the numeral 50,³⁰⁶ a proposition already put forward by Torczyner.³⁰⁷

Line 4 *šm 'yhw* 𐤎 Š^ema'yāhû 20/50?

šm 'yhw: The PN Š^ema'yāhû (“YHWH has heard”) also occurs in Lachish 4.6, Arad 32 and 39, and Tel Masos 3.4.³⁰⁸ It is also attested in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Lachish 4). The reading in Lachish 19 is unfortunately uncertain owing to the faded state of the individual letters, but is read and agreed upon by most interpreters today.³⁰⁹

𐤎: The same hieratic numeral (20 or 50) that appears in line 3 is written also in line 4.

Line 5 *ybš* (traces) Yabeš ...

ybš: This PN, read by Lemaire and myself (with what appear to be an archaic *yod* and a *beth* with an open loop), occurs 24 times in the Hebrew Bible, and is both a place name (Yabeš Gilead) and a PN.³¹⁰ It appears in 2 Kgs 15:10, 13, 14 as the patronym of Šallūm, King of Israel. Torczyner suggested an uncertain reading *šb š*,³¹¹ while Diringers read *'bš*³¹² or *šmš*³¹³.

³⁰⁵ Lemaire 1977: 132; 2004: 2112.

³⁰⁶ *HAE*, I: 435; see Aharoni 1966a: 18, 19, fig. 4.

³⁰⁷ Torczyner 1987: 200, 212.

³⁰⁸ See Arad 31.5; 39.2; 39.7 (Aharoni 1981: 56–59, 68–69); Tel Masos 3 (Fritz 1983: 134; Ostrakon 2 in Ahituv 2008: 165).

³⁰⁹ Ginsberg (1940: 12) read the PN as [Y]šm 'l, although the alignment of the names on the right side of the inscription leaves no space for the initial *yod*, whereas Driver, G. R. (1943: 34) read the PN as Šm 'l.

³¹⁰ Lemaire 1977: 132, 133; 2004: 2112.

³¹¹ Torczyner [Tur-Sinai] 1987: 200.

³¹² So did Gibson (1971: 49 and references there).

³¹³ See Diringers 1943: 89, 91; 1953: 338, n. 5.

Lines 6–7

6.	l(traces)		?.....	
7.	...	⤵	?.....	11

The rest of the inscription is virtually faded with the exception of a few daubs of ink. At the start of what could be the sixth line of writing is a faint *lamed*. Diringer had noticed “traces of two or three undecipherable characters, of which the last one may be a *mem* or a [*tsade*], followed by a dot” in line 6.³¹⁴ At the end of the possible line 7 are another two apparent hieratic signs ⤵, the numerals 10 and 1 (=11), as in line 2. Some scholars read nine lines of text instead of seven, as well as an alleged numeral 11 in their line 9³¹⁵, which close-up examination disproved as surface stains. Moreover, Diringer suggested that the list stood for a statistical schedule dealing with the inhabitants of a street or district, since he read a faint *tšb* (“foreign inhabitant, sojourner”) in his line 9³¹⁶, which physical examination has nonetheless disproved.

3.1.20 Lachish 20

Ostrakon 20 was found in the ashes of the 588/6 B.C.E. destruction in one of the domestic rooms (L.12:1065) that were erected on the eastern portion of the Palace C ruins atop the tell. The seven sherds that make up the present inscription were found together with other fragments from the same vessel (a holemouth storage vessel [possibly a water jar] of Type 495) on the floor of the room.³¹⁷ The fragmentary inscription seems to consist of two lines, whilst scholars added that an alleged symbol or grapheme (a supposed *taw*) lies further down, at the bottom of the sherd,

³¹⁴ Diringer 1943: 91; 1953: 338, n. 5.

³¹⁵ Lemaire 1977: 132; 2004: 2112; *HAE*, I: 435–436; Gogel 1998: 421.

³¹⁶ Diringer 1943: 92.

³¹⁷ *Lachish III*: 314. The rest of the vessel was also recovered (today stored at the British Museum: FN 6806, BM 10595) (Magrill 2005: 74).

although physical examination rather suggests a mere stain (Figs 66–67). Both lines of writing are broken due to a couple of missing pieces, and the ink is faded in places.

Inge suggested that this inscription could have been a receipt like those at Samaria, and indicates that a large part of the pot from which the potsherd came was also found in the room.³¹⁸ Renz and Röllig also list this inscription as a delivery memo or receipt (“Liefervermerk”).³¹⁹ The text apparently starts with a date: “In the ninth (year)...”, which was first noted by Ginsberg.³²⁰ This reading is similar to that of the contemporary storage-jar label Lachish 29, the inscription of which starts with the date: “In the fourth (year)...”³²¹ (see §5.5; Catalogues A and B; cf. also Lachish 25–30,³²² and Arad 19 and 20³²³). Lachish 20 is clearly another storage-jar label, written below and parallel to the curved shoulder of a Type 495 (water) jar that was held in Room L.12:1065. In fact, the seven repaired pieces, when fitted together, make up enough of the original jar to suggest that the inscription was written when the vessel was whole, as Ginsberg noted.³²⁴

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|---|
| 1. <i>btš’ytyt</i> [] <i>yhw</i> | In the ninth (year), house (of) [] <i>yāhû</i> |
| 2. <i>ḥkly[hw?] zn \</i> | <i>Ḥakaly[āhû?]</i> kind/sort? 1 |

btš’ytyt: The spelling of “ninth” in *btš’ytyt* has the internal *m.l. yod* that does not appear in the Samaria ostraca (*bšt htš’t*), and the latter corpus also sometimes lacks the word for “year”, as it is often implied.³²⁵ The Lachish word *btš’ytyt* is an abbreviation of *bšnh htš’ytyt*, hence interpreted by all as *b[šnh h]tš’ytyt* (“in the ninth [year]”). The same lack of the word

³¹⁸ Inge 1938: 254.

³¹⁹ *HAE*, I: 436.

³²⁰ Ginsberg 1940: 12–13.

³²¹ See Lemaire 2004: 2123; Aḥituv 2008: 89–90.

³²² See Lemaire 2004: 2119–2125.

³²³ For Arad 20, see Aharoni 1981: 40–41.

³²⁴ Ginsberg 1940: 12.

³²⁵ Cf. Diringen 1934: 23; Gibson 1971: 11.

“year” is also noticeable in Arad 20.1. The fact that the *m.l.* appears in Lachish but not in the above Arad example could suggest that this “is a borderline case in which each scribe used his own discretion”.³²⁶ It has been argued that “the ninth year” refers to the ninth year of Zedekiah’s reign, which tallies with Nebuchadnezzar’s siege of Jerusalem (2 Kgs 25:1–2; Jer. 39:1–2), not to mention that this inscription was recovered from burnt debris of about 588/6 B.C.E.

byt[...]yhw: This has been suggested to stand for a place-name.³²⁷ The supposed *yod* after the breakage is actually half missing where the sherd breaks off.

*hkly[] zn *: Line 2 probably starts off with a supposed PN that is likely vocalised as *Hakalyā[hû* (*hkly[hw...]*), suggested by Torczyner and Lemaire, among others.³²⁸ Diringen had initially suggested the reading of the beginning of line 2 as *hy.n*, i.e. *hy(y)n* “the wine”, as in the wine receipts of Samaria, followed by *lr* before the lacuna left by the missing piece. He therefore suggested a possessive *lamed* and the *rêš* as a possible initial letter of a PN.³²⁹ After the lacuna, there seems to be a wide space, and little to no trace of any ink to suggest the presence of a letter. The negatives of some good quality photographs reveal no traces of ink. All I could personally make out of the rest of line 2 were the letters *zn* before the second lacuna, and then following this second lacuna are some very faint ink traces on the repaired sherd (if there was a letter, then it is fragmentary owing to the missing piece). Finally, at the end of the sherd is a quasi-vertical stroke, possibly the hieratic numeral 1 (**). Lemaire proposes to reconstruct line 2 as follows: “*Hakalyā[hu*

³²⁶ Aharoni 1981: 40–41, n. 3.

³²⁷ Lemaire 2004: 2113; see also Diringen 1943: 94.

³²⁸ Torczyner [Tur-Sinai] 1987: 215; Lemaire 1977: 134; 2004: 2113. Renz and Röllig (*HAE*, II/1: 66) translate it as Piel imperative of *hkh* with preposition *l-* (“Hope to YHWH”), although imperative elements in theophoric names are rare.

³²⁹ Diringen 1943: 93, 95–96; in *Lachish III*, Diringen read different letters but did not suggest a reconstruction or translation (Diringen 1953: 339).

*son of A]zn[y] 1” [sic], with the PN Azny perhaps being a hypocoristicon of ’znyh.³³⁰ However, there are clear spaces before and after *zn*, so *zān* could stand for “kind/sort” (cf. 2 Chr. 16:14; Ps. 144:13), perhaps indicative of the (liquid) content of this (water) jar type (Fig. 67).*

3.1.21 Lachish 21

This is another very small ceramic sherd, which was retrieved from below the floor of the same room as Lachish 20 (L.12:1065), and has therefore been suggested to antedate the reign of Zedekiah possibly by a few years, at least from an archaeological standpoint. This small fragment is inscribed on both sides, with traces of five lines of writing on the outer surface and another five lines on the inner side (Figs 68–69). Diringier had originally read five lines,³³¹ whilst Thomas argued in favour of six and not five lines on the inner side.³³²

As the ink was already starting to fade by the time of their publication from the 1930s and 40s onwards, it leaves us with little to help us discern any relation between the content on the obverse and that of the reverse. Nevertheless, Inge remarked that, from what is legible, this inscription “appears to be part of a letter like the Lachish Letters”.³³³ This is because of the striking resemblance between the opening letters of this letter and those of Lachish 2 and 5, both of which date to slightly later times.

³³⁰ Lemaire 1977: 134 and references there; 2004: 2113.

³³¹ Diringier 1943: 96.

³³² Thomas, D. W. 1950: 57.

³³³ Inge 1938: 254.

The slanting layout of the letters on this fragment is made obvious by the ample margin on the right hand side. The margin itself indicates that this fragment was the start of the letter. In the rest of the documents discussed above, most of them bear cursive script that slants and follows the edge, suggesting that the scribe/s made use of all the available space on the relevant ceramic sherds. This can be observed on most of these ostraca, wherein the lines are handwritten close to the edges, but Lachish 21 sticks out from the rest in its very ample margin. Nevertheless, a wide margin should not be all that surprising. Some of the Arad ostraca (e.g. 31, 58, and 59) bear a similar margin on the right-hand side, while the fragmentary Arad 88 has an exceedingly wide margin on the right.³³⁴ It therefore seems to have been a matter of writing style, scribal technique, or simply the idiosyncrasy of the different scribes.

After physically examining Lachish 21 and looking at the corresponding IAA photographs, I can confirm that this fragment was originally part of another epistolary message! Therefore, Torczyner was right in calling this another “letter”. Not only that, but the script on the obverse is very similar to that of some of the “guardroom” messages/letters. Even if this sherd could antedate Zedekiah’s reign by a few years, it remains likely that it dates to Jehoiakim’s reign. Be that as it may, the script is contemporary with the others from the “guardroom” cache, therefore having a late 7th–early 6th-century B.C.E. date. How this ostrakon ended up atop the tell is anyone’s guess, and its findspot below the floor of a Level II storage room indicates that this sherd ended up reused in the make-up of the floor of a small room that could have easily been built over a short while during Level II (§1.6.2). This possibility supports the idea that this fragment belonged to an ostrakon contemporary with the “guardroom” ostraca.

³³⁴ See Aharoni 1981: 56–59, 88–89, 103–104.

Unlike Lachish 16 and 17, both of which are fragments from the middle of what were once longer inscriptions, Lachish 21 presents us with the advantage that it is a fragment bearing the start of the inscription on its obverse. The IAA archive photographs helped further in the decipherment of some of the letters on the obverse. In my drawing, I reproduce the most visible graphemes (Fig. 68).

Lines 1–5 (obverse)

1. 'l[
2. h . 't _[
3. t . kl'š[
4. wš'dny[
5. wh'...[

The first line consists of the letters *aleph–lamed–aleph*, the first indication of the start of the customary address in a letter from inferior to superior (cf. Lachish 2 and 6), i.e. 'l 'dny, as Torczyner suggested.³³⁵ Even so, we should also consider the remote possibility that the first three letters perhaps stood for an address to a person whose name started off with the letter *aleph*, as in the Arad ostraca addressed to Elyashib, for example ('l 'lyšb), in which case it would entail that the message/letter was from superior to inferior. However, for the sake of argument and the genre of the Lachish letters/messages, let us consider the first option, and analyse whether the legible letters (graphemes) on this fragment fall into the customary formulae observed in the “guardroom” epistolary ostraca.

For lines 1 and 2, Torczyner, followed by Ginsberg, reconstructed the blessing formula present in Lachish 2 and 5, and then proceeded with the self-abasement formula, hence:

³³⁵ Tur-Sinai 1940: 217; see also Ginsberg 1940: 13. Diringier (1943: 96–97) suggested a possible *zayin* at the start, yet he rightly remarks that “the characters are extremely doubtful”, and thus the assertion that the inscription “begins” with the customary address 'l'dny “is quite possible, but not manifest” (cf. Diringier 1953: 339); see also *HAE*, I: 437; Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005: 337–338. Thomas (1950: 57) follows Diringier’s reading, but also adds that Torczyner’s proposal of another letter “may be so”.

- (1) 'l. '[dny.....yšm' yhw]
- (2) h. 'l'[dny šm't šlm my ']
- (3) bdk. klb. ky
- (4) wš^{'h/w}[]
- (5) wh'

May YHWH cause my lord to hear tidings of peace.
Who is thy servant, a dog, that he should bring forth(?) the (?)³³⁶

According to Torczyner, line 3 supposedly includes the phrase *kklb* (“like a dog”), which is unusual, since the other instances of self-abasement in the Lachish corpus do not include the preposition *kaph* prefixed to *klb* (see §4.5.2). Alternatively, and more likely, the phrase can be read as shown above, with the final *kaph* of the word *'bdk* preceding the word *klb*, as it does in the other self-abasement formulae. On the other hand, Diringer, followed by Thomas, read line 3 as *štkl'*, with Thomas stating that this reading is correct, as the letters are clear.³³⁷ Lemaire omits the *taw* and *aleph*, and instead reads *š . kl[....?]*.³³⁸ Nevertheless, from what I observe from the IAA photograph, there are the following graphemes: *t . kl'š[*. These letters and word-divider do not fit the self-abasement formula, as claimed by Torczyner and Ginsberg.

On the whole, the letters that I recognised on the obverse fall, by inference, into the syntactical pattern of the introductory formulae and content of Lachish 2 and 6, and some of the other epistolary ostraca. Hence, one possible reconstruction for lines 1–4 can be the following:

- (1) 'l. '[dny...yšm' yhw]
- (2) h . 't '[dny šm't šlm.....]
- (3) t . kl'š[r... ..]
- (4) wš'dny[
- (5) wh'...[

³³⁶ Tur-Sinai 1940: 217; Ginsberg 1940: 13.

³³⁷ See Diringer 1943: 97–98; 1953: 339; Thomas, D. W. 1950: 57.

³³⁸ Lemaire 2004: 2113.

To my l[ord...May YHW]H let my lord [hear tiding(s) of peace...]?...all that
whic[h.....]?.....my lord?[].....[

If correct, then the above reconstruction indicates that we have another address formula in our extant corpus, which is sadly fragmentary. One can only wonder whether the recipient was again the lord Yā'ûš, as in Lachish 2, 3, and 6. We can also notice again the occurrence of the Divine Name split in two lines (cf. Lachish 5.7–8). The *kl 'š[r* in line 3 indicates the possibility that the sender is replying to instructions (that were perhaps written in other similar messages), and recalls the responses in Lachish 4.2–4. This would entail that the sender is a subordinate writing to his superior.

The fragmentary state of the inscription makes any tentative reconstructions beyond this point uncertain, so I shall not attempt any reading suggestions, but will describe any visible letters. The first three legible letters of line 4 are agreed upon by Diringier, Lemaire, and myself: *waw-tzade-aleph*. For the fourth letter Diringier first suggested a *heth*,³³⁹ and later on a *he*,³⁴⁰ while Lemaire identified two strokes that stand for the numerical sign 2.³⁴¹ By contrast, I observe a *daleth*, a *nun*, and a possible *yod*, which could make up the word *'dny*, before the sherd breaks off. For line 5, the first three letters are also agreed upon by Diringier, Lemaire, and myself: *waw-he-aleph*. The fourth letter is broken off; Diringier suggested an uncertain *beth*, because of the apparent loop just above the edge of the sherd, yet he deemed the reading *wh'b* “and the father” quite unusual.³⁴²

³³⁹ Diringier 1943: 96, 98.

³⁴⁰ Diringier 1953: 339.

³⁴¹ Lemaire 2004: 2113.

³⁴² Diringier 1943: 96, 98.

Lines 6–11 (reverse)

6. '.....[
7. *ik...h^d/r*[
8. ^b/_n..l.. /_t p..[
9. *md'n..*[
10. *hr..*[
11. *dh..*[

Nothing much can be said about the rest of the inscription. Most of the reverse is too faded for any sound reading or reconstruction. I read a few letters, some of which concur with those read by Lemaire,³⁴³ yet any attempt at an interpretation would be highly conjectural. Diringier had identified a few letters, yet he still deemed them extremely uncertain.³⁴⁴ Sadly, the physical examination of the inner surface was futile, since the sherd has its catalogue number written on its inner side in Indian ink at the top and a drop of what appears to be Paraloid resin at the bottom (Fig. 69).³⁴⁵ Like Thomas,³⁴⁶ I noticed six original lines of writing on the inner surface, not five, as suggested by Diringier and Lemaire.³⁴⁷ Thomas also argued against Torczyner's apparent assumption that the reverse preserves the *ends* of the lines, instead of the beginnings.³⁴⁸ The right hand margins of both the obverse and the reverse are similar, and thus both sides of the sherd probably preserve the beginnings of the lines that continued to the left. Note, however, that Thomas mistakenly wrote "beginnings" at the start of his claim, when referring to Torczyner, confusing his entire argument as a result.³⁴⁹

³⁴³ See Lemaire 2004: 2113; Renz and Röllig (*HAE*, I: 437) follow closely Lemaire's readings.

³⁴⁴ See Diringier 1943: 96, 98; 1953: 339.

³⁴⁵ Paraloid B-72 is an acrylic resin that is commonly used as an adhesive and as a surface coating on archaeological ceramics and other materials to write labels on, usually in Indian ink.

³⁴⁶ Thomas, D. W. 1950: 58.

³⁴⁷ See Diringier 1943: 96; Lemaire 2004: 2113. However, Diringier (1953: 339) later suggested the presence of six original lines.

³⁴⁸ Torczyner 1987: 217, 219.

³⁴⁹ See Thomas, D. W. 1950: 58.

All in all, this is a badly preserved inscription, and a fragmentary one at that. Then again, despite Diringer's correct remark that the few legible letters "are not sufficient to make any interpretation reliable",³⁵⁰ we can at least appreciate that the few letters in the opening of the inscription point to the likelihood of another epistolary ostrakon in the Lachish corpus.

3.2 Concluding remarks

The above analysis shows that the 21 ostraca, recovered in 1935 and 1938, comprise mixed types of inscriptions, as opposed to the popular collective label of "letters", summed up in Table 3.1 below. Ostraca 3, 4, 8, 9, and the fragmentary pieces 16 and 21 bear inscriptions on both the outer and inner surfaces of the respective sherds (with the inscriptions of the intact ostraca always starting on the outside), whereas 13 and 19 bear legible inscriptions on their inner sides only. While ostrakon 19 clearly bears a list on the inside, it remains unclear whether 13 bore any further writing on the outer surface, yet the short inscription on the inner side does stand alone as a message.

³⁵⁰ Diringer 1943: 98.

Ostraca	Findspot	Palaeographic Dating (B.C.E.)	Archaeological Context (B.C.E.)	Type
1, 11	“guardroom” E.18:C	late 7 th –early 6 th century	<i>terminus ad quem</i> early 6 th century/ Level II	PNN lists
2–6, 8, 9, 13, 18				letters/messages
7				illegible
10, 12, 14				illegible long inscriptions
15				illegible; probably partly inscribed
16	E/F.17/18:N (ballast of Persian roadway)		secondary context: Persian/Level I	fragmentary piece
17	dump sieving		–	fragmentary piece
19	Area 500/Assyrian siege ramp debris	? late 8 th century	<i>terminus ad quem</i> ca. 701 B.C.E./ Level III	PNN list with hieratic numerals
20	Room L.12:1065	late 7 th –early 6 th century	<i>terminus ad quem</i> early 6 th century/ Level II	storage-jar label
21	below floor of Room L.12:1065		<i>terminus ad quem</i> ? early 6 th century/ Level II	fragmentary piece of a letter/message

Table 3.1 The 21 Lachish ostraca recovered by the British team in 1935 and 1938.

4. Literacy, Language, and Onomastics

The elegant cursive writing and the mastery of language of most legible Lachish ostraca (Chapters 2 and 3) indicate that these epigraphic examples, among other corpora from various sites in Israel, Judah, and the Negev, were the product of a literate and learned society or of an elite group thereof.

4.1 Literacy among the social classes

The main sources of knowledge about reading and writing in ancient Israel are the Hebrew Bible and the archaeological and epigraphic remains. There is, however, a general lack of visual depictions of everyday activities (including scribal ones) in Iron Age Israel, unlike Egyptian depictions, for example.¹ In addition, the paucity of epigraphic remains from the 10th and 9th centuries B.C.E. in ancient Israel is part of a phenomenon common across the Fertile Crescent, and is explicable as an archaeological accident and not as an indication of a lack of writing.² The extant epigraphic data come from Northern Israel, Judah, and the Negev, during the monarchic period, especially during the 7th and early 6th centuries B.C.E.

¹ Mendel 2013: 552, 553.

² Millard 1995: 217. See also Lemaire (2007) on 9th-century B.C.E. inscriptions.

Lemaire, followed by Rollston, remarks that the calibre of the epigraphic evidence requires some sort of “school” or “scribal training”, although Rollston prefers to avoid the term “school” and rather to use the term “formal, standardized education”.³ Moreover, van der Toorn argues that, although the ability to write down a name (Judg. 8:14) or to read a letter (Lachish 3.8b–9a, according to one reading [see §3.1.3]) may have been quite common, it does not mean that ancient Israel was a literate society, and “the transmission of cultural lore...was nearly always accomplished by word of mouth”.⁴ Rollston deems this argument rather far-fetched, since some form of formal training had to exist in ancient Israel, despite the fact that we are left to pure guesswork when trying to reconstruct what Rollston calls “the scribal curriculum” of the period.⁵ Moreover, van der Toorn’s argument that the formation of “expert and wise” scribes required a program of study provided by the temple school and therefore limited to the context of the temple is too precise.⁶

Rollston remarks that biblical references mention scribes in high places (see e.g. 2 Kgs 12:10; 25:19; 2 Chr. 24:11), and adds that the epigraphic evidence (especially handwritten ostraca) not only dovetails nicely with the biblical references, but also suggests that a contingent of scribes may have been working under those scribes in high places. The extant evidence further demonstrates that there was some sort of “formal, standardized education” in reading and writing in ancient Israel.⁷ Rollston also believes that there was no government mandated education of the masses in antiquity, and exposure to written materials was confined to certain small sections of society; hence the most plausible aegis of scribal education were the government bureaucracies,

³ See Lemaire 1981; Rollston 2006: 49–50; 2015: 81.

⁴ Van der Toorn 2007: 11.

⁵ Rollston 2015: 83; cf. van der Toorn 2007: 97.

⁶ Van der Toorn 2007: 97; Rollston 2015: 93.

⁷ Rollston 2015: 79.

probably fairly small in this time period, but capable of educating in a sophisticated and standardized manner.⁸ The best manner of accounting for all the data, both epigraphic and biblical, is to contend that scribal education was simply a matter of the state, the army, and the temple, without attempting to dissect it more than this.⁹

Learning to use a writing system for the first time is a laborious process, requiring substantial amounts of time to develop manual dexterity and the cognitive framework, and there is a fairly sophisticated system in place with regard to Palaeo-Hebrew orthography.¹⁰ As seen in §4.5 below, the presence of a certain common structure in the epistolary corpus (i.e. some of the Lachish ostraca, as well as in some of the Arad and Ḥorvat ‘Uza ostraca) cannot be dismissed as being of no curricular import, but arguably a component of the “scribal curriculum”.¹¹ Furthermore, as mentioned in §2.5, the use of the complex Egyptian hieratic numeral system, attested at several different Iron Age Israelite and Judaeian sites, most likely also formed part of the Palaeo-Hebrew “scribal curriculum”.¹²

Rollston believes that some high officials, including military officers, would have had some measure of this same “formal, standardised education”.¹³ The vast majority of Palaeo-Hebrew epigraphic material comes from Israelite and Judaeian officialdom over the course of some 200 years, and it presents an impressive calibre in terms of script, orthography, numerics, and formulae.¹⁴ The sites of Samaria (Northern Israel), the coastal site of Meşad Ḥashavyahu, the

⁸ Rollston 2015: 82–83, 97.

⁹ Rollston 2015: 93–94.

¹⁰ Rollston 2015: 83–84.

¹¹ Rollston 2015: 89–90.

¹² Rollston 2015: 88.

¹³ Rollston 2015: 83.

¹⁴ Rollston 2015: 85.

fortress of Lachish/Tell ed-Duweir in the Shephelah, and the capital Jerusalem have yielded a relatively large number of ostraca of a military-administrative nature ranging from the 8th to the early 6th centuries B.C.E., thereby confirming the dissemination of writing in Northern Israel, and especially within the Judahite army towards the end of the pre-exilic period. Additionally, some scribes with basic literacy skills worked in the Negev, as attested at the fortresses of Tel Arad, Ḥorvat ‘Uza, Ḥorvat Radam (Khirbet Umm Redim), Tel Malḥata (Tell el-Milḥ), Tel ‘Aroer (Khirbet ‘Ar‘ara), Tel Masos (Khirbet el-Mshesh), Tel ‘Ira (Khirbet Gharra), Tel Beersheba (Tell es-Seba‘), and Beersheba (Bīr es-Seba‘) (Fig. 2).¹⁵ In a recent analysis of algorithmic handwriting of Judah’s military correspondence (with Tel Arad as case study), Faigenbaum-Golovin and colleagues state that the entire army apparatus, from high ranking officials to humble vice-quartermasters of small desert outposts far from the centre, was literate, in the sense of the ability to communicate in writing.¹⁶

Reports and procedures were part and parcel of military routine, and the extant inscriptions are an indication that literacy reached even the remotest sites. Not only did the upper stratum of officers read and write, but some middle-ranking soldiers could as well.¹⁷ Mendel remarks that literacy was a matter of social standing in military circles, as exemplified by Lachish 3 (see discussion in §3.1.3).¹⁸ On the basis of Lachish 3 combined with the competence of its script and orthography, it is reasonable to imagine that some military personnel had some formal, standardized scribal training (as it would have been useful in the pursuit of rank within the military).¹⁹ Lachish 3.4–

¹⁵ See Na’aman 2015.

¹⁶ Their study so far analysed 16 ostraca from the Arad corpus by employing new methods for image processing, document analysis, and machine learning algorithms in order to enable identification of the minimal number of authors in a given group of inscriptions (see Faigenbaum-Golovin et al. 2016).

¹⁷ Mendel 2013: 556; see also Mendel 2011.

¹⁸ Mendel 2013: 556.

¹⁹ Rollston 2015: 77–78.

13 seems to deal with the question of the attitude to literacy at the end of the monarchic period in Judah, since apparently the ability to read was a matter of social standing at the time.²⁰ For an army officer such as Hôša‘yāhû it was a matter of pride – and possibly a requirement of his rank – that he could do so, and in Lachish 3 he seems to be defending his literacy skills to his superior.²¹ Young emphasizes that in no case is the literacy of the common soldiers (under the command of the officers) the issue in Lachish 3.²² There was, in all probability, some common knowledge understood by both writer and recipient that is hidden from us.

Rollston writes how the calibre of the writing in the ostraca is normally very high, so it seems reasonable to argue that most of these inscriptions are from the hands of “state scribes” engaging in scribal duties within the army.²³ It seems reasonable to posit that “the scribe of the army” was the person in charge and that he had a group of scribes working under him, producing the documents necessary for the varied needs of the military. In addition to this, we can imagine correspondence going back and forth between these military fortresses, as attested at Lachish/Tell ed-Duweir and in the various Negev fortresses. Rollston deems it unlikely that “the scribe of the army” personally wrote all of the military correspondence, given the amount of material we have in Palaeo-Hebrew, the varied sites from which it came and went, and the numerous different hands in these written materials.²⁴

²⁰ Young 1998: 410.

²¹ Young 1998: 411, 413; see also van der Toorn 2007: 12.

²² Young 1998: 414, 411.

²³ Rollston 2015: 77.

²⁴ Rollston 2015: 78, n. 18.

4.2 Different handwritings

In §2.3 I made a brief comment on the handwriting on which I will elaborate further in the present section. The 21 Lachish ostraca, together with the other ostraca from Tell ed-Duweir for that matter, are clearly the product of different scribes. I can definitely say that the extant non-epistolary inscriptions among the 21 ostraca each bear different handwritings from the epistolary inscriptions recovered from the main cache of the “guardroom”.

Storage-jar labels

The storage-jar label Lachish 20 is clearly written by a different hand from those of the “guardroom” ostraca. The writing of Lachish 20 is larger and the letters are fairly wide and less cursive than the other inscriptions written in epistolary form. The ink inscription was perhaps executed with a brush thicker than the standard rush or reed pen. The size and stance of the letters are therefore indicative of the nature of ostrakon 20, which was the only inscription out of the 21 to have been written when the vessel was still intact, and which served as a label (with a date formula) to a holemouth storage jar of Type 495, written on the shoulder of the vessel. The similar labels of Lachish 25 and 29, discovered during the 1970s, are written in black ink on the shoulders of storage jars in similar script and letter size.²⁵ Different handwritings and script nuances are also observed in the labels of Lachish 26, 27, 28, and 30. Such jar labels were, of course, written on each respective vessel when it was still intact. See Catalogue B and references there for the different ostraca.

²⁵ Cf. also Arad 20 (Aharoni 1981: 40–41).

The Lachish 19 list

The handwriting of Lachish 19, a PNN list with a few legible hieratic numerals, also displays some differences from the rest of the Lachish ostraca, mainly in the larger size of the letters, which were perhaps written with a thick brush like ostrakon 20. The script probably dates to the late 8th century B.C.E., since the letters display less of a cursive stance (§2.3), which could be explained as the work of a different scribe, and since its disputed findspot turned out to belong to an earlier date (§1.6.1).

Fragmentary ostraca

As mentioned in §3.1.21, the small, fragmentary ostrakon piece 21, recovered below the floor of Room L.12:1065, bears writing on both sides, and the legible letters of lines 1–3 strongly suggest that the original inscription was written in epistolary style like the “guardroom” letters/messages. The inscription seems to have been a long document, since the writing is found on both sides of the extant piece, but given the highly faded reverse and the fragmentary state overall, this is as far as one can argue on the contents of the original ostrakon. It is nevertheless contemporary in its script (late 7th–early 6th century B.C.E.), and although it may or may not antedate Zedekiah’s reign, the visible handwriting on the obverse and stance of the letters are very much similar to those of the messages from the “guardroom”. How this fragmentary piece ended up in its findspot (in secondary context) atop the mound remains debatable.

Likewise, the two stray ceramic pieces found outside the “guardroom” (Lachish 16 and 17) are too small and fragmentary to reconstruct their nature, and the secondary deposit and the unstratified context in which Lachish 16 and 17 were respectively found prevent any

reconstruction of their original individual contexts (§1.5). The script of ostrakon 16 falls in the same category as those found inside the “guardroom” proper, which date to the late 7th–early 6th centuries. Torczyner considered ostrakon 16 to have originally dealt with the theme of the prophet like ostraca 2, 3, 6, and the faded 12, but there are no good signs to attest this hypothesis (see argument in §5.6).²⁶ Lachish 17 apparently bears similar idiosyncrasies to Lachish 1 and 8, but nothing substantial can be said about this fading, fragmentary piece, which is the smallest out of the 21 ostraca. Both inscriptions were probably written with a rush pen.

The “guardroom” cache

With regards to the “guardroom” ostraca, among the 16 that were retrieved together in the ash layer inside the room (Lachish 1–15 and 18), only a few are legible. Ostraca 7, 10, 12, 14, and 15 are almost totally illegible, with only traces of letters barely visible.

The legible “guardroom” ostraca (1–6, 8, 9, 11, and 18) display an advanced, cursive penmanship, far more developed than that of incised lapidary inscriptions, since the letters are more rounded and some graphemes join one another with ligatures (see §2.4).²⁷ The inscriptions were apparently written with a rush pen in iron-carbon ink (see §§2.2 and 2.3). Among them are another two lists of PNN (Lachish 1 and 11). Ostrakon 1 has a conservative script with angular letters (*beth*, *mem*, and *nun*) and *yod* with tail, typical of the late 7th century B.C.E. It could also perhaps reflect the scribe’s idiosyncrasy (see §3.1.1). Torczyner deemed the handwriting to be on a par with that of Lachish 8, and that Lachish 1 was a supplementary list of witnesses to

²⁶ *Lachish I*: 173.

²⁷ Moscati 1952: 5, 15.

“letter” 8.²⁸ I agree with Torczyner on the similar script style, but whether it is the same handwriting (or scribe) is speculative, most of all whether Lachish 1 is strictly tied to Lachish 8 (see discussion in §5.6). The inscription of Lachish 11 seems to have been written quite crudely and in large lettering, when compared to the other “guardroom” ostraca, and recalls the probably older Lachish 19. Given that both these ostraca bear PNN lists, it may have been common to write out a list of people’s names in large lettering, but again this is hypothetical and probably dependent on the scribes’ writing preferences and/or styles.

According to Torczyner, only small differences exist between the handwriting of ostrakon 2 and that of 3, and both could have been written by the same hand.²⁹ He added that the hand of ostrakon 6 resembles that of 3, which may have been written by the same scribe, unsurprisingly so, because 3 seems to be a repetition of 6 in most of its content.³⁰ The common factor here is that ostraca 2 and 6 belong to the same holemouth storage jar of Type 498, so there is a high probability that the same scribe lies behind 2 and 6 at least. Not only that, but 2 and 6 contain the same address formula to the lord Yā’ûš, while the blurred obverse inscription of ostrakon 3 has been reconstructed by Torczyner and by scholars in general to read a similar formula by one Hôša‘yāhû to his lord Yā’ûš (reconstructed half faded name) (§3.1.3). Torczyner adds ostraca 12 and 18 to the above, as possibly coming from the same hand, owing to strong resemblances (see counter-arguments in §5.6).³¹ Ostrakon 18 would share another common factor here, since it also originates from the same holemouth vessel of Tufnell’s Type 498 as ostraca 2 and 6 (see §3.1.18). I should point out that the top left edge of ostrakon 18 joins perfectly with the bottom

²⁸ *Lachish I*: 30–31, 129.

²⁹ *Lachish I*: 43, 73.

³⁰ *Lachish I*: 119.

³¹ *Lachish I*: 153, 183.

edge of ostracon 6, so there is a stronger chance that these common sherds came from the same scribal source, and were perhaps composed over a short period of time (Figs 20 and 21). Also noticeable are the letters with “forked” downstrokes in ostraca 2, 3, and 18, which are indicative of the split nib of the stylus and are not observed in the other legible ostraca (§2.3). This detail further suggests the possibility of a common source for the above ostraca.

Torczyner also remarked that the handwriting of ostracon 4 displays a few peculiarities in some of the letters that do not warrant a definite decision whether this ostracon was by the same hand as the scribe responsible for ostraca 2 and 3 (and perhaps the others mentioned above). He also remarks that Lachish 5 and 9 display common wide letters, which are spaced out from each other, and some letters are quite horizontal (such as the almost horizontal downstrokes of the *mem* and the horizontal angular *‘ayin*). For these ostraca see §§3.1.4, 3.1.5, and 3.1.9.

Torczyner’s original reading of ostracon 12 was based on Harding’s facsimile of the first photograph of the sherd, taken while the sherd was still covered in mud. Unfortunately, the inscription was virtually lost during the cleaning process, so any subsequent readings of this inscription by various commentators, including myself, were based on the editor’s reading, Harding’s autograph, and R. Richmond Brown’s photograph in the *editio princeps* (see §3.1.12).³² The physical examination of the sherd proved fruitless, since whatever traces were left of the inscription are today lost. Even so, I also looked at the photograph of Lachish 12 that is available on the IAA Archive online, which is much clearer than any other published photograph (Fig. 51). This photograph was, in all probability, the same photograph that Harding based his facsimile on. Indeed, traces of writing can still be discerned on the photographed

³² See *Lachish I*: 150–153.

ostrakon. The script of the few visible letters could very well date to the late 7th–early 6th centuries B.C.E., and indeed bear strong similarities to those of the “guardroom” ostraca.

To summarise, Torczyner’s observations on the legible ostraca were as follows (note that he did not make attempts on the fading and the virtually illegible ostraca):

Lachish 1, 8 – similar handwriting

Lachish 2, 3, 6, 12, 18 – similar handwriting

Lachish 4

Lachish 5, 9 – similar handwriting

I have listed the different handwritings of all 21 ostraca in Table 4.1 below, but I should point out that this is my hypothesised guess based on Torczyner’s observations and my own. The fragmentary ostraca that are difficult to classify or associate with any of the other ostraca have been listed separately. Question marks (?) indicate uncertainties. The ostraca accompanied by “(T498)” indicate the legible sherds common to the Type 498 holemouth storage jar, according to Tufnell’s classification. Also, the fact that different ostraca are listed in one group does not necessarily mean that they were all written by the same scribe, but rather display common stylistic similarities or handwritings. At present, we cannot conclude how many scribes were responsible for the various Lachish ostraca; thus we await future examinations of the sort similar to the recent algorithmic handwriting analysis of 16 Arad ostraca mentioned in §4.1.³³ Nevertheless, it is clear that different hands were responsible for the various Lachish ostraca.

³³ Faigenbaum-Golovin et al. 2016.

Handwritings/scribal idiosyncrasies	Ostraca
#1 (similar to each other)	1 8 (T498)
#2 (similar to each other)	2 (T498) 3? 6 (T498) 12? 18 (T498) 21
#3	4
#4 (similar to each other)	5 9
#5	7 (T498)
#6	11
#7	15
#8	16
#9	17
#10 (older?)	19
#11	20

Table 4.1 A hypothetical breakdown of the different handwritings for both legible and fading ostraca (whether whole or fragmentary).

4.3 The ostracon and the *spr* (ספר)

Pottery was essential in everyday life, and ceramic sherds could be reused for mundane purposes: carrying hot coals or scooping water (Isa. 30:14); scraping sores (Job 2:8); writing letters, receipts, quick drafts of lists of names (e.g. the ostraca from Lachish, Arad and other Negev fortresses, Samaria, Ophel, and Jerusalem), as well as judicial pleas (Meşad Ḥashavyahu 1); and as symbolic or metaphorical objects (Isa. 29:16; 45:9; Jer. 18:1–6; 19:10–11; Lam. 4:2).³⁴ Whether papyrus was considered to be cheap or expensive, ostraca were always cheaper.³⁵ In addition, as Dearman remarks, the advantage of using pottery sherds as writing materials is their ability to survive the rigours of physical transmission, water, or extended passage of time,

³⁴ See Borowski 2002: 30–31.

³⁵ Skeat 1995: 78.

especially if some ostraca were carried throughout a regional system and then filed for later use. Furthermore, an ostrakon is not subject to decay as is papyrus or vellum, although the ink can fade unless the message is inscribed (i.e. scratched post-firing) with a sharp point on the potsherd. They also do not take much room for storage.³⁶

It is interesting to note the recurring use (11 times) of the word *spr* (ספר) in the Lachish epistolary ostraca, namely:³⁷

- Lachish 3.5; 3.9; 3.10; 3.11 (depending on the interpretation and context, the word recurring in lines 9–11 could stand for either “letter” or “scribe”); 3.19;³⁸
- Lachish 5.5 [reconstructed]; 5.6–7 (“letters”);
- Lachish 6.3; 6.4; 6.14 (“letter/s”);
- Lachish 18.2 (“letter”).

As far as the extant Palaeo-Hebrew ostraca are concerned, the root *spr* = “letter” is so far only attested in the Lachish corpus. Young notes that ספר was a term used in Early Biblical Hebrew (Young’s EBH, or Classical Hebrew, i.e. pre-exilic), and remained in use in Late Biblical Hebrew (Young’s LBH, i.e. post-exilic).³⁹ The word ספר can designate any written sheet or collection of sheets in Biblical Hebrew, but in most cases it means “document” or “(long) text” (in the sense of the anachronistic term “book”). As opposed to לוח (“board, tablet”), the biblical word ספר was mostly used for documents written on less durable materials (papyrus or parchment), although this meaning is not always certain, and cognates in languages that predate Hebrew as well as a few biblical passages do not rule out that in an earlier period a ספר might also have been written on clay tablets or stone. The semantic meaning of ספר must have been rather broad, the basic

³⁶ Dearman 1989: 347.

³⁷ An alleged twelfth occurrence of the word *spr* would be in the fragmentary Lachish 16.4, but owing to the unreliability of this reconstruction, it has been left out from this discussion.

³⁸ See discussion in §3.1.3 and Appendix A; see also Rollston 2006: 62, n. 42; 2010: 4–5, point #3.

³⁹ Young 2003: 288.

meaning being apparently “written text”.⁴⁰ For documents comprising several sheets of papyrus/parchment sewed or fixed together (i.e. scrolls), the special designation was מגלת־ספר (occurring four times – Jer. 36:2, 4; Ezek. 2:9; Ps. 40:8), or simply מגלה (from *גלל “to roll”). In Jer. 36 the word ספר is used in alternation with המגלה. The words מגלת־ספר and מגלה are not attested in the epigraphic record to date.⁴¹

This brings me again to the word *spr* used in the Lachish examples. I do not agree with Doering’s statement that the usage of the word is “deployed...self-referentially for the respective letter itself”, given the limited extant data, but he is correct in saying that the use is deployed “in reference to other letters”.⁴² In the contexts where “letter” is meant, we are led to believe that the “letters” in question were either written on pottery sherds, like our extant ostraca, or else written on less durable materials (e.g. papyrus or parchment). This suggests that the word *dlt* in Lachish 4.3 could refer to any material or writing surface other than a ceramic sherd, as discussed in §3.1.4, which could have ranged from a (column of a) papyrus to a door or gate, and the like. As Adey points out, when we speak of “letters”, we can also speak of “documents” or “memoranda”, depending on the social context, such as the first 18 Arad ostraca sent to ’Elyāšīb, requesting him to authorise the release of goods to the Kittim/Kittiyim.⁴³ The term “letters” can also stand for “reports”, as in the military correspondence observed in the legible Lachish ostraca written in epistolary form.

⁴⁰ Smelik 2011c; see also Davies 2002: 268.

⁴¹ For further discussion see Smelik 2011b.

⁴² Doering 2012: 98.

⁴³ See Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005: 8–41.

4.4. Record-keeping and the gatehouse

The many extant corpora of ostraca from ancient Israel to date reflect various uses and activities.

- The Samaria ostraca were found among debris in a storehouse of goods, not in an administrative setting, and if the ostraca are not official receipts, then they are possibly the equivalent of the scratch pad for initial notation, or “examples of an ephemeral kind of writing”, as Millard calls them.⁴⁴
- The Arad ostraca are examples of the record-keeping and administration necessary for a regional centre/fortress, whose work was integrated with the state bureaucracy in the capital, Jerusalem.⁴⁵ The corpus comprises records of priestly duties, records of shipments in kind from other settlements, directions from Jerusalem to officials at Arad to distribute these supplies among certain named recipients (including Kittiyim mercenaries), regular inventories, and letters from the capital to the next regional centre, especially regarding military matters.⁴⁶
- Similarly, a number of the Ḥorvat ‘Uza ostraca (1, 2, 6–10) were recovered from the gate area: among the legible inscriptions is a demand to attend a certain matter (ostrakon 1); a list of PNN with hieratic numerals (ostrakon 6); an Edomite inscription opening with a greeting and a blessing invoking Qaus, the national deity of Edom, followed by a request for grain (ostrakon 7); and an administrative list of three (military?) men, with their respective patronymics and places of origin, to one Aḥiqam (ostrakon 10); whereas ostraca 2, 8, and 9 are fragmentary.⁴⁷
- Similarly, the 7th-century B.C.E. ostrakon from the Meṣad Ḥashavyahu fortress was

⁴⁴ See Dearman 1989: 347 and references there; Millard 1995: 208. For earlier bibliography on the Samaria ostraca see Pardee 1979: 52–54; see also Kaufman 1982; Rainey 1988; Noegel 2006; Mendel and Grosman 2013.

⁴⁵ Dearman 1989: 346.

⁴⁶ Dearman 1989: 346–347.

⁴⁷ See Beit-Arieh 2007a: 122–128; 132–143; Aḥituv 2008: 166–179; 351–354; Na’aman 2012.

discovered in a storeroom beside the gate. The inscription likely comprises a judicial plea of a certain reaper to the official of the fortress for the return of a garment taken by another individual from the reaper. The discovery of the ostrakon in a room of the city gate can reflect not only a typical place of storage for documents, but also the location of the office of the local army commander that intercepted incoming visitors and messengers.⁴⁸

For a further discussion on ostraca found in gateway areas see §5.3.4.

The 16 “guardroom” ostraca of Lachish/Tell ed-Duweir, along with hundreds of jar fragments, were recovered from a single stratigraphic context within a small, three-sided room of the gate complex of ancient Lachish (Room E.18:C), east of the outer gate (§1.4.1). The city-gate area is long known to biblical scholars as the administrative centre for many walled settlements in the biblical period (e.g. Gen. 19:1; 23:10; 34:20; Deut. 21:19, 22:24; Ruth 4:1, 2, 11; 2 Sam. 15:2; 19:9; 2 Chr. 32:6; Neh. 8:1; Ps. 69:12; Amos 5:15).⁴⁹ As Dearman notes, the gate complexes of walled cities normally had several chambers or rooms associated with them, and it is possible that some of these rooms were used for municipal administration, especially for record-keeping. Moreover, as reflected in the biblical citations above, decisions were reached, witnessed, and validated through public procedures in the gates.⁵⁰

The British team applied the hypothetical term “guardroom” to Room E.18:C, given its location by the outer city-gate (see analysis in §5.3). Of course, as Frese writes, it is a common assertion that gatehouse chambers functioned as rooms for the city’s guards, which is based primarily on

⁴⁸ Dearman 1989: 348.

⁴⁹ Dearman 1989: 347.

⁵⁰ Dearman 1989: 347; see also King and Stager 2001: 234–236.

common sense and literary sources, not archaeological remains.⁵¹ The reasons for posting guards at the gate was to control passage in and out of town, impose taxes or tolls on those who pass by, and to police nearby plazas or the approach roads to the city.⁵² Nevertheless, based on this not sufficiently precise association, the term “guardroom” is too simplistic, hence my use of inverted commas for the label “guardroom”. The term שַׁעַר “gate” in the Hebrew Bible can refer to the gatehouse (e.g. 1 Sam. 21:14; 2 Sam. 18:24; 19:1) but it can also refer to the gate plaza or complex (2 Sam. 18:24; 19:9; 23:15–16), and thus the posting of guards at the “gate” does not necessarily entail their use of the gatehouse chambers or that the guards alone used the chambers, or else that the chambers were designed for this purpose.⁵³

4.5 Social status: formal and deferential language

The content of the legible Lachish ostraca written in epistolary form bears social expressions of the time. In his essay on the social status conveyed in the Lachish ostraca, Adey argues that “the looseness or tightness of a social network may affect speech/writing patterns adopted by a speaker” (with the term “social” being “about human interaction, whether interpersonal or intergroup, that is constitutive of a cohering society”).⁵⁴ He adds that the uniqueness of the Lachish epistolary ostraca is their interpersonal exchange, despite being generally considered as “military correspondence”.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Frese 2015: 78, with earlier literature. See also Borowski 2003: 47; Rocca 2010: 23.

⁵² Frese 2015: 78.

⁵³ See Frese 2015: 78–80 and references there. See also Emerton 1994.

⁵⁴ Adey 2009: 6.

⁵⁵ Adey 2009: 6; see also Bordreuil et al. 1988: 3.

4.5.1 Polite epistolary style: the use of blessing formulae

Out of the 21 ostraca, the legible Lachish 2–6, 8, and 9 start off with varying formulae of blessing, as greetings from sender to addressee.⁵⁶ Below is a list of all opening greetings and other wishes identified in the legible ostraca.

Lachish 2.1b–3a

yšm' yhwh 't 'dny šm't šlm 't kym 't kym

May YHWH let my lord hear tiding(s) of peace today, this very day!

Lachish 2.5b–6

ybkr yhwh 't ' [dn]y dbr 'šr l' yd'th

May YHWH promptly bring (to) my I[or]d information which you (*or* I) do not know!

Lachish 3.2b–4a

yšm' yhw[h 't] 'dny šm't šlm w[šm't t]b

May YHW[H let m]y lord hear tiding(s) of peace and [tidings of good (fortune)!]

Lachish 4.1–2a

yšm' yh[wh 't 'dny] 't kym šm't t]b

May YH[WH let my lord] hear this very day tiding(s) of good (fortune)!

Lachish 5.1–3a

yšm' [yhwh 't 'd]ny [šm't šl]m w]tb ['t kym] 't k[ym]

May [YHWH let my lo]rd hear [tiding(s) of pea]ce and good (fortune) [this very day,] this v[ery day!]

Lachish 5.7b–9a

yr'k yhwh hqsr b]tb hym

May YHWH let you enjoy the harvest in prosperity today!

Lachish 6.1b–2a

yr' yhwh 't 'dny 'th 't hzh šlm

May YHWH let my lord see, at this time, peace.

Lachish 8.1–2a

yšm' y[hwh] 't 'dny š[m't] t]b 't kym kym

May Y[HWH] let my lord hear tidings of good (fortune) this very day, this day!

Lachish 9.1–2a

yšm' yhwh 't 'dny š[m't] šlm

May YHWH let my lo[rd] hear [tiding(s)] of peace.

⁵⁶ Pardee et al. (1982: 156) remark that, in the Lachish tradition, this formula is the proper way for an inferior to introduce a letter to a superior, with or without an address formula preceding this phrase, and with or without a temporal phrase inserted to it.

	Volitive Expressions		Divine Subject	Direct Objects						Temporal Clauses			
2a	yšm'		y/hw/h	t' dny	šm t šlm					t kym t kym			
2b		ybk	y/hw/h	t' dny		dbr 'sr l' yd'th							
3	yšm'		y/hw/h	t] dny	šm t šlm		w[šm t 'tb]						
4	yšm' 1		y/h[w/h 2	t' dny] 3			šm t 'tb 5			t kym 4			
5a	yšm'		y/hw/h	t' d]ny	[šm t š]m		w'tb			[t kym] t k[ym]			
5b		y'r'k (verb + 2 m. s. suffix)	y/hw/h	see verbal suffix				hqs'r b'tb			kym		
6		y'r' 1	y/hw/h 2	t' dny 3					šlm 5			t' h t' hzh 4	
8	yšm'		y[hw/h]	t' dny			š[m] t 'tb			t kym kym			
9	yšm'		y/hw/h	t' dny	š[m t] šlm								

Table 4.2 The different blessing formulae in the Lachish ostraca.
Note the cell numbers for Lachish 4 and 6 indicate syntactical sequence, as written in the respective inscriptions.

As seen in the list and table 4.2 above, I list the opening blessing formulae of Lachish 2–6, 8 and 9, and have added the other wishes read in Lachish 2:5b–6 and 5:7–9 (listed in table 4.2 as “2b” and “5b” respectively). Lehmann also lists the different formulae in a table, but apart from ostraca 2–6, 8 and 9, he added 12, 13, 16, and 18 into the mix, although these do not contain such blessing formulae, either because of their different genre or because of their washed out/fragmentary state.⁵⁷

Crawford divides the Lachish blessings into the following four groups, with an additional fifth group for a *unicum* formula (Lachish 6):⁵⁸

1. Lachish 2, 7, and 9 fall under the first group, opening with the phrase: “May YHWH let my lord hear tidings of peace”; out of these three, only Lachish 2 opens with an address that actually mentions the name of the recipient (Yā’ûš). Nevertheless, I am cautiously sceptical of lumping Lachish 7 in this group, or any group for that matter, because the ostrakon is poorly preserved (as noted by Crawford himself), owing to its highly burnished surface, which is why I did not include it in the list and table 4.2. It appears Crawford based his argument on Torczyner’s tentative reconstruction of Lachish 7, which is highly questionable.⁵⁹
2. Lachish 3 falls into Crawford’s second category, with a blessing preceded by the name of the sender (Hôša’yāhû) “who has sent to inform” the recipient Yā’ûš (reconstructed PN), and followed by a message that is more formal and serious in tone than the rest of the legible messages.

⁵⁷ See Lehmann 2003: 96.

⁵⁸ Crawford 1992: 60–62.

⁵⁹ *Lachish I*: 123–124.

3. Lachish 5 represents the third variation, and despite the faded and obscure text, this letter includes the same greeting formula of the other two groups, and includes “good (fortune)”, as in the reconstructed Lachish 3.
4. Lachish 4 and 8 make up the fourth group, with a greeting mentioning “good (fortune)” that replaces “peace” in both messages (*šm‘t ṭb* replaces *šm‘t šlm*).⁶⁰ This swapping in the greeting wish of Lachish 4 and the placement of *šm‘t ṭb* at the end of the wish may reflect the sender’s worry, and instead of the usual polite concern with the superior’s well-being, the servant anticipates his message by focusing on his superior’s desire for “[tidings of] good fortune” (or “good [news]”), which is not fully fulfilled in his report.⁶¹
5. Lachish 6 falls into a category of its own, perhaps a fifth group, since the greeting formula differs significantly from the rest in its choice of words.

Pardee and others note that the Hiphil *yšm‘* as a greeting, appearing six times in the legible ostraca, is used only at Lachish, and is “unquestionably a formulaic feature of the scribal tradition represented by these letters”.⁶² They add that in Lachish 4, 5, 8, and 9, the *yšm‘* clause serves as the entire *praescriptio*, with no address used. In other words, the lack of address is always compensated for by greetings, yet the latter do not qualify as an address, since they do not include the name of the recipient or of the sender, but only the title of the recipient.⁶³ Bridge observes that, among other conventional formulae and expressions, the unique blessing formula in Lachish

⁶⁰ See comments in Crawford 1992: 89, n. 224.

⁶¹ Bridge 2010: 532. Moran (1963: 174) interestingly noted that, in Akkadian treaties, the combination *ṭūbtu u sulummū* is only used of peace effected by a treaty, to which Crawford (1992: 61) adds that despite the fact that the “Lachish Letters” are not treaty documents, “they are not prohibitively separated either in time or geography from [the Akkadian treaties]”, and “a peace treaty would be good news indeed to soldiers manning a garrison at some distance from the capital”.

⁶² Pardee et al. 1982: 81.

⁶³ Pardee et al. 1982: 146.

6 indicates that the senders varied their language according to subject matter.⁶⁴ Joosten observes how the verbal form is in first position, while the temporal phrase follows in a later position, and even where a temporal phrase is underscored, it is never fronted, which is a peculiarity that manifests similarities with imperative clauses in Classical Biblical Hebrew.⁶⁵

The form *šm 't šlm* is not found in the Hebrew Bible, but the phrase מְשֻׁמֵעַ שְׁלוֹם (“good tidings”) occurs in Nah. 1:15, whereas the temporal phrase *'t kym* or *'t kym 't kym* occurs only in the Lachish ostraca, and is always used in conjunction with the *yšm 't* blessing.⁶⁶ Furthermore, not so many scholars read *'t kym kym* in Lachish 8.2, except for Michaud and Lemaire.⁶⁷ I too was able to identify the second *kym* by means of the IAA archive photograph, since the physical examination of the now faded ostrakon 8 did not provide further results. This phrase could be a variant of *'t kym 't kym*, or else the scribe left out the second *'t* either as a form of idiosyncrasy or style, or else by mistake.⁶⁸ The expression *'t kym 't kym* may signify a situation so deteriorated in the face of the Babylonian invasion, that the arrival of “tiding(s) of peace” was imperative.⁶⁹

Jouïon considered the entire *yšm 't* phrase, along with the various forms and placements of the temporal phrase *'t kym*, as specifically epistolary in style, the aim of the blessing being along the lines of: “May YHWH cause my lord to find that this letter furnishes good news.”⁷⁰ Joosten remarks that the Lachish examples bearing volitive clauses with adverbial phrases of time have a rather stereotyped form, as one would expect in letter greetings, and their semantics manifestly

⁶⁴ Bridge 2010: 533.

⁶⁵ Joosten 2011: 503.

⁶⁶ Pardee et al. 1982: 81.

⁶⁷ See Michaud 1957: 49; 1958: 90–91; Lemaire 1977: 124; 2004: 2106–2107.

⁶⁸ Pardee et al. (1982: 104) are very hesitant to accept the reading *kym* without the *'t* that normally precedes it.

⁶⁹ See Lemaire 1977: 98; Michaud 1957: 41.

⁷⁰ Jouïon 1938: 85.

imply a wish, i.e. volition, of the speaker.⁷¹ Crawford views the wishes for peace and peaceful tidings in this context as a wish not just for health but for safety and the safety of hearing that the enemy has retreated, and the threat is over.⁷² Similar blessings can be observed in Arad 16, 21, and 40 (through the use of the verb *brk*), and Arad 18 (with the verb *š'l*).⁷³ Moreover, the language, structure, and style of the Edomite inscription of Ḥorvat 'Uza 7 bear a strong resemblance to contemporary Hebrew inscriptions, not to mention that blessings like those in its opening formula and the use of the imperative are well known in biblical and extra-biblical sources of the period, all of which indicate a close linguistic and stylistic affinity between Hebrew and Edomite.⁷⁴

4.5.2 Servile humbleness: the use of deferential formulae

The contents of the legible letters clearly indicate a master-servant relationship and deference. Out of the extant legible letters, only Lachish 2, 5, and 6 contain a formula by which the individual sender abases himself as a dog undeserving of his superior's attention or consideration, but at the same time expressing loyal submission to his superior.⁷⁵ Pardee et al. point out that, when the self-abasement formula (*my 'bdk klb ky...*) is present, the latter serves in these texts both as a transitional formula and as the first phrase of the body, whereas the regular marker of transition *w't* is omitted.⁷⁶ Schwiderski, in contrast, argues that *klb* is actually the subordinate's

⁷¹ Joosten 2011: 503.

⁷² Crawford 1992: 60.

⁷³ Pardee et al. 1982: 145, 149, 154–155, 157–160.

⁷⁴ Beit-Arieh 2007a: 137.

⁷⁵ See Thomas, D. W. 1960: 415; Ahituv 2008: 62; Moran 1992: 350, 351–353; see also Hutton 2002–2003; Thomas, B. 2009; Bridge 2010; 2011. Pardee et al. (1982: 156) remark that, in the Lachish tradition, this formula is the proper way for an inferior to thank a superior.

⁷⁶ The transition-marker *w't* corresponds formally and rhetorically to the biblical וְאֵתָּה (w^e 'attāh), which is used to mark the transition from topic to comment in any discourse, and is actually attested before the cited body of letters in the Hebrew Bible (see Pardee et al. 1982: 81, 172–173; Pardee 2002: 79, nn. 5 and 9); see also Pardee et al. (1982: 149–150) on corresponding formulae used as paragraph markers in Aramaic letters.

answer to his own question, rather than an appositive, and *ky* marks an independent asseverative clause rather than a subordinate result clause, hence, “Wer ist dein Knecht? Ein Hund! Dennoch...”, but, as Conklin points out, “this use of *ky* to introduce an independent contrastive clause is not standard Hebrew prose usage”, and therefore less likely.⁷⁷

The formulaic phrase *my ‘bdk klb ky* is limited to three of the messages addressed from subordinates to superiors, as follows:

Lachish 2.3b–5a

my ‘bdk klb ky zkr ‘dny ‘t [‘]bdh

Who is your servant (but) a dog, that my lord remembered his [se]rvant?

Lachish 5.3b–5a

my ‘bdk klb ky [šlht] ‘l ‘bdk [thsprm...]

Who is your servant (but) a dog, that [you sent] to your servant [the letters]?

Lachish 6.2b–5a

my ‘bdk klb ky šlh ‘dny [‘t sp]r hmlk [w ‘t] spry hsr[m l ‘m]r qr ‘ n ‘

Who is your servant (but) a dog, that my lord sent [the lette]r of the king [and] the letters of the commander[s sayin]g “Read, I beg you!”

	Self-abasement uttered by the “Speaker”	Verbs		The “Hearer”	The “Speaker”		Reasons		
2	<i>my ‘bdk klb ky</i>	<i>zkr</i>		<i>‘dny</i>	<i>‘t [‘]bdh</i>				
5	<i>my ‘bdk klb ky</i>		<i>[šlht]</i>			<i>‘l ‘bdk</i>	<i>[‘t hsprm]</i>		
6	<i>my ‘bdk klb ky</i>		<i>šlh</i>	<i>‘dny</i>				<i>[‘t sp]r hmlk</i>	<i>[w ‘t]spr y hsr[m l ‘m]r qr ‘ n ‘</i>

Table 4.3 The three deferential or self-abasement formulae in Lachish 2, 5, and 6.

⁷⁷ See Schwiderski 1997, esp. pp. 135–141; 2000: 60; Conklin 2003: 138.

Jepsen argued that the use of *klb* in Lachish 2, 5, and 6 does not constitute a submissive self-determination (i.e. “a dog”), but rather the PN *Klb* (Caleb), since such names usually follow *'bdk* (as in Lachish 3.1, and in the Elephantine Papyri 4 and 12), hence, “Who is your servant Caleb, that...”.⁷⁸ In Jepsen’s cited biblical passages, 2 Sam. 9:8 and 2 Kgs 8:13, *klb* is actually written with the definite article (*hklb*) and in a different syntactical arrangement than in the three ostraca above. Thus, his argument revolves around the fact that for *klb* to mean “dog”, it has to be a written formula different from *my 'bdk klb ky*. Jepsen’s purely syntactical/grammatical approach suggests that Hebrew authors would always make use of the one formula in the same style, and at the same time ignores the variations in the three deference formulae of the Lachish ostraca.⁷⁹ Although Jepsen’s idea of *klb* as a PN in the context of the Lachish ostraca sounds plausible, it remains unlikely.

Watson, in contrast, followed Torczyner on the proposition that the formula of Lachish 2, 5, and 6 (*my 'bdk klb ky*) differs from the biblical one (*'bdk klbk*, “your slave and your dog” in 1 Chr. 17:19; *'bdk hklb* “your slave the dog” in 2 Kgs 8:13), and thus the Lachish formula might have been written with haplography of the double *kaph* instead of *my 'bdk klbk ky*.⁸⁰ Watson added that this alleged haplography meant that *klbk* was not pronounced *kalb^ekā* (that would separate the final consonant *-k* from the following *k-* of *ky*) but *kalbāk*.⁸¹ First of all, the reading in 1 Chr. 17:19, which has been generally regarded as a restatement of 2 Sam. 7:21, is usually translated as “according to your heart/will” (*uk^elibb^eka*), as opposed to Torczyner’s “and your dog” (*w^ekalb^ekā*). The phrase *uk^elibb^eka* of 2 Sam. 7:21 has attracted neither Torczyner’s nor Watson’s

⁷⁸ Jepsen 1969: 4–5.

⁷⁹ Edward J. Bridge, message sent to A. Zammit, dated 20 May 2016.

⁸⁰ See *Lachish I*: 39–40, 96; Watson 1971: 44–45.

⁸¹ Watson 1971: 44.

attention, and thus *uk^elibb^eka* of 1 Chr. 17:19 should be treated likewise and the vocalisation allowed to stand, until proven otherwise.⁸² Torczyner is perhaps “assuming ‘in pause’ for the Lachish formula as in Mishnaic Hebrew” is far from tenable, given the almost 700-year span between the two sets of documents.⁸³ Furthermore, it is quite unlikely to have the same scribal mistake (i.e. haplography of *kaph*) occurring three times in the ostraca, especially if it is in the same formula.⁸⁴ The scholarly majority today has accepted the Lachish formula as it is written, with the self-determination *klb* (without haplography of the pronominal suffix *-k*) followed by the conjunction *ky*.

The use of *klb* in self-abasement formulae, by which the servant compares him/herself to a dog, serves for two types of expression: humbleness and invective (criticism). Expressions of master-servant deference are not uncommon in the Hebrew Bible: the use of כִּלְבָּ for self-abasement in 1 Sam. 24:15[14]; 2 Sam. 9:8; 2 Kgs 8:13; and “as invective against others” in Deut. 23:18; 1 Sam. 17:43; 2 Sam. 16:9; Pss 22:17[16], 21[20]; and Isa. 56:10–11).⁸⁵ Older non-biblical sources also feature self-abasement formulae, namely the 18th-century B.C.E. Mari texts (cf. ARM I 27.28 – invective) and the 14th-century B.C.E. El-Amarna letters from Canaan (cf. e.g. EA 71, 75, 85, 130 and 137 – invective; and 60, 61, 314–325 – humbleness).⁸⁶

⁸² Edward J. Bridge, email sent to A. Zammit, dated 26 May 2016.

⁸³ Edward J. Bridge, email sent to A. Zammit, dated 26 May 2016.

⁸⁴ I thank Hugh G. M. Williamson for pointing this out.

⁸⁵ Other forms of self-abasement or belittling of oneself occur in Ex 3:11; Ruth 2:13; 1 Sam 9:21; 17:43; 18:18,23; 2 Sam 3:8; 7:18; Isa 6:5; and Jer 1:6, most of which show the respective speaker rejecting his or her significance; see the discussion in Bridge (2011) on the different types of self-abasement in the Hebrew Bible as expressions of thanks either to other human beings or to Yahweh.

⁸⁶ Bridge 2011: 256; see also Galán 1993. Cf. also EA 319; 320; 322; 323; 324; 325, among others (Aḥituv 2008: 62; Moran 1992: 350, 351–353).

Hutton remarks that Lachish had “its own peculiar formulaic equation:” the structure of the Lachish self-abasement formulae differs from those of the El-Amarna self-abasement questions, since the Lachish formulae contain an interrogative clause, a predicative clause, and the arrangement of the individual elements of the two does not conform exactly to any structure previously known from El-Amarna.⁸⁷ The elements in common are an interrogative particle (*my*), and the metaphorically attributive noun *klb*, whereas an equivalent element is the conjunctive purposive *ky*, which takes the place of the conversive *u/waw* seen in El-Amarna.

The self-abasement in Lachish 2 differs from that of Lachish 5 and 6. The second part of the servant’s exclamation of deference in Lachish 2 finds a parallel in 2 Sam 9:8:⁸⁸

מה עבדך : כי פנית אליהכלב המת אשר כמוני :
What is your servant, that you should notice a dead dog like me? (NIV)

In the self-abasement formula of Lachish 5, the sender makes a reference to something sent to him, the object in question having been reconstructed as *hsprm* in line 5 owing to the mention of “the letters” in the following lines (6–7). In the self-abasement formula of Lachish 6, the sender mentions a letter of the king and letters of the commander[s] that his master sent him.

There have been alternative hypotheses about the use of self-abasement formulae in the Lachish ostraca that express criticism towards the addressee, which were however based on now outdated theories about the function of the ostraca.⁸⁹ Day has recently discussed the pairing of the

⁸⁷ Hutton 2002–2003: 10.

⁸⁸ Smelik 1991: 121.

⁸⁹ For example, Coats (1970: 18) deemed the self-abasement formula of Lachish 2 a form of criticism and self-defence, and the idea of “to be remembered” by one’s lord is to be accused of misdeeds, which seems to have relied heavily on Torczyner’s original interpretation of the ostraca, as rightly noted by Pardee et al. (1982: 81). Moreover, note that Barclay Burns (2002: 7) lumps the “Lachish Letters” with the El-Amarna Letters as bearing the term *klb* “to signify not only fidelity but also lowly, and even groveling self-abasement, and to insult one’s enemies”, and

words *klb* and *'bd* in the El-Amarna letters and the Lachish ostraca, which rather implies the domestic keeping of the dog in the ancient Near East.⁹⁰ Hutton is of a similar opinion, and deems that the deferential speakers in Lachish 2, 5 and 6, who are of low status, show humility and loyalty to their officials for acting so favourably towards them.⁹¹ I agree with these views, and claim that the use of *klb* in the Lachish self-abasement formulae is best understood as an expression of thanks from the subordinates to humble themselves for favours received from their superiors, so as to avoid being in debt to them, as the servants are indirectly implying that the superiors have been magnanimous, as remarked by Bridge.⁹² The prior forwarding of correspondence is at least referred to in Lachish 5 and 6, and in Lachish 6 the servant has even been asked to read the forwarded letters. The use of self-abasement to express thanks to another person primarily serves to highlight the magnanimity of the hearer and functions as the speaker's acceptance of reduction in respect or honour relative to the hearer. This maintains an unequal social relationship between the receiver and giver, while at the same time the receiver avoids direct expressions of obligation to the giver for his generosity.⁹³

Bridge remarks that the use of self-abasement to express thanks in biblical narrative suggests this was an aspect of ancient Israelite culture. Moreover, the use of *klb* for self-abasement not only has a long pedigree (being also found at Mari and El-Amarna), but it appears in a recurring formula in the Lachish ostraca. The Lachish context, therefore, not only gives more credence to

although he later comments briefly that the Lachish designation “dog” is “used by an inferior greeting a superior officer”, the distinction between the purpose of the Lachish designation from the El-Amarna use of the term is not clear enough in his paper's gist; the Lachish use of “dog” is groveling self-abasement up to an extent, depending on how one understands the laconic information one gets from Lachish 2, 5, and 6, but highly unlikely to be insulting language, and certainly not an insinuation of male submission and perversion.

⁹⁰ Cf. Day 2013: 50–53 and references there vis-à-vis Thomas, D. W. 1960.

⁹¹ Hutton 2002–2003: 10.

⁹² Bridge 2010: 526, 533; 2011: 267.

⁹³ Bridge 2011: 266–267; 2010: 533.

the fact that the use of *klb* in self-abasement expressions is to be considered as stock language, but witnesses to the use of self-abasement to express thanks in at least one sector of Israelite society during the last few years of the kingdom of Judah.⁹⁴

4.5.3 Address formulae and the use of first and third person

The epistolary ostraca that are written from an inferior to a superior have varying address formulae, and bear the alternating use of first and third person by the respective inferiors.

In Lachish 2, the sender refers to his superior in the third person (*'dny*) as he does to himself (*'bdk* throughout, and *'bdh* in line 5), except perhaps in line 6, if one reads the final verb as 1.c.s. *y^eda 'tīhū* (§3.1.2).

Throughout Lachish 3, Hôša'yāhû refers to himself in the third person, with 2.m.s. possessive suffix (*'bdk* “your servant”), and addresses his superior in the third person, with 1.c.s. possessive suffix (*'dny* “my lord”). He later changes into first person when referring to himself, e.g. *ly* “to me” in line 10, and *qr'ty* “I read” and *'tnnhw* “I recount it” in line 12. The fact that he keeps his self-defence in the first person indicates respect towards his superior, and thus he mitigates his criticism towards Yā'ûš by keeping it indirect.⁹⁵ Lachish 3 demonstrates a clear inferior-superior relationship, and it is the only surviving legible Lachish message to include the names of both correspondents. The message displays the necessary formalities, but dispenses with deference completely by replacing it with first-person references (unlike the self-abasement formulae expressed in Lachish 2, 5, and 6), since the upset Hôša'yāhû is standing his ground and voicing

⁹⁴ Bridge 2011: 256, 267, 273.

⁹⁵ Bridge 2010: 531.

his complaints to his master for what seems to be a reprimand he received from his lord in a letter sent the evening before that questions Hôša'yāhû's literacy (Lachish 3.4b–13a) (§3.1.3). I agree with Bridge on the following observation: the extended salutation in Lachish 3 sets a tone of formality to the message, and *'bdk* is used constantly in lines 5–8, yet *'dny* is used less in these lines, and is instead replaced with a 2.m.s. perfect verb (*šlḥth*) and an infinitive with 2.m.s. suffix (*šlḥk*) in lines 6–7, before Hôša'yāhû starts his complaint.⁹⁶ The particle *n'* in Hôša'yāhû's request (lines 4–5), which is thus far the only occurrence of the aforesaid particle in the legible Lachish ostraca in general, probably indicates politeness to soften his imperative-request.⁹⁷

Bridge further argues that Lachish 6.5–11 is similar in tone: the sender, this time anonymous, is emotional and dispenses with self-abasement formulae, although politeness is still present in the use of *'dny* in line 8 and *'bdk* twice in lines 13–15. The change to a more direct form of address represents emotion: the sender is upset with the nobility, and expresses it in his writing and in his request that the superior write a letter to the nobility, which reflects openness and some measure of reciprocity with Yā'ûš (§3.1.6). The subordinate's request to write in lines 8–9 (*hl' tktb*) a command in the form of a question is a negative politeness strategy called “hedging”, which gives Yā'ûš freedom to choose whether to take up the advice, and thus save face.⁹⁸

The legible messages Lachish 4, 5, 8, and 9 lack the address formulae of Lachish 2 and 6, or the opening greeting of Lachish 3. The recipient of each individual letter is addressed with the epithet *'dny* only. These letters further lack any PNN that would identify the individual sources of the respective messages. The senders refer to themselves in the third person (*'bdk*). In

⁹⁶ Bridge 2010: 530.

⁹⁷ Bridge 2010: 530–531.

⁹⁸ Brown and Levinson 1987: 131 *apud* Bridge 2010: 530.

Lachish 4, the sender occasionally switches to first person, as indicated by certain verbal forms. While Lachish 8 is today washed out, Lachish 5 and the fading Lachish 9 are written in the third person throughout. Furthermore, Lachish 9 is the only letter from the site to contain a directive for the distribution of commodities, and it recalls Arad 18 since it is similarly from an inferior to a superior, yet the *praescriptio* of the two letters are completely different.⁹⁹ Arad 1–14 and 17 (from the Eliashib Archive) are similar letters containing directives, but from a superior to an inferior. The sender/s and recipient/s of the fading alleged letters (Lachish 12 and 18) are impossible to verify, although present-day reconstructions point to another two messages from subordinates to their superiors. Lachish 18 is particularly unique, since it is a short (two-line) message supposedly speaking of a letter sent from the sender’s superior, but it does not contain any address, greeting, or any other formula whatsoever. By virtue of content (i.e. the lack of a *praescriptio*), this ostrakon shares similarities with the Meşad Ḥashavyahu ostrakon, unless Lachish 18 was an addendum to another ostrakon! Unfortunately, the message lacks a central fragment, half of the inscription is badly faded, and physical examination did not indicate the presence of any traces of writing on the inner surface.

4.6 The use of the Divine Name

Smelik remarks about the “striking feature” of the frequent appeals to YHWH in most legible ostraca. He deems this, along with the many theophoric PNN in the texts, to stand for an indicator of the “very great” reverence for YHWH in Judah at this time, “despite the accusations of the prophets that the people did not go far enough in the service of YHWH”.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ See Pardee et al. 1982: 159, 161.

¹⁰⁰ Smelik 1991: 121.

Conversely, Thomas remarked that, although the frequent use of the Divine Name in the Lachish ostraca is “very striking”, no religious significance can be properly read into its use, since the occurrence is restricted to the stock phrase *hy yhw* (“as YHWH lives”), and to the greeting formulae discussed above (§4.5.1). He concluded that the ostraca “make no contribution whatsoever to our knowledge of religion in Palestine in the time of Jeremiah”.¹⁰¹

By the time of late Monarchic Judah, Yahweh worship had become fully fledged, and it is thus conceivable to regard the many stock phrases making use of the Divine Name as well as the multitude of theophoric names as a product of tradition rather than faith at this point in time.

4.7 Names and name lists

In the discovery’s aftermath, the profusion of names with the *-yhw* theophoric suffix appearing in the “Lachish Letters” was explained by Torczyner as owing to Josiah’s reform in 622 B.C.E. which brought about a return to monotheism, i.e. the worship of Yahweh alone. Furthermore, Lachish 1 was highly regarded for the insight it gives on the onomasticon of Judah at the time of the prophet Jeremiah, as do the many Yahwistic PNN that feature in the rest of the Lachish collection, for that matter.¹⁰² This is because seven of the PNN in Lachish 1 have the suffix *-yhw* and seven appear in the Hebrew Bible, six of them occurring in the Book of Jeremiah alone. Hence, they date to the late pre-exilic period, shortly before the fall of Judah and Jerusalem, which finds support in the archaeology of Tell ed-Duweir. This does not mean, however, that the name *Yirm^ḥyāhû* (Jeremiah), for example, is limited to the prophet Jeremiah or that it necessarily refers to him. Likewise the name *Mattanyāhû* (Mattaniah), which brings to mind the pre-throne

¹⁰¹ Thomas, D. W. 1950: 2.

¹⁰² *Lachish I*: 27–30, 198, 206. See also no author 1935a; 1935d; Hauptert 1938: 31; Reider 1939: 229–230.

name of Zedekiah, is not limited to this period. Thomas indeed remarked that nothing can be deduced from the many PNN in the “Lachish Letters” that end in *-yhw*, and the attempts to view them as a reflection of the success of Josiah’s reforms are unconvincing.¹⁰³

Torczyner’s notion was in fact challenged by Tigay in his study on theophoric names in ancient Israel and Judah.¹⁰⁴ He explained that the evidence from the Lachish ostraca shows men active in 587/6 B.C.E., who are generally named along with their patronyms, and that there is an equal number of Yahwistic names in each generation (cf. Lachish 1.1–5; 3.17). Tigay hence argues that there are no grounds for supposing that those men active in the letters, namely the sons, were all born and named after Josiah’s reform and were aged 35 or less. It would also be virtually impossible to assume that their fathers were born and named after the reformation, for then the sons could not have been out of their teens in 587/6 B.C.E. He further challenges Torczyner’s suggestions of having the fathers change their names in the wake of the reformation. Tigay’s overall study concluded that, on the basis of Hebrew theophoric PNN in ancient Palestinian inscriptions, the worship of other gods and goddesses was in fact rather rare and that Israel was essentially monolatrous throughout.

Day has challenged Tigay’s conclusions and remarks that Hebrew theophoric PNN may not be sufficient indicators of the frequency of particular deity worship, since many names could have simply carried on by way of tradition. He presents the following arguments:¹⁰⁵

- (1) the frequency of Yahwistic names may not necessarily imply that Yahweh was the only deity worshipped at the time, but rather the most important deity worshipped, and

¹⁰³ Thomas, D. W. 1950: 2. See also Cassuto 1936a; Artom 1936: 527.

¹⁰⁴ Tigay 1986: 15.

¹⁰⁵ Day 2000: 227–228.

whoever worshipped other deities may still have regarded Yahweh as the chief god, with the others being subordinate members of his pantheon;

- (2) several names could have been traditional, passed from generation to generation;
- (3) Tigay's evidence is limited to late Monarchic Judah;
- (4) Tigay's proposed statistical ratio of the number of Yahwistic names in comparison to the number of "pagan" names (16:1) is actually lower (10:1), since, as argued by Day, Tigay overestimates the former and underestimates the latter.

Hess responds to Day's four individual arguments as follows:¹⁰⁶

- (1) the point is not relevant because it neither challenges the data nor proves the alternative, namely, that Yahweh was the most important deity but not in some sense the unique or sole deity;
- (2) whether the names are traditional or not, it nevertheless proves that people preferred Yahwistic names (which were understood as Yahwistic from what is known of the language in Iron Age Israel);
- (3) Tigay's evidence included all available onomastic data from within Palestine at the time of his study, and despite the preponderance originating in late Monarchic Judean contexts, the dramatic increase in the number of PNN in the nearly two decades since Tigay wrote has not increased the percentage of non-Yahwistic divine names in Israelite names;
- (4) Day does not identify the suggested error in detail, thus it is difficult to evaluate the validity of this argument.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Hess 2007: 303.

¹⁰⁷ See further literature on the statistical matter in Hess 2007: 303–306.

Indeed, PNN with the theophoric elements *yhw-*, *-yw*, *-yh*, and *-yhw* comprise the largest class of Israelite names between the 8th and early 6th centuries B.C.E, alongside the occasional prefixed element *'ēl-*, which is likely interpreted in this context as the noun “god”.¹⁰⁸ The corpus of 7th- and early 6th-century Judah largely consists of ostraca, seals, and seal impressions, most of which come from administrative or military contexts.

The large corpora of inscriptions from Tel Arad and Tell ed-Duweir reflect the situation before the exile, at least among the military personnel and their subordinates, and the majority of the PNN appearing in these two groups of documents are Yahwistic. Here I should add that the contemporary corpus of the Ḥorvat 'Uza fortress, among other Negev sites, also features varied Yahwistic PNN, alongside the clear Edomite influence in some of the ostraca's content and other featured names.¹⁰⁹ Beaulieu writes that a comparative and statistical study of the Arad ostraca from various levels reveals a progressive increase in the percentage of Yahwistic names.¹¹⁰ He cautiously adds that the overall small number of available texts does not warrant conclusive statistics, yet the extant data indicates that by the end of the monarchy Yahweh had established quite an exclusive position in theophoric name giving. Beaulieu rightly asks whether our extant sources provide an overall sample of the population of Judah or only of certain social classes. Here he quotes Edelman, who remarks that “the preponderance of the use of Yahweh as the theophoric element to date merely indicates that the worship of Yahweh was particularly strong among the upper class of the state at the end of the monarchy”.¹¹¹ The individuals with theophoric names appearing in 7th- and early 6th-century B.C.E. inscriptions tend to be associated

¹⁰⁸ See Beaulieu 2011: 248; see also Zevit 2001a: 586; Penchansky 2005: 85.

¹⁰⁹ See Beit-Arieh 2007a.

¹¹⁰ Beaulieu 2011: 248.

¹¹¹ Edelman 1996: 19; see Beaulieu 2011: 249.

with the military, the civil administration, or with the cult, which are “the spheres of influence especially considered the domain of the head of a national pantheon”.¹¹²

The legible PNN appearing in the 21 Lachish ostraca under study are the following:

Ostraca	Names	Ostraca	Names
Lachish 1.1	<i>gmryhw</i>	Lachish 3.19	<i>tbyhw</i>
Lachish 1.1	<i>hšlyhw</i>	Lachish 3.20	<i>šlm</i>
Lachish 1.2; 1.3	<i>y'znyhw</i>	Lachish 3.20	<i>yd'</i>
Lachish 1.2	<i>tbšlm</i>	Lachish 4.6; 11.4; 13.2?	<i>smkyhw</i>
Lachish 1.3	<i>hgb</i>	Lachish 4.6; 19.4	<i>šm'yhw</i>
Lachish 1.4	<i>mbt'hyhw</i>	Lachish 5.10	<i>tbyhw</i>
Lachish 1.4	<i>yrm'hw</i>	Lachish 9.7	<i>š[l]myhw</i>
Lachish 1.5	<i>mtnyhw</i>	Lachish 11.2	<i>'ltn</i>
Lachish 1.5	<i>nryhw</i>	Lachish 11.3	<i>mkyhw</i>
Lachish 2.1; 3.2; 6.1	<i>y'wš</i>	Lachish 11.5	<i>šdq...</i>
Lachish 3.1	<i>hwš'yhw</i>	Lachish 19.1	<i>bn . 'zr .</i>
Lachish 3.15	<i>kny[hw]</i>	Lachish 19.2	<i>pqh</i>
Lachish 3.15	<i>'ltn</i>	Lachish 19.3	<i>mbl</i>
Lachish 3.17	<i>hwdwyhw</i>	Lachish 19.5	<i>ybš ...</i>
Lachish 3.17	<i>'hyhw</i>	Lachish 20.2	<i>hkly[hw?]</i>

Table 4.4 PNN appearing in the 21 Lachish ostraca.

The above names feature in both long texts and PNN lists, of course. Name lists are a significant genre in Hebrew epigraphy, notably on ostraca, and are fairly common in sites with military and administrative contexts, such as Tell ed-Duweir, as well as Tel Arad and other Negev fortresses.

The extant lists of names from the corpus of “Lachish Letters” are ostraca 1, 11, and 19. The function of Lachish 1 and 11 remains unknown. Lachish 19 is different, as it also bears hieratic

¹¹² Edelman 1996: 19.

numerals yet no indication whatsoever to explain the numerals. An additional list was recovered at Lachish in 1966 (ostracon 22), with two undeciphered measuring symbols noticeable in lines 6 and 7), and the preposition *lamed* preceding all featured PNN. Ussishkin further recovered ownership labels (Lachish 26 and 28). More theophoric PNN with the suffix *-yhw* appear in these additional ostraca (see Catalogue B).

Name lists are also attested in Edomite and Ammonite contexts, and in Aramaic contexts from later periods (Elephantine).¹¹³ We seldom know who wrote name lists and for what purpose, yet it is not impossible that in some cases they represent some aspect of manpower administration, as argued for example by Mendel for the case of Ḥorvat ‘Uza.¹¹⁴ The latter fortress, which was active from the 7th to the early 6th centuries B.C.E., yielded military lists of soldiers and troops, with some inscriptions describing military ranks and units. Most of the ostraca, in fact, comprise fragmentary lists of PNN, some even bearing patronymics and/or hieratic numerals (see Ḥorvat ‘Uza 3, 6, 10, 12, 14, 18, 19, 21–24, 28, and 34).¹¹⁵ To name a few examples, Ḥorvat ‘Uza 10 (also known as the “Aḥiqam ostracon”) is a list of three men with their patronymics and town names, addressed to one Aḥiqam, the origin and purpose of which have been debated among scholars (see §5.3.4). Ḥorvat ‘Uza 19 gives a list of names under the heading *‘šrt* «Ten», possibly indicating a list of troops under the command of a chief officer of ten.¹¹⁶ In addition, ostraca 23 and 24 belong to the same jar and each comprises a hierarchical list of names, ranked

¹¹³ See Mendel 2011: 63 and references there.

¹¹⁴ Mendel 2011.

¹¹⁵ See Beit-Arieh 2007a; Aḥituv 2008: 166–173.

¹¹⁶ See Beit-Arieh 2007a: 152–156; Aḥituv 2008: 177–179.

by ordinal numbers: first, second, third, and fourth. Ostrakon 24 is identical both in structure and content to 23, with the only difference being in the names listed.¹¹⁷

The fortress of Tel Arad also yielded contemporary lists of names, among them ostraca 31, 38, and 39.¹¹⁸ Arad 31 (the “Wheat ostrakon”) stands out from the rest: it is a list of grain issues to people, and gives the type of item delivered at the start of the inscription, as well as *ephah* measures and numerical signs, and a final total at the end.

Other PNN lists from the Negev, dating to the second half of the 7th century B.C.E., include two Edomite lists from Tel Malḥata (ostraca 1 and 2),¹¹⁹ two Hebrew lists from Tel Masos (ostraca 1 and 3),¹²⁰ and a Hebrew roll call from Tel ‘Ira (ostrakon 1).¹²¹

4.8 Concluding remarks

To this day, the literacy and “scribal curriculum” of ancient Israel and Judah remains a debated issue. Nevertheless, the various corpora of handwritten ostraca attest to the dissemination of knowledge of writing beyond the capital, and well into Northern Israel, the Shephelah, the western coast, and southwards in the Negev. The “Lachish Letters” bear witness to an advanced system of cursive Palaeo-Hebrew script, and of grammatical and syntactical features employed among the military faction of Judah, on the eve of the exile. Many authors were certainly responsible for the various types of legible ostraca in our extant corpus, as gleaned from the

¹¹⁷ See Beit-Arieh 2007a: 159–168; Aḥituv 2008: 168–173.

¹¹⁸ For Arad 31 (the “Wheat” ostrakon) see Aharoni 1970: 32–38; Aḥituv 2008: 135–137; for Arad 38 and 39 see Aharoni 1981: 67–69; Aḥituv 2008: 139–141.

¹¹⁹ Beit-Arieh 2015b: 487–490.

¹²⁰ Fritz 1983: 134–137; Aḥituv 2008: 164–165.

¹²¹ Beit-Arieh 1999: 402–405; Aḥituv 2008: 179–180.

different handwriting and nuances in the cursive Palaeo-Hebrew script itself. The scribes responsible for the epistolary inscriptions made use of elaborate blessing and deferential formulae, so far only known from the Lachish corpus as far as the extant Palaeo-Hebrew epigraphic evidence is concerned. The function of the so-called “guardroom” remains debatable, but it apparently held an archive of assorted records. There was also a preference for Yahwistic elements in PNN by the late 7th and early 6th centuries B.C.E.

REAPPRAISALS

5. The “Lachish Letters” in Context: Archaeological and Epigraphic Reassessments

In order to understand the “Lachish Letters” from an archaeological and a philological point of view, it is time to discuss their contextual and historical framework by carefully reconsidering the various hypotheses regarding the true nature of the ceramic sherds and the inscriptions they bear. The analysis below outlines unsettled issues about the excavation and documentation of the “Lachish Letters”, and devotes special attention towards the concept of “archaeological context”, which essentially is the most precious datum when it comes to excavated artefacts. The examination proceeds with a discussion of the first edition of the ostraca, including certain outdated readings that require revision.

5.1 Archaeological lacunae: Starkey’s excavation method, and the insufficient data of the British reports

Starkey’s method of excavation and reports are summarised best by Ussishkin:

The few notes Starkey left behind include no discussion of the dig’s strategy and methodology, and even the excavation reports published after his death only allude to these matters. There seems to have been no general excavation plan at the outset but rather certain principles that guided the work...The excavation method and interpretation of data was “horizontal”; almost no use was made of the “vertical” dimension – excavated sections – to understand the stratigraphic relationship of the

remains. Attention was obviously not devoted to details or nuances that arose from the excavation.¹

The main aim of the Wellcome-Marston expedition was to excavate the mound in its entirety (§1.2.1). The team's efforts were distributed over the entire mound and surrounding area, thoroughly and methodically, and emphasis was placed on excavating horizontally, while neglecting the detailed recording of findings.² The excavators' approach to the remains of the mound was by strata, and each stratum, by locus (i.e. by defined areas, as in the case of each individual tomb, which was given its own locus).³ This approach resulted in the removal of structures in the upper strata to dig below them (e.g. the removal of the Persian-era Residency to study the underlying Judaeon Palace-Fort, and the removal of each of the three stages of the Fosse Temple to eventually reach bedrock).⁴ Moreover, the six years of excavation were carried out on a large scale by hundreds of inexpensive labourers and an abundance of funding, which led to the desired extensive excavation, but also made room for improper planning and errors.⁵ One classic example is the misinterpretation of the stone piles covering the slope in the south-western corner of the mound as fallen Level III fortification debris, which in later decades turned out to be part of the Assyrian siege ramp (§§1.6.1 and 3.1.19).

Another example of improper planning was having the labourers dump excavated pottery sherds and vessels into heaps in a certain place, to which certain photographs are testimony.⁶ Ussishkin explains that “presumably it was at these heaps that Olga Tufnell classified and recorded the

¹ Ussishkin 2014a: 38.

² Ussishkin 2014a: 47.

³ Ussishkin 2014a: 44.

⁴ Ussishkin 2014a: 38–39.

⁵ Ussishkin 2014a: 43.

⁶ See Ussishkin 2014a: 44–45, fig. 2:16.

finds, and only those artefacts or sherds to be kept were brought back to the expedition camp”.⁷ This is particularly relevant and worrisome when it comes to the “guardroom” ostraca and the other hundreds of pottery fragments unearthed within. There is a high chance that any ceramic fragments recovered from the “guardroom” were dumped into piles outside, irrespective of whichever layer or stratum they were found in, and later perhaps selected and carried back to the camp.

Moreover, Starkey remarked how the team immediately started sieving dumped soil gathered from the Persian roadway (overlying the Level II courtyard) soon after the discovery of the “Lachish Letters”, in the hopes of finding any other ostraca they could have missed prior to the aforesaid discovery.⁸ The problem lies precisely with sieving the dump heap: although it is laudable that the team painstakingly went through the sieving process to collect any missed ostraca, it is nevertheless irreversible that, once dumped material is mixed together, the context of that excavated material is lost forever. Therefore, whatever artefacts were recovered during the sieving process of the dump heap (such as the fragmentary ostrakon Lachish 17 [§1.5]), very little can be said about such artefacts without their contexts. Furthermore, the Level I Persian roadway and the Level II gateway area below form quite an extensive area consisting of multiple loci and strata, and thus one can never know the original archaeological context of the recovered items (through sieving), such as Lachish 17. Given the excavation method, this argument also stands for the case of the other “guardroom” ostraca, with their relatively fixed archaeological context: regardless of the excavators’ description of the ostraca’s findspot at the upper zone of the

⁷ Ussishkin 2014a: 45.

⁸ *Lachish I*: 12–13.

ash deposit, the fact that the team did not bother with detailed stratigraphic nuances and recording remains irreversibly problematic.

Equally laconic is the actual transmission of the data, i.e. published and unpublished reports, photographs, plans, sections, or lack thereof. This is particularly evident in the case of the documentation for the “Lachish Letters”. Despite the scrupulous layout and presentation of the data in the British reports (*Lachish I* and *Lachish III*), as commended by Ussishkin,⁹ they nonetheless provide insufficient recording in terms of the stratigraphy of the “guardroom”, the findspots of the 16 ostraca discovered within, and the findspots of ostraca 19, 20, and 21. Much attention and care was given to the palaeographic and philological study of the ostraca, both in written and drawn form, with due admiration and appreciation. Nevertheless, the much needed archaeological documentation of the ostraca’s respective discoveries and stratigraphic contexts was not given its due importance. Only vague descriptions and preliminary notes appeared in the PEQ during the 1930s, in various newspapers of the time, and eventually in the final reports. Merely a handful of photographs of the “guardroom” exist, most of which were taken from afar and at an angle (almost always from north-west and facing south-east). These do not tell us much about the stratigraphic layout and any architectural features of the “guardroom”. Furthermore, any sections or plans that would furnish us with further visual aid for the stratigraphy of the room and the other findspots are virtually absent. This is explainable by the fact that the British excavation was “horizontal”, as cited above, and thus little attempt was made at an understanding of the relationship of the ostraca with their surroundings, and of the “vertical” dimension. At the time, the ostraca understandably were an exciting discovery, which made the Lachish expedition all the more popular. Different first impressions and hypotheses were put forward by

⁹ *Renewed Excavations*, I: 30.

archaeologists, philologists, and biblical scholars alike, but the question of how the ostraca came to be and why they ended up in their individual findspots threw scholars in a vicious cycle of debates, which are still ongoing. It is also understandable that the discoveries and relevant publications were made in a time when archaeology was still growing as a science, and documentation practices were not as thorough as today's. Moreover Starkey's tragic demise together with the outbreak of war led to the eventual termination of the British excavations at the site.

Archaeology is a destructive science, and the excavators' task is to thoroughly and methodically record every minute detail and nuance, both textually and visually, in an objective and systematic manner. This approach not only achieves a sound analysis and interpretation of the site and finds, but also preserves what has been extracted or destroyed for posterity. For this reason, in order to fill in any blanks presented in the archaeology of the Lachish ostraca, the present research necessitated a closer look at unpublished material, including the typed reports, the IAA online archive, correspondence, articles, news, and notes that appeared in the press following the discoveries, and Tufnell's personal letters (the Olga Tufnell Archive, PEF, London), which were accessible to me at the time of writing.

To summarise, despite all the evident problems in the excavation method and transmission thereof, the British expedition is to be commended, considering the period in which it was carried out. As Ussishkin remarks, the excavation was "indubitably excellent", since "Starkey chose a good and loyal team", who made sure to organize the expedition and excavation work and to

register the main finds to the best of their abilities for their time.¹⁰ With the exception of the Assyrian siege ramp, Starkey and his colleagues understood well and correctly interpreted all the finds, and their conclusions were reaffirmed during the renewed excavations.¹¹

5.2 Lingering issues on the nature and origin of the ostraca

The source of the ostraca is a pivotal issue in my overall discussion, as it is essential for our perception of the inscriptions and what they actually stood for. Much ink has been spilt on the controversial source of the “Lachish Letters” – the place where they were composed, the reason why they were written, and the identities and stations of the sender/s and addressee/s.

5.2.1 Ceramic and imaging tests

One drawback among others about the origin of the Lachish ostraca, or at least that of the clay used for the original vessels before they were broken and used as writing surfaces, is that no ceramic petrography was ever performed on the sherds. This has been confirmed to me by both the Israeli and British museums.¹² On the one hand, the lack of such experiments is understandable, given that ceramic petrography is a destructive procedure that would require the sampling of chips or flakes of the sherds to examine them under the microscope. In addition, the test itself would only determine the place of origin of the clay used for the original vessels, since the procedure cannot determine the place of manufacture of the vessels, least of all the place where the ostraca were written. In the discovery’s aftermath, the ostraca were taken to London

¹⁰ Ussishkin 2014a: 47.

¹¹ Ussishkin 2014a: 47–48.

¹² Eran Arie (Israel Museum), email sent to A. Zammit, dated 9 March 2014; Rupert L. Chapman III (British Museum), email sent to A. Zammit, dated 21 March 2014.

for ink composition tests (§2.2) and various photographic experiments.¹³ Today, the British Museum Conservation Department prohibits any further experiments on their Lachish ostraca collection, in order to safeguard the fragile sherds and their fugitive ink.¹⁴

5.2.2 The problematic Type 498 holemouth storage jar

Following the discovery of the 16 “guardroom” ostraca in 1935, it was realised that five of them (2, 6, 7, 8, 18) belonged to the same ceramic vessel, a holemouth storage jar of Type 498, as classified by Tufnell (Figs 20–21). In describing the jar Tufnell wrote:

Type 498 is of special importance as five of the Lachish ostraca...were written on its fragments. The jar was among more than a score of broken vessels found in the guardroom; their rim showed some variety, and it was not clear whether, like Type 498, they all had handles.¹⁵

In describing the “guardroom” (E.18:C) Tufnell remarked the following:

...there was little variety in form among the hundreds of blackened jar fragments piled close to the east wall of the guardroom. It was impossible to estimate the number of jars of Type 498 which were originally present. It is not clear why several ostraca were written on parts of the same jar.¹⁶

Tufnell could not estimate the number of Type 498 jars, yet she clearly listed *one* definite vessel of Type 498 (quantity = 1) which originates from the “guardroom”, most probably because the other pottery sherds recovered from the “guardroom” were too fragmentary or blackened by fire

¹³ First on Ilford panchromatic plates with a red filter, and later with half-tone panchromatic plates with a tri-colour red filter, as well as infra-red and ultra-violet light tests (Starkey 1938: 14).

¹⁴ Multi-spectral imaging (MSI) was carried out on the Lachish ostraca “a few years ago...by a team from Brigham Young University, but the results were completely unsatisfactory and failed to produce any improvement on the original glass plate images” (Jonathan N. Tubb [British Museum], email sent to A. Zammit, dated 17 January 2014). For further information on modern-day MSI experiments on ostraca see Faigenbaum et al. 2012; Faigenbaum et al. 2015; Sober et al. 2014; Faigenbaum-Golovin et al. 2015.

¹⁵ *Lachish III*: 316.

¹⁶ *Lachish III*: 129.

to reconstruct or associate with any specific vessel shape.¹⁷ Type 498 was grouped as Tufnell's Class S.8 of ceramic vessels at Lachish, which comprises storage jars with two handles and a round base.¹⁸ From the extant pottery recovered at Tell ed-Duweir, Tufnell reported that Class S.8 was predominant in the Level II "guardroom", but Type 498 itself was found only in the "guardroom".

Tufnell's views on the "Lachish Letters" were as follows. Since five of the ostraca were written on fragments from the same jar, then either the ostraca were sent to Lachish from the same source, or they were file copies, inscribed *in situ*, of correspondence received from or forwarded to another destination.¹⁹ Tufnell's dual hypothesis is sound, because either interpretation is possible, given the extant data. There are, however, important issues to address.

The main issue is that Tufnell's reconstruction of the Type 498 jar's shape is questionable! If the abovementioned five ostraca are said to solely make up the Type 498 vessel, with the ostraca virtually being shoulder, body, and base sherds (as explained below), then how did Tufnell reconstruct the folded rim and two handles of the jar, as shown in her drawing (Fig. 20)? Are the latter diagnostic pieces stored in the British Museum (or anywhere else)?²⁰ Unfortunately, the published reports shed no further light on the rest of the sherds that led to the jar's reconstruction, identification, and eventual classification, nor did the British or Israeli archives, for that matter.

¹⁷ *Lachish I*: 220; *Lachish III*, pl. 96.498.

¹⁸ *Lachish III*: 316.

¹⁹ *Lachish III*: 129.

²⁰ Diagnostic ceramic sherds comprise rims, handles, bases, and decorated body sherds. They are the most useful sherds in identifying the style of the original vessel. Non-diagnostic ceramic sherds consist of plain (undecorated) body sherds without any distinguishing features whatsoever.

Regrettably, no data that would contribute to the pottery issue turned up in the catalogued material of the Olga Tufnell Archive at the PEF or the typed report copies at the British Museum.

It is possible that any elusive extra pottery fragments of Type 498 ended up catalogued or stored in the British Museum. Surprisingly, in the guide to the British Museum's Lachish collection, Magrill lists only one other sherd as a holemouth storage jar fragment of Type 498 (item no. BM1980,1214.7941, hereafter referred to as sherd 7941), under the heading "Iron Age Pottery" for E.18:C (see also Tables 5.1 and 5.2 below).²¹ If there are indeed any other extant sherds of Type 498, it is likely that they are non-diagnostic pieces that Tufnell left uncatalogued for obvious reasons. Prior to the physical examination of sherd 7941 (of Type 498), my first suspicion was that, if this sherd happened to belong to the five-ostraca vessel, then it would have meant that at least one extant non-inscribed sherd of the same (broken) vessel was not used as a writing surface. This detail would have implied that the Type 498 vessel was broken *in situ* at Lachish/Tell ed-Duweir and a scribe (or scribes) used its sherds as writing surfaces.

Since there is no further detail on sherd 7941 in any of the excavation reports or Magrill's catalogue, the ceramic piece was traced in the British Museum online catalogue, and it turned out to be merely a rim/side piece, with no indications whatsoever of the presence of handles.²² The sherd measures 18.5cm (preserved) by 17.4cm (preserved), and is 0.5cm thick. It is a wheel-

²¹ Magrill 2006: 91.

²² British Museum Collection Database "BM1980,1214.7941" <www.britishmuseum.org/collection>, last accessed on 25 October 2014. I thank Sarah Collins for her assistance in tracing the sherd.

made “rim/side fragment of pottery holemouth storage jar” of Type 498, having pink fabric with grits. The sherd bears incrustation and discolouration.²³

Given that there was no accompanying image on the online catalogue, the above vague description warranted a first-hand examination of the sherd at the British Museum, in order to verify whether the rim/side fragment was the missing diagnostic piece on the basis of which the five-ostraca vessel (Type 498) was reconstructed. Unfortunately, the physical examination disproved this idea, since the fabric of the pottery is totally different from that of the five ostraca.²⁴ The latter have a rough red paste with crushed limestone, and a greenish buff/white slip on most of the vessel’s exterior and a reddish exterior towards the base (see the surfaces of Lachish 7 and 8) (Figs 20, 40, and 42), with the section (or profile) black on the outside and red on the inside. Sherd 7941, on the other hand, has a pink fabric all throughout with grits, and severe incrustation on both the outer and inner surfaces (Figs 70–71). Moreover, on the inner surface of this sherd are three written pieces of information:

1. in black Indian ink and directly on the surface of the pottery is written, in three registers:
D/F 18 C/Ostraca Room;
2. on another part is more writing in black Indian ink, on a layer of Paraloid resin onto the pottery surface, in three registers: **1980/12 - 14/7941;**
3. above the first writing in Indian ink is some rather untidy writing in large letters in blue coloured pencil or crayon: **LIII:542**, with 542 crossed out and **498** written below it.

The above details raise further questions:

²³ It was treated (via dry surface cleaning with sponges, soft brushes and a museum vacuum cleaner) on 2 July 2008 to remove the heavy layer of museum dust and dirt that resulted from long-time storage.

²⁴ The term “fabric” is used to describe the clay and inclusions of a vessel, synonymous with body and paste (Gibson and Woods 1997: 152).

- Ink label #1 must have been written during or in the aftermath of the Mandate period excavations, given the erroneous grid coordination of F.18:C (*Lachish I*), since the latter was later corrected by Tufnell as E.18:C (*Lachish III*).
- Ink label #2 was likely written in the given year, i.e. 1980 (or afterwards), during the cataloguing of the Lachish material housed at the British Museum. The 1980,1214 designation serves to indicate the item was purchased in 1980 by the British Museum from the Institute of Archaeology (London), as explained by Magrill.²⁵ It is therefore unlikely that this label was written prior to the 1980 transfer, when the sherd was still housed in the aforesaid Institute, given that it is the British Museum's numbering system.
- The writing in blue remains problematic. Given the label LIII:542 corrected into LIII:498, I conclude that the LIII designation refers to the *Lachish III* report (published in 1953), in which Tufnell presents the pottery retrieved from the "guardroom" (E.18:C). This then indicates that the manuscript of *Lachish III* was already in press, or else the report itself was already published. Whoever was responsible for this blue writing and apparent immediate correction of the pottery type remains debated, yet there is a high chance that it was Tufnell herself, while processing the finds either at the time of excavation or after the termination of the expedition in 1938, whilst she was preparing the publication of the British reports.
- I agree that sherd 7941 is definitely not Tufnell's Type 542, as rightly corrected on the sherd. Plate 97 of *Lachish III* shows that Type 542 has a totally different rim profile from that of sherd 7941 (cf. Figs 19 and 71). The problem lies with the correction on the sherd into Type 498. The *only* specimen of Type 498 jar published and listed by Tufnell is the

²⁵ Magrill 2006: xi.

one to which Lachish 2, 6, 7, 8, and 18 belong, yet she remarks of an indefinite number of Type 498 vessels, given the multiple body/non-diagnostic sherds (quoted above).²⁶ Still, my question stands: if sherd 7941 is truly a Type 498 piece, why then did Tufnell not list *two* definite specimens of the Type 498 vessel in her Table 96 instead of *one*? At least, the fabric of sherd 7941 and that of the five ostraca are totally different from each other, which results in the remains of two extant jars of Type 498 as far as the available evidence can tell us. Of course, it would be reasonable to assume that other body fragments (of unknown or unclear type) might be stored in the British Museum, or in any of the other museums worldwide, which respectively hold a collection of Lachish finds.²⁷ It remains dubious whether such non-diagnostic sherds were processed or catalogued at all.

- The severe incrustation on sherd 7941 indicates that this ceramic piece had been lying in a damp area of the “guardroom”.²⁸ I point out that none of the Lachish ostraca bear any incrustation whatsoever. To my knowledge, none of the other “guardroom” ceramic sherds were ever described as bearing incrustation. All broken sherds are said to have been found blackened and retrieved from the ash deposit of the “guardroom”, and the inscriptions on the sherds that would later be called the “Lachish Letters” were discovered upon careful washing and inspection of the sherds at the camp.²⁹ I confirm that none of the 16 “guardroom” ostraca suffered such incrustation as that of sherd 7941. It remains debated which part of the “guardroom” was so damp that it would have such an adverse effect on sherd 7941, unless the supposed designation of **F 18 C/Ostraca Room** is

²⁶ *Lachish III*: 129, 130, pl. 96.

²⁷ See explanation in §1.2.1; see also Magrill 2006: ix–x.

²⁸ Rupert L. Chapman III (British Museum), personal communication, 2015.

²⁹ Starkey 1938: 13.

erroneous! Alternatively, the heavy earthen encrustation could indicate that sherd 7941 was closer to the surface.³⁰

To summarize, the purpose of tracking down sherd 7941 aimed at the following objectives:

*1) To find out how Tufnell reconstructed the shape of her
Type 498 holemouth storage jar*

This search did not yield the expected answers, but raised further questions left open for debate. Tufnell's restoration and drawing of the Type 498 vessel shape remains problematic, since none of the five ostraca (2, 6, 7, 8, 18), supposedly the only published pottery pieces to make up this vessel, creates a continuity of the complete profile of the jar. The fact that these five ostraca belonged to one and the same jar is without a doubt: while body fragments are usually near impossible to identify unless the fabric matches other diagnostic pieces that aid in the reconstruction of a vessel, the advantage the five ostraca common to the Type 498 vessel is that all bear matching rills on their inner sides (cf. Figs 25, 38, 40, 42, and 61).³¹ Indeed, the rills of Lachish 7 (once part of the rounded base of the vessel) are characteristically tapering and indicative of the base of a round vessel. Lachish 2, essentially a non-diagnostic sherd, has a slight carination at its very top, suggesting that the sherd formed part of the vessel's shoulder, and perhaps indicating where the rim's presumed inclination would have started).³² The other three ostraca (6, 8, 18) do not display any diagnostic features, yet they happen to join one on top of the other (from top to bottom: 6–18–8), and their rills are testimony to the fact that they formed part of the general body and height of the vessel. Other than these diagnostic features, there is no

³⁰ In a report entry about the excavations within the city gate (1–15 February 1936), Starkey remarked that any surface sherds that bore severe lime encrustation were given a weak acid bath (Typed Reports 1935–1936: 36).

³¹ Rills are the grooves and ridges that result from the potter's thumb marks during manufacture of wheel-thrown pottery.

³² A carination is a sharp change in direction or ridge in the profile of a pot, often forming a shoulder (Gibson and Woods 1997: 118–119).

extant full rim, no handle attachments, and no handles *per se* from the same vessel that would indicate how Tufnell reconstructed this particular shape. No other sherds of Tufnell's Type 498, or any ceramics bearing similarities to this particular vessel shape, have turned up in either of Aharoni's or Ussishkin's excavations at Tell ed-Duweir.³³ Comparisons of Type 498 with vessels from other sites have so far proved futile.³⁴

The only close examples of handle-less holemouth jars from Lachish are presented by Tufnell's Types 537, 540, and 541, but these three types, like other jar types, are only represented by extant rims (as stated by Tufnell, quoted above). There were no complete handle-less holemouth jars found at (Iron Age) Lachish but only complete storage jars with handles.³⁵ Given these problems, Lily Singer-Avitz communicated to me that this Type 498 jar is "indeed a peculiar vessel...[and]...as drawn is not common", so Tufnell's reconstruction remains "not clear".³⁶ Sherd 7941, if it indeed belongs to another Type 498 jar, would be the only extant rim/side fragment for this vessel type, or at least the only one catalogued for the British Museum, yet this sherd lacks handles or handle attachments. Hence, Tufnell's reconstruction of the jar's shape *with handles* remains questionable without any further evidence of any other existing Type 498 fragments, whichever museum they are held in.³⁷ See also Table 5.2 (§5.3.1) for unpublished

³³ We only have to await any developments of the sort from the Fourth Expedition to Lachish, which is in progress at the time of writing.

³⁴ At Lachish, although the handle-less holemouth jar is a known shape, it is not as common as at Ramat Raḥel, for example (Lily Singer-Avitz, email sent to A. Zammit, dated 1 August 2015).

³⁵ Lily Singer-Avitz, email sent to A. Zammit, dated 1 August 2015.

³⁶ Lily Singer-Avitz, emails sent to A. Zammit, dated 30 April 2015 and 9 June 2015 respectively.

³⁷ I checked with the staff of the Ashmolean Museum (Oxford), one of the museums that holds a small Lachish collection, and they confirmed to me that they do not hold any Iron Age pottery of the sort (I thank Paul Collins for his assistance on the matter). At the time of writing it was not possible to double-check with all the other worldwide museums that hold Lachish collections (listed in §1.2.1). I could only confirm the presence of Lachish Iron Age II pottery at the Weingreen Museum of Biblical Antiquities (Trinity College Dublin), for which I thank Zuleika Rodgers. Furthermore, I was only able to search the respective online collections of a few museums in England, New York, and Australia (see relevant weblinks in the Bibliography), but time constraints did not permit a thorough search for Lachish Iron Age II pottery that would contribute further to the Type 498 issue and related matters.

Iron Age holemouth storage jar fragments catalogued by Magrill, which are likely non-diagnostic (body) pieces. As it was not possible to check these unpublished sherds at the time of writing, I can only wonder whether any of these sherds would turn out to belong to Tufnell's Type 498 vessel shape!

2) *To find possible explanations on the source of Lachish 2, 6, 7, 8, and 18*

The case of the Type 498 jar carries a certain weight in the argument, since the source and function of the five “guardroom” ostraca that belong to this jar type (2, 6, 7, 8, 18) are significant for our understanding of these inscriptions and what they stood for. Physical examination of sherd 7941 (of Type 498) served to confirm whether this non-inscribed (blank) piece belonged to the five-ostraca vessel. If true, then the vessel in question was broken *in situ* at Lachish/Tell ed-Duweir, and a scribe (or scribes) used its sherds as writing surfaces, five of which have survived. These five ostraca would thus turn out to be not incoming documents but compositions *in situ*, whatever the purpose.³⁸ This is because it would not make sense to have the otherwise implied sender of these five ostraca send other non-written parts (e.g. sherd 7941) of the Type 498 jar to Lachish. Unfortunately, these suspicions were unfounded. Sherd 7941 turned out to belong to a totally different vessel albeit supposedly of the same type (498), with its striking difference in ceramic fabric and severe surface incrustation.

³⁸ To date, the only known case of other ostraca belonging to one jar is that of Ḥorvat ‘Uza 23 and 24, but the scenario is different (Beit-Arieh 2007a: 159–168). These inscriptions are respectively written on two large fragments of the same jar, and were found in a room together with five other fragments of the jar. Each inscription comprises a hierarchical list of names, ranked by ordinal numbers, thought to be stereotypical announcements, rather than letters addressed to a specific individual or other types of document, since both inscriptions were written on an intact jar, not on fragments. Beit-Arieh (2007a: 167) remarked that this is the only known example of Hebrew inscriptions of this type and the only example of such inscriptions to be written on an intact jar. It is argued that the jar was placed in the corner of the room where it was found (Room 927), but the function of both inscriptions is disputed between notice boards, duty rosters, enlisted military officials, or lists of recipients of commodities.

In conclusion, the questionable Type 498 holemouth storage jar (which up until now was thought to be represented at Lachish by at least one evident specimen and not two) has always been deemed by scholars a linch pin to the entire question about the source of the ostraca. The fact that five of them are common to one vessel led scholars to question the how and why of this scenario, and whether the five ostraca were incoming documents or compositions *in situ*. No sound conclusions can be reached on the source of the five ostraca and the Type 498 jar they supposedly formed part of (see §§5.10 and 5.11). Central to this issue is the fact that Tufnell's reconstruction of the rest of the profile (rim and two handles) of Type 498 remains questionable, and we seem to lack records for any other (published) sherds pertaining to this particular and rare vessel shape. No further detail of the sort came up in my research of the different archives and Magrill's catalogue. Unfortunately, with the above reconsiderations and outcomes, the extant evidence, as it stands, does not provide solutions, but only open questions to ponder on.

5.2.3 Inscribed and non-inscribed repaired ceramic sherds

During close-up examinations of the British Museum ostraca, I noticed that a few of them consist of inscribed and non-inscribed sherds that were joined during post-excavation through modern repair. It is possible that, prior to such modern repair, the non-inscribed (blank) pieces were not part of the original ostraca that the scribes composed.³⁹

The ostraca that possibly include such extra fragments are Lachish 11 and 15. Lachish 11 is a PNN list written on what seems to be a fragmentary ostrakon that is composed of two extant repaired sherds (one at the top with writing on it, and one at the bottom left with no trace of ink

³⁹ It is certain that none of these repairs I am referring to happened back in antiquity, since we do have evidence of such ancient repairs and how they look. Tufnell's report states that ancient cracks on the storage-jar label Lachish 20 were "repaired by lime daubs" (*Lachish III*, pl. 96.495).

but possible stains), with a further piece missing from the bottom right (Figs 48–49). After examining the sherd under the lens and double-checking with archive photographs of the ostrakon, I have considered the possibility that only the top sherd was the original ostrakon which the scribe made use of, while the bottom extant sherd and the missing one would have been extra detached pieces of pottery left unused and lying on site. Of course, this suspicion could be proven otherwise, since a further piece is missing from the bottom right, where one would expect the continuation, if any, of written text that starts on the top sherd. Then again, I noticed that there is a fairly wide space below the last trace of ink on the top sherd (perhaps the last line of writing that is today faded), which might indicate that the PNN list stopped precisely at this point (§3.1.11). If this hypothesis is correct, then I am left to consider what I said in my second point about the source of the ostraca in §5.2.2. The presence of non-inscribed (blank) sherds joined to extant inscribed sherds by modern repair (such as Lachish 11) suggests that the original vessel was broken on site, and a piece was selected for writing on. Archaeologists would later find a joining piece from the original vessel and attach it to the inscribed piece. This would mean that an ostrakon such as Lachish 11 would have been composed on site.

The same hypothesis applies to Lachish 15. This ostrakon, the largest of the lot, is made up of a large ceramic sherd and three smaller sherds attached to the bottom right, unlike its upside down publication and interpretation in the *editio princeps*(!) (§3.1.15). The ostrakon has been deemed illegible by all scholars, and has never been published as a drawing by anyone throughout the years. Torczyner only recognised a few letters on the smaller sherds, which according to him form words on the top left (in actuality, words that should be read on the bottom right), but he could not make out anything else, and so left it at that. By viewing the IAA photograph of the

legible part of Lachish 15, I did identify some letters, which I reproduce in my hand copy, but I cannot make out sensible words (Figs 56–57). Upon close examination of the actual ostrakon, I noticed that today the writing has faded beyond recognition. The fact that the large ceramic sherd does not seem to bear any traces of writing whatsoever, yet only the three smaller repaired sherds do, might indicate that the larger sherd never bore writing to begin with. This would imply that the corresponding vessel was broken *in situ*, and a scribe used a small piece of the broken vessel to write upon (i.e. the three repaired sherds at the bottom right). Moreover, the sheer size of the large sherd (20 by 17.3cm) may not have made it impractical as a written document if it truly were inscribed and kept in one place (perhaps an archive), but it surely would have been cumbersome to carry around (by messengers and the like) and prone to breakage.

The only cautious reservation I would pose on the above observations is that I examined the ostraca in the light and under the lens with the naked eye, and compared my observations to the best available photographs taken at the time of discovery. Moreover, the ink today is fading or badly washed out on the legible ostraca, let alone on the barely legible ones! Therefore, the element of subjectivity is still present. If the above observations would be proven correct, however, then they would imply that some of the extant ostraca might have been written *in situ* at Tell ed-Duweir. A similar theory was indeed proposed during the 1980s, albeit with different arguments, which generated greater debate.

5.2.4 Letters, copies, or drafts?: Yadin’s revolutionizing theory

In 1984, Yigael Yadin proposed a revolutionizing theory on the origin and nature of the “Lachish Letters”, mostly based on philological grounds, but also on the fact that five ostraca are common

to one vessel.⁴⁰ Yadin challenged the general view that the “letters” were sent from some military outpost/s in the Shephelah to Lachish, addressed to one Yā’ûš, who supposedly held high military office at Lachish/Tell ed-Duweir. Instead, he argued that the ostraca were not the actual letters, but copies, or rather drafts of letters written on papyrus that were to be sent *from* and *not to* Lachish.⁴¹ Yadin’s arguments were, however, ably challenged by Rainey and Emerton, especially on philological grounds.⁴²

Yadin’s thesis revolves around Torczyner’s comment that papyrus was the usual material used for important (or official) documents, while ostraca were simply a cheap substitute for papyrus. Furthermore, there was the danger of sending a message on an ostrakon (such as the supposed highly confidential information in Lachish 3).⁴³ Emerton deemed this idea an exaggeration, since the messenger, if literate, could have read the contents of the message he was carrying, and if the Babylonians intercepted the messenger, then it would have made no difference whether the message was written on papyrus or an ostrakon.⁴⁴ Yadin based his proposal on the following points that he raised:⁴⁵

(a) five of the ostraca originate from a single jar: this factor indicates that the five ostraca “were prepared within a short span of time, one being written soon after the other, and certainly all of them were written at the same place”;⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Yadin 1984.

⁴¹ Yadin 1984: 180, 184. Borowski (1986: 77) calls Yadin’s theory “both imaginative and attractive” and remarks that “it stands on solid ground”, while Halpern (1992: 84) calls it “a persuasive case”. Lindenberger (2003: 116–118, esp. p. 117, nos. 61–67) lists the assumptions made by Yadin and the resulting unresolved issues, but still argues in terms of having a single author of the epistolary inscriptions and a single recipient.

⁴² Rainey 1987; Emerton 2001.

⁴³ Tur-Sinai 1987: xxvi–xxvii; Yadin 1984: 180.

⁴⁴ Emerton 2001: 3.

⁴⁵ Yadin 1984: 180–181.

⁴⁶ Yadin 1984: 182.

(b) the sender is mentioned only in one ostrakon (Lachish 3), “and on a most important ostrakon [Lachish 4], not even the addressee is mentioned”;⁴⁷

(c) several ostraca deal with the same matter, often written in the same style and contain numerous repetitions – ostraca 2 and 6 have the same addressee; a common central theme of a defence in the face of accusation of indiscretion appears in ostraca 3, 6, and 12 (following Torczyner’s interpretation); and ostraca 3, 5, 6, and 18 mention letters being sent around, which makes them, or at least the latter three, almost duplicates of one another;⁴⁸

(d) the contents of ostrakon 4, including the phrase “the (fire-)signals of Lachish” (or, as Yadin phrases it, “the beacon of Lachish”) – Yadin revises the phrase *wyd’ ky ’l mś’t lkš nḥnw šmrm* (Lachish 4.10–11) as to mean “we are *tending* the beacon of Lachish” instead of “we are *looking toward* [or *watching for*] the beacon of Lachish” [both my italics], arguing that the preposition *’l* in the expression *lšmr ’l* is to be understood as *lšmr ’l*, since *’el* is sometimes used in the sense of *’al* in the Hebrew Bible. This statement, argued Yadin, supports the theory that the “Lachish Letters” are copies, or probably drafts, of letters that were to be sent from Lachish. Yadin argued against Torczyner’s translation of 2 Sam. 11:16, i.e. “while Joab was looking as if watching the besieged city”, and instead compares the RSV rendering: “And as Joab was besieging the city”, which, according to Yadin, makes *šāmar ’el* have the meaning of *šāmar ’al*, hence, “clearly *not* ‘looking toward’” [his italics].⁴⁹ Yadin further compared 1 Sam. 26:15 to sustain this argument: “And David said to Abner, ‘Are you not a man? Who is like you in Israel? Why then have you not *kept watch over* your lord the king? For one of the people came in to destroy the king your lord.’” (ESV).⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Yadin 1984: 181.

⁴⁸ Yadin 1984: 183–184.

⁴⁹ Yadin 1984: 181; see Tur-Sinai 1987: 117.

⁵⁰ Yadin 1984: 181.

The confusion of the two prepositions in the Hebrew Bible is without a doubt, and it arose through Aramaic influence over Hebrew, but Emerton remarked that one cannot be sure whether the date of this confusion was as early as the time of the Lachish ostraca.⁵¹ Moreover, Emerton pointed out Yadin's failure to cite Torczyner's two verses in support of his translation "watching...for" in the ostrakon, i.e. Ps. 59:10 ("for thee I am watching because God is my stronghold"), and Ps. 130:6, with the preposition *l-*, but still relevant to the discussion ("My soul is [waiting] for YHWH more than [sic for than] they that watch for the morning, [they that] watch for the morning").⁵² Emerton stated that the meaning "watch over" fails to fit either verse.⁵³ In addition, Rainey remarks that, in 2 Sam. 11:16, on which Yadin built his argument, Joab was carefully studying the defences of Rabbath-ammon from a distance; he was not protecting the city, but besieging it.⁵⁴ Therefore, the expression *šāmar 'el* cannot mean "watch over" or "tending" in this case. Rainey further suggests that in 1 Sam. 26:15–16, there is "a *play* on the two different constructions" ("Then, why did you not keep an eye on [*šāmar 'el*] your lord, the king?" [v. 15], and "you have not kept guard over [*šāmar 'al*] your lord" [v. 16]), which means that *šāmar 'el* cannot always mean to "watch over" in the Hebrew Bible.⁵⁵ Emerton concluded that Torczyner's interpretation ("watching...for") seems more likely, and that the author of ostrakon 4 and his men were not guarding or tending the beacon (or fire-signal) from those who would attack it or perhaps steal the combustible material, or that they were keeping it in good order, ready to light it when needed, as Yadin appears to suppose. Emerton asked, if the

⁵¹ Emerton 2001: 4.

⁵² *Lachish I*: 83–84.

⁵³ Emerton 2001: 4.

⁵⁴ Rainey 1987: 149.

⁵⁵ Note that the first verse should be 15 instead of 16, as cited in Rainey 1987: 150; cf. Emerton 2001: 5.

writer intended to say the latter, would he have expressed his meaning with the interchangeable expression *šāmar 'el = 'al?*⁵⁶

Despite Yadin's attractive theory, one needs to be cautious in building an entire argument on the source of the Lachish messages based on one ostrakon only. Although Lachish 4 may have been a linch pin for many scholars in trying to understand the function of the rest of the ostraca cache, one must keep in mind that the extant corpus is limited and fragmentary. For a discussion on the mention of *lkš* and other place names in Lachish 4, see §5.9.

5.2.5 Ussishkin's views on the "Lachish Letters"

From an archaeological standpoint, Ussishkin agrees with Tufnell and, to an extent, Yadin in terms of the Lachish ostraca being copies and not actual received letters.⁵⁷ Like Ussishkin, I refer to Tufnell's two citations quoted in §5.2.2 to illustrate the argument better.⁵⁸

In view of Tufnell's descriptions of the Type 498 vessel and the rest of the "guardroom" pottery, Ussishkin adds that the large amounts of broken pottery found on the floor of the guardroom were not restored and, given Tufnell's report, he lists the following concluding points (quoted *verbatim*):

- 1) Five of the ostraca were written on fragments of the same vessel;
- 2) This vessel was identified as a holemouth jar, defined as Type 498;
- 3) Many fragments belonging to "more than a score" of holemouth jars of Type 498 were found in the guardroom;
- 4) and most important, holemouth jars of Type 498 were found in Level II at Tel Lachish only in the guardroom (see *Lachish III*: caption to pl. 96:498).⁵⁹

⁵⁶ Emerton 2001: 5.

⁵⁷ *Renewed Excavations*, II: 522–523.

⁵⁸ *Lachish III*: 316, 129.

⁵⁹ *Renewed Excavations*, II: 522.

Against this background, Ussishkin considers the meaning of the ostraca, and argues that an explanatory scenario for an outside source for the ostraca, especially with regards to the five ostraca of the Type 498 jar, “would be very complicated” and “for all practical purposes impossible”, because if this were the case, then the letters’ recipient at Lachish was keeping Type 498 fragments in the only room at Tell ed-Duweir holding this type of jar (the “guardroom”):

A holemouth jar of Type 498 broke or was broken in a small fort in the region of Lachish. The fragments of the jar were used for writing letters which were then sent to Lachish. At Lachish the addressee kept or threw them in the only room in the entire settlement where holemouth jars of Type 498 were kept.⁶⁰

The better alternative, states Ussishkin, is that if the messages were “copies of letters” inscribed in the “guardroom”, then one can easily imagine a scenario explaining the data:

One of the more than a score of Type 498 holemouth jars kept in the guardroom broke, or was broken intentionally, and its fragments were used for writing the copies (as well as the letters sent from there).⁶¹

Ussishkin essentially agrees with Tufnell and Yadin. Given the extant ceramic data, Tufnell was in favour of the more logical scenario of the ostraca being “copies” of documents. This hypothesis, of course, tallies with Yadin’s theory, at least on an archaeological basis.

Given the archaeological data, as it stands, I understand that the argument proposed by both Tufnell and Ussishkin, and to an extent Yadin, has its merits. The reason is because it would be too much of a coincidence to have the supposed addressee of the “letters” keeping Type 498 sherds bearing inscriptions in the room where this jar type was stored. Unfortunately, one cannot

⁶⁰ *Renewed Excavations*, II: 522. On a related note, I should point out that, in his final excavation report, Ussishkin switches the identity of the sender of the “letters” (i.e. Hôša’yāhû, according to Torczyner’s interpretation) with that of the addressee (of at least three of the “letters”) (i.e. Yā’ûš). Therefore, in all four instances of his argument, Ussishkin meant to say Hôša’yāhû instead of Yā’ûš (see *Renewed Excavations*, II: 522–523). Nonetheless, in his recent popular book on Lachish, Ussishkin deals briefly but correctly with the above (Ussishkin 2014a: 381).

⁶¹ *Renewed Excavations*, II: 522.

say much with regard to the ceramic data in general, given what I discussed on Tufnell's problematic Type 498 jar in §5.2.2. The data, or at least the recording, archiving, and publication thereof, are too laconic if not confusing at times. My only comment on the statement that the "guardroom" was the only location at Tell ed-Duweir to hold Type 498 jars is as follows. Those jars may have been imported vessels kept at the "guardroom", one of the first rooms at the outer entrance to the fortress to any incoming visitor. The storage of any ceramic vessels at the "guardroom" could have been temporary, to be then moved elsewhere. It is possible that these jar types happened to be stored in the "guardroom" when the Babylonian army attacked the fortress.

As long as doubts surround Tufnell's reconstruction of her Type 498 jar, any argument revolving around the origin of the aforesaid jar and related ostraca remains hypothetical. Equally unsettled is the argument about whether the ostraca are actual received messages or compositions *in situ* (drafts or copies of outgoing messages, or any other document written on site). My analysis leads me to believe that, with what little evidence we have left, the cache from the "guardroom" is likely to comprise a mixed archive of documents (lists and epistolary ostraca, among others) with different origins: some may or may not have come from outside Tell ed-Duweir, while others may have been written *in situ* and thus never left Tell ed-Duweir (see §§5.3.4 and 5.10). The above considerations also make one question the true nature of the "guardroom".

5.3 The disputed nature of the "guardroom" (E.18:C)

The use of Room E.18:C, in the gateway area of Tell ed-Duweir, is debated. It could very well have been a guardroom, as the general label applied to it suggests, since the room was small,

walled on three sides, and flanking the outer gate, much like a sentry room (cf. §4.4). Furthermore, the plastered floor of the room merged with the road/courtyard outside, indicating that the room was open on the north, thus enabling the alleged guard to control the passage while under shelter (Figs 13–14). Cassuto even added the function of post-office to the possibilities.⁶² Nonetheless, as discussed in §4.4, the concept of a room for the city's guards is based on common sense and literature, rather than archaeological remains.⁶³ There is ample room for further suggestions, and I will discuss them below by listing the different features of the “guardroom” or lack thereof.

5.3.1 The pottery, the type of storage, and the supposed lack of a door

Firstly, given that hundreds of jar fragments were discovered inside E.18:C, and because there was a change in the colour of the Level II ash deposit from grey to black inside the room, owing to carbonised vegetable matter (§1.5.1), the room was likely used for storage of rations or foodstuffs. Tufnell listed 19 types of pottery vessel (see Table 5.1 below),⁶⁴ ten of which happen to be storage jars (nine of them of the holemouth type). Holemouth jars likely contained foodstuffs (such as grain and olives), and not liquids, given that the latter would be more likely and practically stored in storage jars with narrow necks and, possibly, stoppers).⁶⁵ Then again, if the room did indeed serve for storage, why would one store jars and any other objects inside a

⁶² Cassuto 1975: 236.

⁶³ Frese 2015: 78.

⁶⁴ *Lachish III*: 129, 329.

⁶⁵ Katz and Faust (2011: 175–176) distinguish between four main groups of storage vessels recovered in the Kingdom of Judah: storage jars, holemouth jars, holemouth storage jars, and pithoi. Storage jars (the commonest type, which includes the *mlk* jars) are characterized by handles that enable them to be lifted and carried around, and by a narrow neck that can be sealed, and they usually range in height from 50 to 60cm and in volume from 20 to 60 litres. Holemouth jars are small, handleless storage vessels with a cylindrical shape and a rounded base, and are about 30cm high and can hold between five and nine litres. Holemouth storage jars are characterized by a folded rim, a swollen body, and a low ringed base, with some having four handles and three ridges in the shoulder area. Pithoi are the largest of the four types, having elongated bodies and thicker sides, and can range in volume from 150 to 200 litres.

room that is practically open? No wall was built on the northern side of this room facing the courtyard, and the width of the doorway to the courtyard was the same as the width of this room.⁶⁶ The lack of a threshold additionally suggests an open room, although the possibility of some kind of wooden door or gate, or even a curtain cannot be ruled out. Even so, neither charred wood nor any (iron) nails were ever recovered inside the “guardroom” or in its whereabouts, in any excavation. It is possible, though unlikely, that doors, beams, wooden shelves and/or pegs may not have been incorporated in the building. It has been suggested that bricks could have been an alternative possibility for shelving.⁶⁷ Then again, since this room suffered greatly during the Babylonian attack and resulting conflagration, the likelihood that any wooden structures or features disintegrated during the fire, or ended up looted or reused elsewhere cannot be ruled out. Be that as it may, the fact that the ostraca were found along the east wall suggests the use of shelves, or else the ostraca were held in an open ceramic vessel, such as a bowl or another holemouth jar, which in turn could have been stored either on shelves or on the ground, along the east wall.

Table 5.1 below sums up the types of Iron Age vessel recovered from the “guardroom”. The characteristic pottery vessels of the strata belonging to Lachish Level II show striking similarities with assemblages from other sites in Judah, including Jerusalem’s City of David (particularly Stratum 10 of Area E, and Strata 10C and 10B of Area G); Ramat-Raḥel (Stratum 5a); Tell Beit-Mirsim (Stratum 3A); Tel Arad (Strata VII–VI); Tel ‘Ira (Stratum 6); En-Gedi (Tel Goren) (Stratum 5); and the late Iron II corpus at Gezer.⁶⁸ Tufnell also remarked that comparable forms

⁶⁶ Ussishkin 2014a: 373.

⁶⁷ Zimhoni (1990: 5) proposed this idea for storeroom 4014 (Lachish Level III).

⁶⁸ For a general discussion on comparable Lachish material see Zimhoni 1985; 1990; on the City of David see Shiloh 1984: 4, 14, 17–20, 28–29, figs. 24:1; 30:2; 34:2; on En-Gedi see Mazar, Dothan and Dunayevski 1966: 17–38, pls.

to her Class S.8 of vessel (storage jars with two handles and a round base) can be traced in the ceramic material from Tell en-Naşbeh and Megiddo (Strata IV–I), but none like her specific shape for Type 498(!) (see analysis in §5.2.2).⁶⁹

Vessel	Class	Type	Quantity	Comments
bowl (B)	13	79	1	
lamp (L)	9–10	153	1	
jug (J)	8	274	1	
holemouth storage jar (S)	8	498	2* (Tufnell wrote 1)	five ostraca (Lachish 2, 6, 7, 8, 18) belong to one of the jars, whereas sherd 7941 belongs to another jar
storage jar (S)	2	509	1	
holemouth jar (S)	8	537	2	
holemouth jar (S)	8	538	1	
holemouth jar (S)	8	539	1	
holemouth jar (S)	8	541	1	
holemouth jar (S)	8	542	1	
holemouth jar (S)	8	543	1	
holemouth jar (S)	8	544	1	
holemouth jar (S)	9	547	1	
bowl (B)	1	606	1	burnished
bowl (B)	13	635	1	
bowl (B)	13	639	1	
jug (J)	7b	666	1	
cooking pot (CP)	-	691	1	

Table 5.1 Iron Age pottery vessel types from the “guardroom” (E.18:C) (held at the British Museum), following Tufnell’s classification (1953: 129, 329), except for my corrections for Type 498 marked with an *.

The fact that so many storage vessels (or fragments thereof) were recovered indicates the density of storage created by all the pottery inside the “guardroom” (Fig. 19). It is likely that storage vessels were stacked close to the east wall of the room (perhaps stacked in such a way as to have the base of the upper jar lying between the shoulders of the bottom two jars, as suggested by

XIV–XXVI; Yezerski 2007; on the pottery of Tel ‘Ira see Freud 1999, esp. pp. 215–227. For an expanded bibliographic summary on pottery assemblages from other sites see Lipschits 2005: 192–193. For a general discussion on the distribution and use of storage vessels in Judah see Katz and Faust 2011.

⁶⁹ *Lachish III*: 316; for Tell en-Naşbeh see Wampler 1947, II, pl. 26.427–429; for Megiddo see Lamon and Shipton 1939, pl. 11.54.

Zimhoni⁷⁰), since the excavators remarked that hundreds of jar fragments were piled in this particular spot, in the Level II debris. Otherwise, shelves holding vessels were constructed along the wall, or on the east wall alone, which eventually collapsed during the Babylonian attack. Furthermore, in the case of Rooms 4084 and 4086 (inner city-gate, Level II), Zimhoni observed that the predominance of storage jars and the absence of bowls and cooking vessels indicate that each room was chiefly used for storage.⁷¹ Did the “guardroom” (E.18:C) serve as another storeroom then, given the presence of bowls, jugs, holemouth and storage jars, and a cooking pot?

In addition, the fact that virtually all of the types of vessel in Table 5.1 are each represented by one specimen, except for a few examples, does not tell us anything. This is because hundreds of jar fragments were found in the “guardroom”, and the specimens in Table 5.1 are only jar types that apparently Tufnell was certain about. It seems that almost each type is actually represented by mere fragments, according to the data presented by Magrill. This could be due to Tufnell’s method of cataloguing only those sherds she considered significant at the time of excavation, or else due to the likelihood that most of the “guardroom” pottery sherds were too fragmentary to reconstruct or assign to any particular vessel type. Magrill catalogues several Iron Age fragments from Room E.18:C, and those of uncertain type are marked with a question mark (?), which I list in Table 5.2. Note also that I am listing only the published and unpublished Iron Age pottery, as I am leaving out the unpublished Late Bronze Age, Persian, and Roman pottery fragments discovered in E.18:C.⁷²

⁷⁰ Zimhoni 1990: 5 (for Room 4014, Lachish Level III).

⁷¹ Zimhoni 1990: 7.

⁷² By “unpublished” I am referring to the material that was not given any field or type numbers. These items only have their respective museum catalogue numbers (see Magrill 2006: 91–92).

In Table 5.2 I also include all 16 ostraca recovered from the “guardroom” (Lachish 1–15, 18), since they formed part of the pile of ceramic fragments along the east wall. Magrill also includes the two fragmentary ostraca Lachish 16 and 17 with the E.18:C pottery, but since the former was discovered in the courtyard and the latter was found during sieving of the dump heap, I strictly do not consider them alongside the other “guardroom” ostraca. On another note, the three ostraca held in Jerusalem (Lachish 3, 4, and 6) are, of course, excluded from Magrill’s catalogue of British Museum items, but I am including them in Table 5.2 for the sake of argument. The table also lists the fragments that were given a type number by Tufnell, as well as the unpublished fragments. It was not possible to verify this during the time of writing, but I suspect that these unpublished fragments are non-diagnostic (body) sherds, which are difficult to assign to any known vessel shape.

Vessel	Type (after Tufnell)	Field No. (FN)	Museum No. (BM)
Bowl fragment	606	-	7903
Cooking pot fragment	691	-	10685
Jug fragment	666	-	10687
Jug fragment	666	-	10688
Holemouth storage jar fragment	498	-	7941
Holemouth storage jar fragment	537	-	7907
Holemouth storage jar fragment	537?	-	10658
Holemouth storage jar fragment	537?	-	10660
Holemouth storage jar fragment	537?	-	10661
Holemouth storage jar fragment	537?	-	10662
Holemouth storage jar fragment	537?	-	10663
Holemouth storage jar fragment	539	-	7916
Holemouth storage jar fragment	541?	-	10652
Holemouth storage jar fragment	541?	-	10653
Holemouth storage jar fragment	541?	-	10654
Holemouth storage jar fragment	541?	-	10655
Holemouth storage jar fragment	541?	-	10656
Holemouth storage jar fragment	542	-	7920
Holemouth storage jar fragment	543?	-	10639

Holemouth storage jar fragment	543?	-	10640
Holemouth storage jar fragment	543?	-	10641
Holemouth storage jar fragment	543?	-	10642
Holemouth storage jar fragment	543?	-	10643
Holemouth storage jar fragment	543?	-	10644
Holemouth storage jar fragment	543?	-	10645
Holemouth storage jar fragment	543?	-	10646
Holemouth storage jar fragment	543?	-	10647
Holemouth storage jar fragment	543?	-	10648
Holemouth storage jar fragment	543?	-	10657
Storage jar fragment	509?	-	10690
Ostrakon I [Lachish 1]	-	4022	125701
Ostrakon II [Lachish 2]	498	4023	125702
* Ostrakon III [Lachish 3]	-	4024	IAA 1938.127
* Ostrakon IV [Lachish 4]	-	4025	IAA 1938.128
Ostrakon V [Lachish 5]	-	4026	125703
* Ostrakon VI [Lachish 6]	-	4029	IAA 1938.129
Ostrakon VII [Lachish 7]	498	4030	125704
Ostrakon VIII [Lachish 8]	498	4031	125705
Ostrakon IX [Lachish 9]	-	4032	125709
Ostrakon X [Lachish 10]	-	4033	125712
Ostrakon XI [Lachish 11]	-	4034	125713
Ostrakon XII [Lachish 12]	-	4035	125714
Ostrakon XIII [Lachish 13]	-	4036	125711
Ostrakon XIV [Lachish 14]	-	4037	125710
Ostrakon XV [Lachish 15]	-	4038	125706
Ostrakon XVIII [Lachish 18]	498	4028	125708
Bowl fragments	unpublished	-	10700 – 10702
Cooking pot fragments	unpublished	-	10686
Holemouth storage jar fragments	unpublished	-	10649 – 10651; 10664 – 10684
Storage jar fragments	unpublished	-	10691 – 10692

Table 5.2 Magrill’s (2006: 91–92) listings of published and unpublished Iron Age pottery from Room E.18:C, with my additional rows (marked with an *) of the three ostraca held by the Israel Antiquities Authority.

5.3.2 The stone bench

Another suggestion about the room’s function was made by the excavator himself. Starkey pointed out the possibility that the “guardroom” may have actually served as an open courtroom, perhaps a place of gathering, given the presence of a stone bench against the south wall of the room, which faced the open north side (§1.5.1) and was later removed to uncover the floor

underneath.⁷³ Similar benches have been discovered in other sites. At Gezer, stone benches line three sides of each of the six bays of the gate, while at Dan, a bench constructed of dressed stones is located to the right of the entrance.⁷⁴ The hypothesis of the courtroom brings to mind the biblical references to the city gate serving as a meeting place for the city elders to conduct commercial and legal transactions (§4.4). Starkey's hypothesis of an open courtroom at the Lachish "guardroom" was based on Torczyner's outdated interpretation (see §5.6). In any case, the bench may have served for seating or shelving.

5.3.3 The location of the "guardroom"

Another point would relate to the governor of Lachish himself. Since the palace at the centre of the mound was left in ruins after the Assyrian destruction, the town of Level II was left without an administrative centre, and the excavations of Level II have not uncovered any building of the sort inside the fortress. As an alternative to the "courtroom" hypothesis, Starkey suggested that the headquarters of the governor during the second half of the 7th century and the early 6th century B.C.E. was actually located in the gateway area.⁷⁵ Ussishkin concurs with this idea. He remarks that the gate complex remains the only public building of the Level II city to date, located ironically outside the fortified settlement proper.⁷⁶ The Lachish gate complex remains unparalleled among contemporary city gates, because its plan recalls a rectangular fortress. The courtyard was bounded by the inner gatehouse and the main city wall on the east. On all the other sides it was surrounded by rooms or long corridors (built atop a broad foundation wall) that opened onto the courtyard, among which were the two tower rooms of the outer gatehouse, one

⁷³ Starkey 1938: 12; cf. Wright 1938: 26–27. According to the caption of pl. 14.4 (*Lachish III*), the stone bench was eventually cleared during the excavation of the "guardroom" to uncover the plastered floor.

⁷⁴ King and Stager 2001: 234.

⁷⁵ Starkey 1938: 12.

⁷⁶ *Renewed Excavations*, II: 522.

of which is the “guardroom” (E.18:C) on the east side. This unique ground plan indicates that the Lachish gate complex must have had an additional function. Other fortresses in Judah did not have this kind of layout, states Ussishkin.⁷⁷

5.3.4 The case of other ostraca from Judah and the Negev

In order to answer the questions raised by the archaeology of the “guardroom” and of the “Lachish Letters”, Barstad argues that it is possible to find solutions which cover both alternatives, i.e. whether the extant epistolary ostraca were letters received at Lachish/Tell ed-Duweir or drafts/copies of letters composed *in situ*. Barstad views the Lachish ostraca as simply written messages, most of which would have been delivered orally, especially in wartime conditions, lest the messenger would get caught and the content of the letter ended up in enemy hands. He therefore proposes that the Lachish ostraca are not copies, but the *recording in writing of orally delivered messages*, which would then account for circumstances such as the leaving out of sender and recipient, the fact that five of the ostraca belong to the same pot, and the writing on “memory pads” of ostraca rather than the use of papyri.⁷⁸

On a similar note, Parker believes that the Lachish ostraca were *actual letters received at Lachish*, contrary to Barstad’s proposal of orally-delivered messages at the city-gate.⁷⁹ *Contra* Yadin, Tufnell, and Ussishkin, Parker remarks that in the urgency of the situation in which the “Lachish Letters” were written, file copies were undoubtedly the last thing the senders were

⁷⁷ See *Renewed Excavations*, II: 522; Ussishkin 2014a: 373, although one may think of “Solomonic” Megiddo (Strata VA–IVB), albeit it belongs to an older date, but its gate complex was nevertheless composed of a six-chamber inner gate, a central passage leading to the two-chambered outer gate, and along the northern side of this in-between passage were three rooms (cf. Rocca 2010: 22, 23).

⁷⁸ Barstad 1993: 10.

⁷⁹ Parker 1994: 68.

concerned with, and multiple drafts the last thing they could afford. He further asks that, if the “Lachish Letters” were drafts/file copies, would the Arad ostraca and the Meşad Ḥashavyahu “judicial plea” then be considered drafts/file copies as well? To add to this question, are the extant ostraca in epistolary style from Ḥorvat ‘Uza and other Negev fortresses also to be considered drafts/file copies, for that matter? Parker deems it more likely that, allowing for changes in the supply of and demand for papyrus, ceramic sherds were used for short texts and texts of transient value, whereas papyrus was reserved for longer texts or texts considered to be of more permanent significance (§4.3).⁸⁰ Parker adds that, given the location of the ostraca at the city gate, Lachish was the recipient of the letters rather than the sender, not to mention that we lack evidence for a city-gate’s use as a scriptorium or filing-room for drafts/copies. He also mentions the plausibility that an officer in charge of a fortress would receive messengers and messages at the city gate, and that the first room inside the outer gate would be the immediate depository for such missives, as was suggested by the excavator himself.⁸¹

Another appealing proposal is that by Lehmann. Given some of the enigmatic language of the ostraca, with the short and cryptic Lachish 2 as a striking example, and the left-out details of sender and/or addressee in most of the “letters”, he suggests that the ostraca might be viewed as some sort of “passes” or “accreditation letters”, especially if the messengers were bearing sensitive military information. He further suggests that the lists of PNN (Lachish 1 and 11) might denote accredited messengers arriving at Lachish (§3.1.2).⁸²

⁸⁰ Parker 1994: 68; see also *Lachish I*: 16–17.

⁸¹ See Starkey 1938: 12.

⁸² Lehmann 2003: 92–94; Reinhard G. Lehmann, personal communication, 2013. See also Zammit forthcoming.

The above three proposals are attractive and credible, given the archaeological scenario, the various doubts raised by the archaeology of the “guardroom”, and the political setting of the time. A common denominator in all three hypotheses is the role played by the “guardroom” and, for that matter, the person in charge stationed there, or close to the outer gate, receiving messengers and missives. The findspot of 16 ostraca within the Lachish gateway complex finds common ground with the findspots of other ostraca from other archaeological sites. This harks back to Parker’s question on the ostraca of Lachish, Tel Arad, and Meşad Hashavyahu, and of other Negev sites, for that matter, as to whether they are to be considered drafts or file copies. I will discuss a few examples below.

Meşad Hashavyahu (Yavneh-Yam)

The large ostrakon Meşad Hashavyahu 1 was discovered near the door of the fortress there, and thus, given the nature and content indicative of a judicial plea, it was suggested that the text was written on the spot by a professional scribe. The repetitions and direct speech indicate that the worker dictated his plea to the scribe at the gate of the fortress, before it was submitted to the judicial authorities.⁸³ It is worth noting that this ostrakon, today composed of seven extant pieces, was found in three different places altogether. In the first season of excavations, five of the pieces were recovered inside the guardroom of the Meşad Hashavyahu fortress (in the southern wing of the gate), while the sixth (bottom) piece was found just outside the entrance to the guardroom (§4.4). The seventh piece was recovered during the second excavation season, in another room close-by.⁸⁴ This detail is somewhat reminiscent of Lachish 16, a small fragment of

⁸³ See Naveh 1960; 1962; 1964; Pardee 1978a; Pardee et al. 1982: 15–24, 156; Ahituv 2008: 156–163; Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005: 358–370.

⁸⁴ Naveh 1960: 130; 1962: 27; for the three different findspots see Naveh 1962: 28, fig. 1.

an ostrakon that was not found inside the Lachish Level II “guardroom” (E.18:C), but reutilised in the ballast of the Level I Persian roadway (E/F.17/18:N) (§§1.5 and 3.1.16).

Tel Arad

When we come to the large Arad corpus (112 Palaeo-Hebrew texts, including seals, among other ostraca written in Aramaic, Greek, and Arabic), which ranges from the 10th to the early 6th centuries B.C.E., we have a situation with different types of ostraca discovered in different spots of the Arad fortress and belonging to different times of the Judaeen monarchy. Only 21 of the Hebrew texts may be identified as letters with certainty. All the letters belong to Stratum VI, except Arad 40 (Stratum VIII). The Arad ostraca are examples of the record-keeping and administration necessary for a regional centre/fortress, whose work was integrated with the state bureaucracy in the capital, Jerusalem.⁸⁵ Among the ostraca is the Eliashib Archive (Arad 1–18), an epistolary corpus found in one of the casemate rooms in the south wall (Locus 637), in a thick burnt level of Arad Stratum VI, contemporary with Lachish Level II.⁸⁶ I am citing this particular archive not for its findspot *per se* but rather as an example of types of documents found at Arad, and what information we may glean about their function. There are two distinct types of letters at Arad: (i) orders and reports concerning matters about troop disposition and intelligence; (ii) notes concerning the issue and dispatch of rations.⁸⁷ The Eliashib Archive falls in the latter category, since it comprises brief but precise instructions addressed to one Eliashib (apparently the chief

⁸⁵ Dearman 1989: 346.

⁸⁶ Aharoni 1966b; Aharoni 1981: 11. The stratigraphy and dating of Arad is still a controversial matter, but I will not address this issue since it falls outside the scope of this research (for further discussion and references see Aharoni 1981: 9, 70–74; Pardee 1978b: 323, n. 144; Pardee et al. 1982: 24–57; Lindenberger 2003: 115; Aḥituv 2008: 92–122).

⁸⁷ Lindenberger 2003: 115.

supply officer at Arad) concerning material to be supplied by him. The excavator, Aharoni, summed it up as follows:

The letters were certainly brought to Arad by the recipients of the material mentioned in them. Eliashib kept them in his archives as a receipt for the goods he handed over and as a book-keeping “voucher” for the fortress stores. This emerges clearly from a letter which is addressed, not to Eliashib, but to one Nahum ... in which Nahum is told to go to the house of “Eliashib son of Eshiahu”... to take from him a certain quantity of oil and to send it out under his seal. On the other side of this ostrakon there is an inscription in a different script stating that Nahum despatched the oil on a certain date “by the hand of the Kittî”. This clearly shows that the letter was brought to Arad by Nahum and was kept as a receipt by Eliashib, the date of despatch of the “order” being written by Eliashib himself or by his scribe in Arad.⁸⁸

Horvat ‘Uza

Like the Meşad Ḥashavyahu judicial plea, one of the most discussed ostraca from Ḥorvat ‘Uza (inscription 10 – the “Aḥiqam” ostrakon) was found in one of the rooms of the gatehouse of the fortress. Mendel argues that the ostrakon, a list of three male PNN with their respective patronymics and town names, was likely a memo written by a member of the military personnel of the fortress, whose bureau was located in one of the rooms of the gatehouse, which means that the ostrakon could have been composed *in situ*, and therefore never left the site.⁸⁹ Mendel’s hypothesis is highly attractive and reasonable, and is one of many interpretations of the Aḥiqam ostrakon, owing to the uncertain reading of the initial letter of the first word. Conversely, Na’aman interpreted the ostrakon as an administrative text written by an inexperienced hand, probably in another place, and presented at the gate to the guard of the fortress. He deems the

⁸⁸ Aharoni 1966b: 4.

⁸⁹ Mendel 2011.

ostrakon a receipt confirming that the three registered persons had already paid their debts to Aḥiqam, thus explaining the details of patronymics and hometowns for the three men involved.⁹⁰

The above examples are diverse, yet they provide us with possible concepts of what the respective documents likely stood for, where they were composed and by whom. The Meṣad Ḥashavyahu “judicial plea” could have been written at the door, given the written style, contents, and context. Like the Lachish “guardroom” ostraca, the “Aḥiqam ostrakon” remains controversial: it might have been a memo written *in situ* at the fortress of Ḥorvat ‘Uza, or else a receipt of three registered men that was presented to the guard at the gate of the fortress, among other suggestions. The Eliashib ostraca, on the other hand, were clearly brought over to Arad by the respective recipients of the supplies and held at the fortress for book-keeping.

The legible “guardroom” ostraca of Lachish are diverse, ranging from lists to letters/reports of a politico-military nature. As seen so far, their findspot inside a room by the outer gate is intriguing and subject to great debate. The fact that five sherds, some of which bear messages, happen to belong to the same jar created an even greater debate on the source, the destination, the time-span of writing, the motive, the nature of these five ostraca, and the identities of sender/s and addressee/s. Can one confirm Starkey’s and Ussishkin’s suspicions of the gate complex of Tell ed-Duweir likely being the administrative centre for Lachish Level II? One conspicuous fact about the gateway of Lachish is the apparent absence of seals within, which usually convey a picture of activity pertaining to an office of some sort, involving reception of letters, archiving, and general administration.

⁹⁰ Na’aman 2012: 218–219, 225. For further literature see Beit-Arieh 1986–1987; 2007a: 139–143; Beit-Arieh and Cresson 1991: 133; Lemaire 1995: 221; *HAE*, I: 443–445; Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005: 518–521; Aḥituv 2008: 166–168.

5.4 The absence of clay bullae in the gateway area

It is striking that no clay bullae were ever found in the “guardroom”, either during the British expedition or in Ussishkin’s renewed excavations. The “guardroom” was excavated in its entirety by the British team.⁹¹ In the renewed excavations, the room was re-cleared, revealing no additional data. Excavations reached the wide foundation wall of Level III that inhibits any excavations beyond (§§1.4.1 and 1.4.2). Therefore, if any messages on papyri were intercepted at the outer gate, one would expect that somehow clay bullae, which normally sealed papyrus scrolls, would end up in the “guardroom”, where apparently a particular collection of documents (the ostraca) was housed. Nevertheless, no clay bullae were ever reported from the “guardroom” excavations, or the rest of the gateway complex, for that matter.

The only sizeable find of clay bullae was found inside the fortified settlement proper in 1966, precisely at the top of the mound, in a small Level II storeroom below the Level I Solar Shrine.⁹² This storeroom (Locus 3) yielded a rich assemblage of Level II pottery, including a small cylindrical juglet containing a hoard of 17 clay bullae that once sealed papyrus documents – on the reverse are traces of the “warp” and “weft” of papyrus and of the string with which they had been attached. Aharoni proposed that the room was an archive of a chancellery, where perhaps the distribution of commodities took place. Accompanying the juglet were six limestone shekel weights and another ostrakon (Lachish 22), which comprises a list of PNN, all preceded by the preposition *lamed* (Catalogue B). All clay bullae bear Hebrew seal impressions of male PNN in the top register, and a designation in the lower register, with both registers separated by two

⁹¹ Only pottery and ostraca have been recovered from Room E.18:C, as reported by Tufnell (*Lachish III*: 129).

⁹² Aharoni 1975: 19–25.

horizontal lines. One of the bullae carries the designation “servant” or “son of the king” (the reading is unclear, given that the bulla is worn on the bottom right), clearly a high official operating within the administrative or clerical system of Judah. Two other isolated examples of clay bullae from Lachish, recovered by the British team, come from a Level III room and a Level I pit respectively, both inside the city.⁹³ The archaeological data therefore suggest that any sealed papyrus scrolls were taken directly inside the fortress proper, or else, any matters dealing with official documents on papyrus were carried out within the fortified settlement of Lachish and not in the gateway area.⁹⁴

A collection of bullae preserved in a juglet is so far exclusive to Tell ed-Duweir. The only other sizable hoard of clay bullae in Judah comes from the City of David (Area G). A hoard of 51 bullae was discovered by Yigal Shiloh in 1982, in a house which the archaeologists dubbed the “House of the Bullae”.⁹⁵ The collection comes from a stratified context (Stratum 10), contemporary with Lachish Level II, since the house was burned during the Babylonian attack of 588/6 B.C.E., and the resultant conflagration must have destroyed the papyrus scrolls stored inside the house, but the fire baked and therefore preserved the sealing bullae. Only 41 of these are well-preserved and legible, and their script and the PNN they bear belong to the mid 7th–early 6th centuries B.C.E.

⁹³ *Lachish III*: 348, pls. 44A.172–173; 45.172–173. For isolated examples of clay bullae from other sites see Sellers and Albright 1931: 8–9; Diringier 1934: 127, 341; Arie, Goren and Samet 2011: 3.

⁹⁴ Petrographic examinations by Yuval Goren revealed that the 17 bullae discovered by Aharoni were made from clay found in area of the Shephelah, indicating that the papyri that they sealed were written in the area of Lachish (Ussishkin 2014a: 386–387).

⁹⁵ Shiloh 1984: 18–20, 29, fig. 34:2, pl. 35; 1986; Shiloh and Tarler 1986. See also King 1993: 93–95.

One can only speculate that the situation in the “House of the Bullae” might reflect a similar situation at Lachish. Given the hoard of bullae conserved in one particular locus on the mound of Tell ed-Duweir, it is suggested that the room in question was administrative in nature, receiving official documents. On the other hand, the gateway complex, and especially the “guardroom”, housed documents written on broken pottery pieces, which suggests that the information they bore was indeed of “transient value”, quoting Parker above. Given the archaeological and ceramic data, and the underlying problems and reconsiderations I have discussed so far, is it even possible to achieve a clear picture about these ostraca? The 16 “guardroom” ostraca are merely a very small extant sample of the type of documents that might have been originally stored inside Room E.18:C by the outer gate. The recovered ostraca are in themselves fragmentary and elusive, most of which are illegible and too large and cumbersome to carry around over long distances without the chance of breaking them (cf. Lachish 10, 14, and 15). If they, or at least some of them, were not incoming letters to begin with, as Parker suggests, they could have easily been memos written on the spot by professional scribes in the employ of the governor or high official at Lachish, and dictated by messengers received at the gate, as Barstad and Lehmann propose. The proposition of accreditation notes and accredited messengers, as Lehmann suspects, remains possible but nonetheless speculative.

In summary, the Lachish “guardroom” seems to have held a mixed archive of documents. The picture presented overall suggests that the extant ostraca vary between lists of names (possible memos or receipts, either received or composed *in situ*), ostraca that are potential compositions written on site (e.g. Lachish 11 and 15), and possible incoming letters carried by messengers (the epistolary documents).

5.5 Considerations on Lachish 19, 20, and 21

After having discussed and re-evaluated the “guardroom” and gateway ostraca, I shall now reflect on the findspots of the three ostraca that were recovered following Starkey’s tragic demise, when the excavations were about to terminate in 1938.

As discussed in §§1.6.1 and 3.1.19, Lachish 19 was recovered from the burnt stone heap at the foot of the descending road, at the south-west corner of the mound (Saddle Area 500), which was later re-identified as part of the Assyrian siege ramp (§5.1). How a stranded ostrakon ended up among the stone pile of the siege ramp is anyone’s guess: it might have been reused alongside the stones for the setting-up of the ramp, or ended up lost or dropped during the Assyrian attack on the city. Given the sherd bears a list of PNN (with hieratic numerals), one can easily imagine this ostrakon as some kind of quickly-drafted memo that ended up lost in the rubble. Be that as it may, Lachish 19 was found in a secondary context, and that is virtually all one can say about it from an archaeological perspective. Tufnell’s vague remark of this ostrakon’s likelihood to date to “about the time of the burning of Level III” ([pre-]701 B.C.E.) sounds reasonable, given its findspot in the siege ramp, and its earlier script (§2.3).⁹⁶

The last two ostraca to be recovered by the British team, Lachish 20 and 21, both originate from Room L12:1065, a domestic room of sorts built alongside the eastern wall of the ruined Judaeon Palace C, at the centre of the mound. Ostrakon 20, a label on a Type 495 jar, belongs to the same group as Zimhoni’s Level II: Group IIC. To this group also belongs another contemporary vessel

⁹⁶ *Lachish III*: 57. Lachish 19 bears palaeographic idiosyncrasies and features that seem to antedate the later scripts of the other ostraca.

(Zimhoni's Jar No. 1), bearing the label Lachish 29 that was discovered in Room 4086 (part of a unit of storerooms inside the inner city-gate) during Ussishkin's excavations.⁹⁷ Lachish 20 and 29 share similarities (Catalogues A and B). Both inscriptions contain date formulae that scholars have attributed to regnal years of Zedekiah, similar to a storage-jar label from Tel Arad (Arad 20 from Stratum VI), which mentions another date formula attributed most likely to the reign of Jehoiakim. This label is written on a jar that coincidentally belongs to the same Level II: Group IIC of Zimhoni's vessel types (albeit of smaller capacity) (§§1.6.2 and 3.1.20). As Zimhoni noted, "we therefore have three storage jars of the same type with inscriptions probably indicating regnal years".⁹⁸ Moreover, Lachish 20 was discovered in one of the richest vessel assemblages from Tell ed-Duweir, in what appears to be one room (L12:1065) in a series of storerooms, while Lachish 29 was found in a similarly rich assemblage (Room 4086). Lachish 20 is therefore no "letter", but a clear jar label, and the unpublished report states the following: "for the first time we can establish that the writing was done in the room where the sherd was found, as a large part of the jar from which the sherd was taken is present".⁹⁹ That the writing was executed specifically inside the room is debated, yet it is likely that the inscription was written at the fortress. The jar, bearing a label of ownership, was kept inside the storeroom, unless it was imported from another site, with its date and label of ownership, and held at Lachish. Other than that, it is clear what the Lachish 20 inscription stood for, what the reconstructed jar looked like (*sans* the rim), and what the (archaeological) context used to be originally.

Ostrakon 21, a small fragmentary piece written on both sides, was found below the floor of Room L12:1065, during the process of taking up the floor to expose the staircase platform underneath

⁹⁷ Zimhoni 1990: 34, fig. 23.1.

⁹⁸ Zimhoni 1990: 35; for Arad 20 see Aharoni 1981: 40–41.

⁹⁹ Typed Reports 1937–1938: 45.

(§1.6.2). The excavators argued a possible earlier date (by a few years) than that of Lachish 20 and the room's contents. Tufnell and Ginsberg also remarked about a possible slightly earlier script than that of Lachish 20, which may antedate the reign of Zedekiah, yet this is virtually all the information supplied by unpublished, preliminary, and final reports.¹⁰⁰ The few legible letters on this fragmentary ostrakon suggest another possible "letter" like some of the "guardroom" ostraca, and I personally do not see such variations that would date the script earlier (§§2.3, 3.1.21, and Catalogue A). How the ostrakon piece ended up below the floor is another open question. Lachish 21 is as fragmentary as 16 and 17, and apparently found in a secondary context like the two latter ostraca, since it was recovered below the floor of a domestic room, so it could easily have ended up there by accident during the set-up or construction of the room. It is equally possible that it did not take such a long time to construct the room somewhere during the course of Level II. More debatable is the fact that a seemingly epistolary document was found at the centre of the mound, much like the Lachish 22 list that was found below the Level I Solar Shrine close-by.

To summarise, the three ostraca discovered in 1938 were recovered in other locations of the mound. While Lachish 19 and 21 seem to have ended up in "random" secondary contexts, Lachish 20 is a fairly straightforward inscription, a label on a jar that was once housed in a rich Level II pottery assemblage, and which bears a possible date alluding to the ninth and final regnal year of Zedekiah. Other than that, the information gleaned from these ostraca is minimal, and much of their value lies in their palaeographic and philological aspects.

¹⁰⁰ Typed Reports 1937–1938: 53; Inge 1938: 254; *Lachish III*: 57.

5.6 Torczyner’s interpretation: outdated readings, counterarguments, and the controversial “prophet”

By the time of the *editio princeps*, with the first 18 ostraca featuring in the 1938 English version, and all 21 ostraca later featuring in the 1940 Hebrew version, the ostraca were altogether labelled as the “Lachish Letters”. Despite the varied nature of the ostraca, the faded state of most sherds, and the different findspot locations, the collective label of “letters” was kept.

The editor’s interpretation was as follows. Torczyner regarded all the documents as letters that formed part of a single correspondence, a kind of dossier, between the servant Hôša’yāhû and his official Yā’ûš. He regarded the less legible and/or fragmentary ostraca as likely to form part of the same correspondence. Hôša’yāhû is apparently the commander of an outpost and Yā’ûš the governor of Lachish, given the latter’s formal title of *’dny* that indicates a status of authority over the sender. At least 14 “letters” are from Hôša’yāhû to Yā’ûš, and the faded ostrakon 13 might be an exception, given its instructive language at the start of the first legible line, which might suggest that it was sent from Yā’ûš to Hôša’yāhû, and which therefore may be regarded as a copy of an outgoing letter. The correspondence seems to climax in ostrakon 4, with the mention of the fire-signals of Lachish, and the inability of Hôša’yāhû and his men to see (the fire-signals of) Azekah. The latter statement shows striking similarities with the reference to both cities being the last standing against the Babylonian forces in Jer. 34:7. The end-line of ostrakon 4 thus seems to imply that Azekah has already fallen, and Hôša’yāhû is dependent on orders getting through to him from his superior at Lachish. Moreover, Torczyner regards all of Hôša’yāhû’s letters as exculpating ones, and are “evidence of the last military trial held at the gate of

Lachish”.¹⁰¹ Hôša‘yāhû is suspected of betraying the trust of his lord Yā’ûš on different occasions: namely, being implicated in the fate of the prophet Uriah; in the case of one S^emakyāhû having heard Hôša‘yāhû cursing the king; and Hôša‘yāhû failing in his military duty, including the observation of fire-signals from Lachish and Azekah. Ostraca 2, 3, 6, 12, and 16 seem to deal especially with Hôša‘yāhû’s indiscretion, since, according to Torczyner’s readings, they make multiple references to imprudent utterances or actions made by Hôša‘yāhû himself.

Furthermore, Torczyner identifies the nameless *nb*’ mentioned in Lachish 3.20 with the prophet Uriah, the son of Shemaiah, of Qiryat-Ye‘arim, who is mentioned in Jer. 26:20–23. Uriah, like Jeremiah, spoke against Jerusalem and Judah, and when King Jehioakim ordered his execution, he fled to Egypt, but was eventually brought back to Jerusalem by Elnathan, the son of Achbor, and put to death by the king (see §§6.1.1, 6.2, and 6.4.2). Torczyner believed Yā’ûš and his followers, as well as Hôša‘yāhû and his people at his outpost, to be supporters of Uriah, and all the Yahwistic PNN featured in the ostraca are indicators of a zealous worship of Yahweh.¹⁰² Torczyner also considered the list of names in ostrakon 1 as a list of witnesses on Hôša‘yāhû’s behalf, which perhaps accompanied ostrakon 8, given the similar handwriting.¹⁰³

Several reviews of the *editio princeps* soon appeared.¹⁰⁴ In his review, Harris contributes philological revisions of some of Torczyner’s readings, which I have incorporated in my discussion in Chapter 3. Among his statements, he points out that many of the proposed, reconstructed readings of the fragmentary ostraca 5, 6, 9, and 13 are “very hard to accept”, and

¹⁰¹ *Lachish I*: 18, 118.

¹⁰² *Lachish I*: 66.

¹⁰³ *Lachish I*: 30–31, 129.

¹⁰⁴ See Birnbaum 1938; Burrows 1938; Cantineau 1937–1939; Harris 1938; Kahle 1938; Thomas, D. W. 1939.

further notes that, in some of these cases, Torczyner's readings differ from Harding's autographs.¹⁰⁵

Similarly, Kahle commented about Torczyner's rush to publish the other "minor" ostraca (apart from Lachish 1–4), the inscriptions of which are equally as challenging as those of the first four. He also mentioned the general scholarly consensus that deemed much of Torczyner's hypotheses farfetched, and criticised the method of reproduction of the supplementary visual aids (especially the photographs of the ostraca), which he called "insufficient" and "inadequate" in providing any further aid to decipher the respective inscriptions.¹⁰⁶

Despite stating that Torczyner's general interpretation "sounds plausible", Birnbaum deemed the identification of the *nb'* in ostrakon 3 with the prophet Uriah as "more than doubtful".¹⁰⁷ Birnbaum argued that, even if Hôša'yāhû's alleged misconduct endangered Uriah, the danger to Uriah came from King Jehoiakim, and even if one assumes that Yā'ûš, as a faithful Yahweh worshipper, would secretly act against the king's command, in the affair of Uriah, it is puzzling as to how he could court-martial a subordinate officer/official for doing something he knew to be in conformity with the king's policy. Birnbaum further asked that, even if all the other judges had been on the side of Yā'ûš, would Hôša'yāhû not simply appeal to the king for help?¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Harris 1938: 439. This observation is correct, and Harding (1938: 186–187) himself explained his *modus operandi* to draw the ostraca and the reason why some of his readings differ from Torczyner's.

¹⁰⁶ Kahle 1938: 275–276.

¹⁰⁷ Birnbaum 1938: 809.

¹⁰⁸ Birnbaum 1938: 809; 1939a: 27.

In addition, Birnbaum pointed out that although the “letters” might have been addressed to one person, they still do not indicate the number of senders.¹⁰⁹ He adds that, from the ostraca’s contents, it would be reasonable to connect 3 and 6 as coming from the same person, but it is conceivable that two persons should swear an oath in connection with the same matter, or that one is only a quotation from the other. Moreover, the formal characteristics of the contents of 2 and 6 might suggest that the two ostraca originated from the same source, while ostraca 4, 5, 8, and 9 originated from another source. Birnbaum mentioned the common factors in 2 and 6, namely the addressee Yā’ûš, the same introductory formulae, and the fact that the two ostraca belong to the same vessel of Type 498, which may suggest that they were sent by the same person.¹¹⁰ To this observation I add that ostraca 2 and 6 also include self-abasement formulae. Birnbaum also suggested that “letter” 4 and list 11 share a possible link, since the name S^ema^kyāhû appears in both,¹¹¹ but he does not mention ostrakon 13, in which scholars, including myself, have also reconstructed the PN S^ema^kyāhû, despite the faded inscription, although admittedly, Birnbaum’s omission could be due to the reconstructed, and hence speculative, reading.

Similarly, Cantineau mentioned the lack of evidence that all the letters are to be attributed to one and the same author. He also remarked that there is no clear reference to a state of war in the documents, and that the ash layer in which the ostraca were found does not prove their drafting did not occur several decades before.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Birnbaum 1939a: 27.

¹¹⁰ Birnbaum 1939a: 27–28.

¹¹¹ Birnbaum 1939a: 27.

¹¹² Cantineau 1937–1939: 388.

Likewise, Thomas pointed out the lack of proof to support the idea of a “Hoshaiah dossier”, and further regards the identification of the *nb*’ with Uriah as “extremely hazardous”.¹¹³ Most importantly, he stressed that there is no mention anywhere in the ostraca of the PN Uriyāhû.¹¹⁴ Torczyner claimed to read the name Uriyāhû in Lachish 16.5,¹¹⁵ but only the last two letters *hw* survived, which leave the reconstruction of the PN open to any other theophoric PN, not to mention that the name could belong to *any* other prophet of the period, as pointed out by Torczyner himself.¹¹⁶ On the other hand, Thomas deems it “hazardous to see in these two signs the final element of a proper name”, since he stresses that the letters *hw* “are by no means certain”.¹¹⁷ This statement conforms to Birnbaum’s view that the two letters are illegible, *contra* Michaud, who regards them as certain.¹¹⁸

Moreover, Torczyner tried his best to equate the officer who went down to Egypt, mentioned in Lachish 3.15 (read as [y]kbryhw bn 'lntn in the *editio princeps*), with the official mentioned in Jer. 26:22 ('lntn bn 'kbr) (see also Harding’s autograph in Fig. 31). Torczyner argued in favour of a possible error made by the scribe of the ostracon, who switched the biblical names Elnathan and Achbor. According to Torczyner, the PN אכבר in the Hebrew Bible is one and the same with Yik̄bar or Yik̄baryāhû as in ostracon 3, and it would be more plausible to have the scribe of the ostracon switching the names by mistake rather than the copyists of the Hebrew Bible, since the scribe (or Hôša‘yāhû, according to Torczyner) was not copying from any official document but was rather informed about the officer going down to Egypt.¹¹⁹ This identification was questioned

¹¹³ Thomas, D. W. 1939: 5.

¹¹⁴ Thomas, D. W. 1939: 5; 1946b: 10.

¹¹⁵ *Lachish I*: 65, 173.

¹¹⁶ *Lachish I*: 65; Thomas, D. W. 1939: 5.

¹¹⁷ Thomas, D. W. 1946b: 13.

¹¹⁸ See Birnbaum 1939a: 27; 1939b: 108; *contra* Michaud 1941: 56.

¹¹⁹ *Lachish I*: 51, 58, 67–68.

by Reider, especially since the initial *yôḏ* is nowhere visible at the start of Lachish 3.15.¹²⁰ Most scholars today, including myself, read the PN *knyhw* (Konyāhû) in ostracon 3, with the first three letters (*kny*) still legible on the ostracon, not to mention that Torczyner himself later reconstructed the name as *knyhw* in the Hebrew edition.¹²¹ For further philological discussion see §3.1.3 and 6.3.3.

In his discussion on the significance of archaeology for biblical studies, Burrows dedicated various analyses to the “Lachish Letters”, including his dismissal of Torczyner’s identification of the prophet mentioned in Lachish 3 with Uriah.¹²² The identity of the prophet with Uriah was also challenged by Jack and Dussaud, who both instead favoured the identification of the prophet with Jeremiah.¹²³ Jack argued that, rather than having to do with Uriah’s flight, the ostraca reflect the time when two superpowers, the new Babylonia on the east and Egypt on the west, were each trying to secure control of Palestine. Most notably, argues Jack, the contents of the ostraca shed light on the struggle between the pro-Egyptian and the pro-Babylonian parties in Judah at the time of the Babylonian invasion: while King Zedekiah and his court were looking to Egypt for help, Jeremiah favoured submission to Babylonia.¹²⁴ Lachish and its governor, Yā’ûš, were pro-Egyptian and opposed to Jeremiah, whereas Hôša’yāhû was pro-Babylonian and supportive of Jeremiah’s policy, or at least, suspected by certain accusers (including Yā’ûš) of being so. This, remarks Jack, explains the exculpatory nature of Hôša’yāhû’s “letters”, which instead of being a court-dossier in a trial of Hôša’yāhû for divulging confidential information regarding Uriah, are evidently and easily explainable as reflecting the political situation of the

¹²⁰ Reider 1939: 232.

¹²¹ Tur-Sinai 1987: 90.

¹²² Burrows 1941: 41 §33, 252–254 §170; see also Burrows 1938.

¹²³ Jack 1938c; Dussaud 1938; see also Jack’s review of *Lachish I* (1938a).

¹²⁴ Jack 1938c: 176–182.

time. In his review of Burrows' work, Jack even lamented how the author set aside Jack's theory of the Lachish 3 prophet being Jeremiah as "only a possibility".¹²⁵

Like Jack, Dussaud also identified the *nb'* with Jeremiah. However, he argued that both Yā'ûš and Hôša'yāhû, and their men, were faithful Yahweh worshippers, and were in communication with the prophet, and the latter had to be none other than Jeremiah, because only he could impress the state, and would utter demoralizing words (as mentioned in Lachish 6.5–7).¹²⁶ Likewise, Vincent and Michaud followed this idea of identifying Jeremiah,¹²⁷ although Michaud later on stated that the Jeremiah identification remains improbable despite a few details that would fit Jeremiah, and he does not refer to D. Winton Thomas's lecture on the matter.¹²⁸ Although Vaccari and van den Oudenrijn deemed the identification with Jeremiah possible, they nonetheless sensibly remarked that it is difficult to prove.¹²⁹

All in all, Thomas rightly argued against the prophet identification and pointed out that there is nothing in the ostraca approaching proof that Jeremiah is the prophet referred to in Lachish 3, as the *nb'* could be one of the other known prophets who lived at this time, as well as the hundreds of anonymous prophets (1 Kgs 13:11; 20:13; Judg. 6:8).¹³⁰ Thomas argued that the great danger of Torczyner, Jack, and Dussaud, among others, was the "faulty" method of treating the ostraca as an interrelated group and interpreting them each by reference to the other, and as having been sent by the same person, with one main theme running through.¹³¹ Moreover, the ostraca do not

¹²⁵ Jack 1942 vis-à-vis Burrows 1941: 253–254, §170.

¹²⁶ Dussaud 1938: 259–263; see also Jack's (1938d) review of Dussaud (1938).

¹²⁷ Vincent 1939: 67; Michaud 1941: 59.

¹²⁸ Michaud 1958; see also Rowley's (1960) review of Michaud (1958).

¹²⁹ Vaccari 1939b: 190; van den Oudenrijn 1942: 35. See also Rowley's (1945) review of van den Oudenrijn (1942).

¹³⁰ Thomas, D. W. 1946b: 19.

¹³¹ Thomas, D. W. 1946b: 19, 20.

reveal any more information about the prophet figure mentioned in Lachish 3.19–20; we only “caught but a fleeting glimpse of a shadowy figure”.¹³²

5.7 The questionable “prophet” in Lachish 16

The scholarly majority, past and present, read *hnb'* in Lachish 16.5 with a degree of certainty. De Vaux also thought it permissible to restore the PN Jeremiah in the reading *hw* (that precedes *hnb'*), and to see in Lachish 16 and Lachish 3 the activities of Jeremiah.¹³³ Similarly, Dussaud found it tempting to read the PN Jeremiah in Lachish 16.5, yet he hesitated to affirm it.¹³⁴ Seow also regards the preceding fragmentary name as “clearly Yahwistic”, and reads a clear reference to the prophet in ostrakon 16, as does Stökl, who deems the reading *hnb'* in Lachish 16.5 certain.¹³⁵ Like Thomas and Barstad, however, I point out that this reading is not only doubtful, but also unjustified.¹³⁶ A closer look at the photographs of the ostrakon and its physical examination show that the *he* and *aleph* are certain, while the *nun* has a somewhat curved, angular downstroke, which could indicate the way the scribe held and twisted the pen while writing downwards. The supposed *beth* however is no *beth* at all, but rather another *nun*. A glance at the IAA photographs indicates that there was no (faded) loop leftwards that would make the letter a *beth*. Barstad instead suspected a *pe*, but, again, I do not see the small tail at the top of the stroke.¹³⁷ I therefore read the letter as *nun*, hence my reconstruction of line 5 as]*hwhnnh*[, which can be anything: for example, part of the theophoric ending in a PN *-hw*, or else the *w* could start off the phrase “and behold me/us” (*whnn*) (lacking a *mater yod* or *waw* for the final

¹³² Thomas, D. W. 1946b: 23.

¹³³ de Vaux 1939: 206. Torczyner (*Lachish I*: 173) suggested the name of the prophet Uriah for the reconstruction of Lachish 16, in relation to his unitary interpretation of the Lachish Letters.

¹³⁴ Dussaud 1938: 263, n. 1.

¹³⁵ Seow 2003: 217; Stökl 2012: 168; also, take note of the typo that switches ostrakon 16 with ostrakon 6 in Stökl’s introduction on the *nb'* in the “Lachish Letters” on p. 167.

¹³⁶ Thomas, D. W. 1946b: 13; Barstad 1993: 8.

¹³⁷ Barstad 1993: 8.

vowel), whilst the first *h* belonged to the previous word; the last *h* of this line could have belonged to the following broken off text, and it could have equally stood for the definite article *h-*. Be that as it may, I cannot reconstruct any sensible text, given that Lachish 16 is very fragmentary. We have very little to go on, and any reading one comes up with does not yield any real meaning to the fragmentary inscription. I therefore dismiss the idea of tracing a prophetic figure in Lachish 16 or any other related “wishful reconstructions” that have been done in the past.

5.8 The anonymous prophet in Lachish 3 and the laconic Lachish 6

Lachish 3.19–20

As discussed in §3.1.3, the *nb'* in Lachish 3.19–20 has either been syntactically identified with Ṭôbîyāhû (line 19),¹³⁸ or else Ṭôbîyāhû is considered a totally different person from the prophet.¹³⁹ This is a matter of syntactical interpretation, especially with how one chooses to interpret *m't*. Junge, Elliger, Thomas, and Müller claimed that the function of the *nb'* was that of a carrier or messenger (in an organized system of correspondence delivery for military purposes), who delivered the *spr* (letter) to Šallum, son of Yaddua', which Thomas called “a purely secular function” in his paper of 1950.¹⁴⁰ Conversely, Torczyner was against viewing the prophet as a mere messenger, as are Lemaire, and Pardee et al.¹⁴¹ Similarly, Barstad wants “to restore [the prophet] to ‘real prophethood,’” since linguistically, the meaning of *m't hnb'*, a formula

¹³⁸ Stökl 2012: 170.

¹³⁹ Smelik 1990.

¹⁴⁰ See Junge 1937: 17, n. 5; Elliger 1938: 45–46; Thomas, D. W. 1946a: 90; 1946b: 7–9; 1950: 2; 1958: 244–249; Müller 1970: 240–242.

¹⁴¹ *Lachish I*: 59; Lemaire 1977: 105, 109, n. 60; Pardee et al. (1982: 85).

frequently found in the Book of Jeremiah לאמור (מאת הנבא), can only and simply mean “from the prophet”.¹⁴²

As for the alleged prophetic message in Lachish 3.20, the true significance of the word *hšmr* has been debated by scholars: it is either a one-word (and therefore, brief) prophetic message,¹⁴³ or the first word of the prophetic utterance.¹⁴⁴ In his paper on the reception of prophetic messages by the officials and their subordinates in ancient Israel, Parker lists three possibilities for the word *hšmr*: (a) it is either the *first word* of a prophetic utterance; (b) or a *key word* of the utterance; (c) or else a *summation* of the utterance.¹⁴⁵ Williamson remarks that Hôša‘yāhû is most likely sending the prophetic message to his superior along with his own letter (Lachish 3), so in essence, this one (abstract) word (*hšmr*) can neither introduce a positive oracle nor form part of a warning.¹⁴⁶ Given the “totally decontextualized nature of this report”, one cannot tell whether its intention was positive or negative, and there is no further information to justify the conclusion that the message would have been of great concern to the military because of its supposed “demoralizing effect on the citizenry”.¹⁴⁷

Parker thus poses the question as to why the message that allegedly came from the prophet is referred to as “the message of Ṭôbîyāhû”.¹⁴⁸ Lemaire suggested that Ṭôbîyāhû might have been

¹⁴² Barstad 1993: 8–9; see also Parker (1994: 69) and Lemaire (1977: 105), both of whom deem *m't* to mean “from” and not “by”.

¹⁴³ Stökl 2012: 170.

¹⁴⁴ Williamson 2013: 281.

¹⁴⁵ Parker 1994: 71–72; see also Parker’s counterarguments (1994:71) to Hoftijzer (1986: 89), who believes the word *hšmr* stands for a *comment* on the prophetic utterance by citing Lachish 6.3–6 to support his idea; see also Pardee 1990: 93.

¹⁴⁶ Williamson 2013: 281.

¹⁴⁷ Williamson 2013: 282 *contra* Seow 2003: 213.

¹⁴⁸ Parker 1994: 70.

either a secretary performing the roles of scribe and official messenger, or else, in view of the title “servant of the king”, a messenger sent by the king himself.¹⁴⁹ Parker however finds it implausible that “the servant of the king” would serve as the prophet’s scribe or else would have done the prophet’s bidding. He argues that if *spr* is in construct state with a PN, then the person concerned is the author of the *spr*, and therefore ʾĪḥīyāhû composed the *spr* himself, reporting the message of a prophet.¹⁵⁰ Even so, Smelik concludes that there are two likely options for the role of ʾĪḥīyāhû in the construct *spr tbyhw*: either that the *spr* was written by ʾĪḥīyāhû or that the *spr* concerned ʾĪḥīyāhû.¹⁵¹ Pardee however does not see how the Hebrew phrase can be made to say that the letter was written by ʾĪḥīyāhû about a message from a prophet, because “from the prophet” follows the quasi-relative *hb’* (“which came”).¹⁵² He continues that, if one accepts Parker’s observation that *spr tbyhw* means “a letter written by [ʾĪḥīyāhû]”, then the phrase would mean that the prophet got hold of a letter written by ʾĪḥīyāhû and forwarded it to Šallum.¹⁵³ In this view, Pardee (who has changed his mind from his previous conviction of a prophetic message confiscated by royal authorities to keep the prophet’s activities in check¹⁵⁴) now accepts and proposes the possibility that the source of the word *hšmr* might not have been the prophet in the first place, but possibly ʾĪḥīyāhû, who is advising the prophet to “watch out”, perhaps to refrain from subversive activities.¹⁵⁵ This view would entail that perhaps the officials (secretly) supported, or at least sympathised with, the prophet and his activities. Torczyner himself had changed his view in his Hebrew edition, and argued that instead of the prophet composing the *spr*, it was ʾĪḥīyāhû who wrote and forwarded it to the prophet, who passed it on

¹⁴⁹ Lemaire 1977: 105, 108–109.

¹⁵⁰ Parker 1994: 70–71. Similarly Stökl (2012: 169–170).

¹⁵¹ Smelik 1990: 133–135; 1991: 125.

¹⁵² Pardee 2002: 79, n. 14; see also Pardee 1990: 93.

¹⁵³ Pardee 2002: 79, n. 14.

¹⁵⁴ Pardee et al. 1982: 88.

¹⁵⁵ Pardee 2002: 79–80, n. 14.

to Šallum as one of his supporters, who in turn passed it on to other supporters of the prophet, such as Hôša‘yāhû and eventually Yā’ûš.¹⁵⁶ Then again, one must not forget that Torczyner was identifying the prophet (and any allusions to prophetic activities he read in the “letters”) with Uriah, in view of his unitary concept of the ostraca.

Be that as it may, although the actual source of the “letter...saying, ‘Beware!’” (*spr... l’mr hšmr*) is highly controversial, I agree with Parker that anything from *spr* to *hšmr* in Lachish 3.19–21 is a *specification* by Hôša‘yāhû, and the mention of the theme of the message (*hšmr*) is part of this specification, i.e. lines 19–21 “[go] to great lengths to specify precisely the message that is being sent”.¹⁵⁷ I also agree with Williamson on the fact that Lachish 3 mentions too many personages in lines 19–21 for the modern reader to discern who is doing what, since the Hebrew syntax presents too many of what Rollston calls “interpretative approximations”.¹⁵⁸ The situation is the same with Lachish 4 and 6: so many PNN are mentioned in each ostrakon that it makes it syntactically difficult to reconstruct the role of every mentioned individual. Moreover, as Pardee points out, none of the personages mentioned in Lachish 3 is known historically, which thus makes any sound interpretation or historical reconstruction virtually impossible.¹⁵⁹ This also applies to any of the other ostraca from the corpus, for that matter.

Lachish 6.5–7

The passage in Lachish 6.5–7 also brought about mixed views. Indeed, the passage *prima facie* seems to echo the issues touched upon in Lachish 3.19–21, but the laconic state of the fading

¹⁵⁶ Tur-Sinai 1987: 87.

¹⁵⁷ Parker 1994: 71.

¹⁵⁸ Williamson 2013: 282. See Rollston 2010: 4–5.

¹⁵⁹ Pardee 2002: 79, n. 14.

inscription makes a comprehensive reconstruction of the text virtually impossible. Even so, this factor did not impede hypothetical reconstructions. As expected, Torczyner was the original advocate of filling in the lacuna in line 5 as *hnb'* (“the prophet”), and of course, he identified the prophet as Uriah.¹⁶⁰ The reading *hnb'* is supported by Gibson and Parker.¹⁶¹ Barstad called Torczyner’s reading of *hnb'* as “pure guesswork, and cannot be used as a basis for a discussion on prophecy in the Lachish Letters”.¹⁶²

In fact, the scholarly majority today and the recent handbook editions support the alternate reconstruction of *h[šrm]* (“the commanders”), which was proposed by Albright and de Vaux.¹⁶³ Lachish 6 has therefore been regarded to possess no value whatsoever for the (anonymous) prophet scenario, and the reading *hnb'* is disregarded by most.¹⁶⁴ Even so, Parker, who supports the reading *hnb'* despite the uncertainty, indeed analyses all possibilities carefully, and arrives at two observations about Lachish 6: (i) if the restoration *h[šrm]* is accepted, why would the sender comment on the letters of the officials and not on the letter of the king (lines 3–4)? And why would the officials be writing things that would demoralize the commanders and men in the field?; (ii) on the other hand, it seems likely that contemporary prophets (Jeremiah and his type) should have been charged with discouraging the inhabitants of Jerusalem. Parker therefore concludes that, on the face of the matter, it seems more plausible that the king and his officials referred to the words of a prophet, and hence it is to the latter that the author of Lachish 6 is

¹⁶⁰ Initially Torczyner (*Lachish I*: 117) reconstructed Lachish 6:5–7 as “the words of [the prophet] are not good, (liable) to loosen the hands, [to make] sink the hands of the coun[try and] the city...”, but he later abandoned the reading “the city” (*h'yr*) in line 7 (Tur-Sinai 1987: 138).

¹⁶¹ Gibson 1971: 35–36, 45; Parker 1994: 76–77. In addition, Ganor (1967: 74) argued that several of the ostraca (2, 3, 5–8, 12, 16, 18) refer to a prophet whose words cause demoralization among the city’s populace, a statement rightly dismissed by Barstad (1993: 8).

¹⁶² Barstad 1993: 8.

¹⁶³ Albright 1938: 15–16; de Vaux 1939: 198. See e.g. the handbooks of Pardee et al. (1982: 100) and Renz and Röllig (*HAE*, I: 426).

¹⁶⁴ See Barstad 1993:8; Stökl 2012: 169.

referring, which would further suggest that the king and his officials were taking the prophet's words seriously and passing them on for the consideration of the commanders, unlike the reaction presented in Jer. 38:4.¹⁶⁵ Parker therefore remarks that the author of Lachish 6 disagrees with the king's and the official's actions, and is urging his superior Yā'ûš to write back questioning such policy: *hl' tktb 'l[yhm] l'[mr lm]h t'sw kz't* ("By all means write to them: Why are you behaving like this?" [his translation]) (lines 8–10).¹⁶⁶

As plausible as the above hypothesis might be, the laconic state of the inscription, however, inhibits any sound judgement. All in all, I agree with Thomas when he remarked that, in our studies of the history of the Jeremian age, the Lachish ostraca "enable us to do no more than catch a glimpse of the contemporary scene", and whether the phrase *lrpt ydy* ("to weaken the hands of" – Lachish 6.6) is to be considered "a reflection of the activity of the appeasement party which sympathised with Jeremiah in his policy towards the Babylonians, must remain uncertain in view of the state of the text at this point".¹⁶⁷ He further points out that there is no mention of the Babylonians in the ostraca, although the suggested reading of *kśdm* had been proposed by de Vaux, which nevertheless remains *most* uncertain.¹⁶⁸ The remaining similarity between Lachish 6.5–7 and Jer. 38:4, states Thomas, is in the phrase *lrpt ydy* (Piel inf. cons.) ("to weaken the hands of" – Lachish 6.6) and מרפא את־ידי (Piel ptc.) ("weakeneth the hands" – Jer. 38:4), but the fact that the same phrase occurs in both passages does not necessarily warrant any connection between the two.¹⁶⁹ The phrase was undoubtedly a stock phrase to denote a state of

¹⁶⁵ Parker 1994: 76.

¹⁶⁶ Parker 1994: 76; note that Parker identifies the author of Lachish 6 with Hôša'yāhû, but I refrain from identifying the unknown sender/subordinate, since we are not given his name in Lachish 6.

¹⁶⁷ Thomas, D. W. 1950: 2.

¹⁶⁸ de Vaux 1939: 197 *apud* Thomas, D. W. 1950: 2.

¹⁶⁹ Thomas, D. W. 1950: 15.

demoralization, dread or discouragement, and is encountered several times in the Prophets.¹⁷⁰ Thomas, *contra* Torczyner, pointed out that incidentally none of the Hebrew passages making use of this phrase is applied in the Hebrew Bible to Uriah.¹⁷¹

To conclude this section, despite the fact that five of the “guardroom” ostraca belong to the same vessel, and despite the similar handwriting in some of the long, legible inscriptions, one must keep in mind the hundreds of jar fragments discovered alongside the 16 ostraca in the “guardroom”, which may once have borne inscriptions.¹⁷² As a result, we have seen above that some commentators, among them Birnbaum, de Vaux, Elliger, and Thomas, cautiously argued against lumping all the ostraca into a single historical context and explaining them in terms of events and personages from the Hebrew Bible, as attempted by Torczyner, Jack, Dussaud, and others. Pardee and colleagues are correct in stating that the primary value of the ostraca is historical in the broad sense of the term: they provide epigraphic data which in a general sense reveal a situation much like that described in the last two chapters of the Second Book of Kings and the Book of Jeremiah.¹⁷³ Any contacts between the ostraca and the Book of Jeremiah, or any prophet that existed at the time for that matter, are indirect and not direct, and “whatever the precise relationship of these [inscriptions] with Jeremiah may have been, their general contributions to our knowledge of Jeremiah’s time is precious enough” (Chapter 6).¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁰ Thomas, D. W. 1950: 16: see the use of the Qal רפה plus the subject ידיים in 2 Sam. 4:1; Is. 13:7; Jer. 6:24; 50:43; Ezek 7:17; 21:12; Zeph. 3:16, and in Jer. 49:24 the phrase lacks the word ידיים; the phrase ידיים רפות (“slack hands”) is used figuratively of fear and discouragement in Is. 35:3 and Job 4:3; moreover, the phrase רפון ידיים (“the sinking down of hands”) is used similarly of helpless terror in Jer. 47:3; and last but not least, the phrase with Piel ptc. מרפים ידי (“weakened the hands”) is used in Ezra 4:4. On the metaphoric use of יד (hand) see also Roncace 2005: 73.

¹⁷¹ Thomas, D. W. 1950: 16.

¹⁷² Starkey 1938: 12.

¹⁷³ Pardee et al. 1982: 77–78.

¹⁷⁴ Pardee et al. 1982: 78.

5.9 Lachish, Azekah, and *bythrpd* in Lachish 4

Ostrakon 4 is the only Lachish ostrakon so far to feature the very name of Lachish (*lkš*) and that of Azekah (*ʿzqh*), and this combination of place names immediately reminded scholars about the mention of both sites in Jer. 34:7, which describes the two sites as the last standing fortified cities, alongside the capital, during the Babylonian attack of 588/6 B.C.E. This striking “parallel”, if we can call it so, with the Hebrew Bible set off eager debates that aimed at placing the “Lachish Letters” in a specific time-frame and at associating events and personages featuring in the ostraca with those of the Hebrew Bible, and *vice versa*. The very mention of the place name Lachish also led the editor, his followers, and other scholars to consider the identification of the site of Tell ed-Duweir with none other than Lachish.

Lachish

As mentioned in §1.1, ancient Lachish has been identified with four different localities over the decades (Tell el-Heşy, Tell ed-Duweir, Bet ‘Auwa, and Tell ‘Etun). The proposition of Tell ed-Duweir was given by Albright in 1929, and Torczyner stated outright that the lines in Lachish 4.9b–13 “give positive proof that Tell ed-Duweir, where the letters were found, really is the site of ancient Lachish”,¹⁷⁵ and that “it is clear from this that the place where Ya’ush lives is none other than Lachish”.¹⁷⁶ In a short but precise statement Thomas questioned Torczyner’s claims and assumptions by pointing out the following:

...it cannot be regarded as certain that the sender of [Lachish 4] had Tell ed-Duweir, and not some other place, in mind when he wrote that he and his fellows were watching the signal-stations of Lachish. There is indeed nothing in the lines in question to forbid the supposition that both Tell ed-Duweir and Lachish were signal-stations, and that the military governor of Tell ed-Duweir commanded all three stations – Tell ed-Duweir, Lachish and Azeqah – and perhaps also some

¹⁷⁵ *Lachish I*: 84.

¹⁷⁶ *Lachish I*: 85.

others. Again, no great weight need be attached to the fact that the letter was found at Tell ed-Duweir. We know nothing of its “history” prior to its discovery there. Even if its original destination was in fact Lachish – and we do not know for certain that it was – it could still be argued that it might have been brought to Tell ed-Duweir later.¹⁷⁷

The above are indeed valid points when faced with such sporadic data (the brief information given in Lachish 4, and the other legible ostraca for that matter), which are mere snapshots of historical events of the time. Thomas was also correct in saying that, although Lachish 4 is the only legible ostrakon from Tell ed-Duweir to mention the name Lachish,

it does not in itself provide sufficient evidence to prove that Tell ed-Duweir marks the site of ancient Lachish. While there are good grounds for believing that Tell ed-Duweir is to be identified with Lachish, the evidence of [Lachish 4] is of too uncertain a character to warrant its use even as an additional argument in favour of the identification.¹⁷⁸

Indeed, the identification of Tell ed-Duweir with ancient Lachish has been proved archaeologically (Chapter 1), but Thomas was right in pointing out the dangers of claiming heavy assumptions based on terse epigraphic evidence alone. The brief glimpses of information one gets from Lachish 4 are the following: (i) a subordinate following his superior’s orders (likely written in a previous correspondence that unfortunately has not come down to us); (ii) military reports and events relating to places and people (e.g. the place *bythrp* is apparently deserted [see below], while a man is taken up to “the city” (supposedly Jerusalem), either for questioning or as a prisoner); (iii) and the fact that (fire-/smoke-) signals were in practice at the time, which finds a mention in Jer. 6:1.

¹⁷⁷ Thomas, D. W. 1940: 149. See also Jirku 1939: 153; Parrot 1939: 419–420; de Vaux 1939: 201.

¹⁷⁸ Thomas, D. W. 1940: 149.

Azekah

Outside Lachish 4.12–13, the name of the fortress Azekah (*'zqh*) occurs seven times in the Hebrew Bible (as a geographical landmark – Josh 10:10,11; 15:35; 1 Sam. 17:1; as mentioned above, in Jer. 34:7; as a destination of the returning Babylonian exiles – Neh. 11:30; as one of the fortified cities during Rehoboam's reign to guard the Judaeian highlands – 2 Chr. 11:9). On the presumed fall of Azekah as allegedly reported in Lachish 4, as per Torczyner's interpretation, see the discussion in §6.3.6.

Azekah, after Lachish, was the second most important city in the Judaeian Shephelah. The city is identified with modern Tell Zakariya (Tel Azekah), which lies on the summit of a ridge, ca. 370 m above sea-level, running north-south that forms the prominent borderline between the Lower Shephelah to the west and the upper Shephelah to the east.¹⁷⁹ The tell is triangular, covering a maximum area of ca. 45,000m² and extending over ca. 45 dunams.¹⁸⁰ The mound was excavated in three seasons during the years 1898–1899 by Fredrick Jones Bliss and R. A. S. Macalister, with four short reports appearing in the PEF *Quarterly Supplement*, and a final report was published in 1902.¹⁸¹ The limited excavations, together with an archaeological survey of the tell indicate that the site was occupied from the Early Bronze Age II–III up to the Early Islamic period. Tel Azekah has been recently undergoing renewed excavations by the Lautenschläger Azekah Expedition, as part of the Elah Valley Project. The expedition is directed by Oded Lipschits and Yuval Gadot (Tel Aviv University), and Manfred Oeming (Ruprecht-Karls-

¹⁷⁹ King 1993: 84; Dagan 2011: 72.

¹⁸⁰ Dagan 2011: 73.

¹⁸¹ See Bliss 1899a; 1899b; 1899c; 1900; Bliss and Macalister 1902: 12–27; see also the recent reappraisal of the site by Dagan (2011) with further references there.

Universität, Heidelberg).¹⁸² After an intensive ground-survey in 2009, renewed excavation seasons commenced in the summer of 2012 and proceeded annually till 2016 (Fig. 18). A hiatus is planned for 2017, but further excavations are scheduled to continue in the future.

bythrpd

The word *bythrpd* in Lachish 4.5 presumably denotes a place name, and is apparently desolate at the time of writing of the ostrakon (§3.1.4). Its location remains unknown as does that of the ostrakon's sender.¹⁸³ Begin discusses the one possible clue to the identification of *bythrpd*: a 4th-century B.C.E. Aramaic ostrakon, first published by Lemaire, which bears the words: *mršh wrpd glyt*.¹⁸⁴ The coupling of Mareshah – a Judaeen administrative centre in the 4th century B.C.E. – and a place supposedly called *rpd*, could imply some possibilities for the identification of *bythrpd*. The 4th-century B.C.E. *rpd* raises the question whether this is the shortened name of *bythrpd* in the pre-exilic Lachish 4. If this is the case, then *bythrpd* could have been located close to Mareshah. Thus, Jack, and later Lemaire, proposed that the message of Lachish 4 could have originated from Mareshah, where the sender was stationed, and from whence he checked about *bythrpd* and found it was deserted.¹⁸⁵ Moreover, if the sender of the letter was stationed at Mareshah, then a line of vision should have existed between Mareshah and Lachish for those standing at Mareshah to be able to see the signals of Lachish, whereas for Azekah there was no line of vision, if one takes the statement in Lachish 4.12–13 in a literal sense.¹⁸⁶ Mareshah (modern Tell Sandahanna) lies ca. 7km north-east of Lachish and ca. 12.87km south of

¹⁸² See Lipschits, Gadot and Oeming 2012; <<http://azekah.org/>>, last accessed on 10 September 2016.

¹⁸³ Begin 2002: 168.

¹⁸⁴ Lemaire 1996: 114; Begin 2000: 119–129; 2002: 169–174.

¹⁸⁵ Jack 1938c: 184–185; Lemaire 1996: 114.

¹⁸⁶ Begin 2002: 169, 170.

Azekah.¹⁸⁷ The identification of the site of Mareshah in Tell Sandahanna was possible due to the ancient name in nearby Khirbet Marash, and to a Greek inscription discovered in a burial cave close to the mound that mentions the place name Marisa.¹⁸⁸ Begin and Grushka mapped lines of vision in the Lachish/Tell ed-Duweir-Azekah/Tell Zakariyah area, and confirmed that no line of vision existed between Mareshah and Azekah, and that Mareshah is the only Iron II fortress in this area that meets the two constraints imposed by ostrakon 4 if literally interpreted – from there Lachish could be seen but not Azekah.¹⁸⁹

5.10 Final considerations on the “guardroom” ostraca: a mixed archive of documents

Given the above archaeological and epigraphic reappraisals regarding the Lachish ostraca, I can conclude that the extant “guardroom” cache of 16 ostraca constitutes a mixed archive of documents, varying between compositions *in situ* and incoming documents.

It is possible that the two lists of PNN (Lachish 1 and 11) were memos composed at the site, perhaps directly at the gate or in the gatehouse of Lachish, to be eventually kept in the “guardroom”. Neither list contains any numbers, commodity symbols, or even a title of some kind that would indicate the purpose of either list. Despite such hypotheses as incoming (accredited) messengers listed at the gate of Lachish, especially with regards to Lachish 1,¹⁹⁰ neither list contains the place names of the individual men’s places of origin, which would likely be expected when taking note of high-ranking men entering the fortress¹⁹¹ (cf. the Aḥiqam

¹⁸⁷ Jack (1938b: 185) wrote “four or five miles north-east of Lachish...and eight miles south of Azeqah”; cf. Lemaire 1977: 115–116.

¹⁸⁸ Begin 2002: 169 and references there. Cf. Avi-Yonah 1977.

¹⁸⁹ See Begin and Grushka 1999; Begin 2002: 170–171; see also Lemaire 1977: 114.

¹⁹⁰ See the respective propositions by Elliger (1939: 64–65) and Lehmann (2003: 94).

¹⁹¹ See Vaccari (1939b: 182, n. 1) on Lachish 1.

ostrakon from Ḥorvat ‘Uza¹⁹²). In any case, such lists could have easily been written on the spot, for whatever reason. The purpose of either list would be even harder to pin down if one were to argue that these lists were sent or brought to Lachish. If the latter, then such information was common knowledge only to the senders and/or messengers and the persons receiving them at the gate (or the intended recipients).

The faded ostraca (Lachish 7, 10, 12, 14, and 15) pose a problem to any interpretation of the “guardroom” ostraca. These ostraca have been considered illegible by scholars and were discarded from their respective discussions. The physical examination of Lachish 10 and 14 coupled with their IAA photographs enabled me to spot random letters on each ostrakon. To his credit, Torczyner made brief comments on the letters he could spot on each ostrakon, which he prudently did not interpret because of their faded status.¹⁹³ The many letters spread over the surface of each ostrakon indicate that both Lachish 10 and 14 once bore long texts, perhaps other long lists of PNN of sorts, or long epistolary documents. As remarked in §5.2.3, Lachish 15 likely constitutes a small repaired ostrakon (bottom right), unfortunately washed out, and a large non-inscribed sherd. The washed-out Lachish 7, with its roughly burnished surface, seems to bear a few letters that are otherwise difficult to identify. We thus cannot discern the type of document it carried. The fine surface of Lachish 12 suffered several deep scratches, and the inscription was lost during the cleaning process, but a photograph taken before cleaning aided the keen eyes of Harding and Torczyner to spot a few words on the sherd that recall the epistolary formulae appearing in Lachish 2–6, 8, and 9.¹⁹⁴ It is possible that Lachish 13 constitutes an

¹⁹² See §5.3.4 above, and the arguments by Beit-Arieh (1986–1987; 2007a: 139–143); Aḥituv (2008: 166–168); Mendel (2011); Na’aman (2012: 218–219; 2015: 53).

¹⁹³ See *Lachish I*: 140–141, 162–163.

¹⁹⁴ *Lachish I*: 150–153.

instruction from a superior to his subordinates, which makes it the only legible ostrakon in the Lachish corpus with a superior–inferior relationship between correspondents (see §3.1.13 and Catalogue A). If this is the case, then this document could either be an instruction written *in situ* and passed on to low-rank officials, or else it was an incoming instruction from outside of Lachish/Tell ed-Duweir, but the sender and recipients remain unknown.

The legible ostraca that are written in epistolary style are Lachish 2–6, the faded Lachish 8 and 9, and the short message 18. The origin of the epistolary documents has been subject to a highly controversial discussion for over eighty years. As seen above, scholars are torn between the “compositions *in situ*” scenario and the “incoming messages” hypothesis.

1) *Compositions in situ: drafts, copies, orally-delivered messages*

In §5.3.4 we discussed how the “drafts/copies” scenario can be challenged. Barstad introduces the possibility of orally-delivered messages at the gate, given war time conditions and the danger of letters and the messengers carrying them falling into enemy hands. This idea would perfectly explain the left-out details of sender/s and recipient/s, the five ostraca common to one and the same vessel, and the use of pottery sherds as “memory pads”. In addition, Parker argues that the likely urgent situation of the time could not warrant scribes affording to make file copies and/or multiple drafts of any documents they composed or any messages the fortress received. He further remarks that the location of the epistolary documents inside the “guardroom” strongly suggests that Lachish was the recipient and not the sender, and thus the “guardroom” probably functioned as the immediate depository of such documents. As shown in §5.3.4, Parker is in favour of the actual received letters scenario, which brings me to my next point.

2) *Incoming messages: epistolary documents received at Lachish*

Adding to the points mentioned above, Parker also commented on pottery sherds functioning as writing material for short texts or for texts of transient value. Indeed, the extant military reports in the Lachish corpus did not essentially warrant being written on papyrus. The act of writing and sending such reports around seems to have been a common day-to-day activity among the military personnel, and ceramic sherds were an abundant material to function as writing surfaces. The use of ostraca was common practice all over ancient Israel and Judah, as seen above. In fact, in §5.3.4 I also discussed case studies of the places that have, thus far, yielded such epistolary documents, or fragments thereof: Tell ed-Duweir, Tel Arad, Tel Malḥata (one fragmentary letter in Edomite script), Tel ‘Ira (one fragmentary letter), and Ḥorvat ‘Uza.

The situation with the epistolary documents of Lachish is simple: both Barstad and Parker could be right! Given the problematic and controversial archaeology of the “guardroom” ostraca, either of the hypotheses put forth by Barstad and Parker fits. The concept of orally-delivered messages that were taken down by scribes at the gate is as credible as having actual messages on pottery sherds carried by messengers and presented at the gate of Lachish. Since we are in no position to affirm either one or the other, both hypotheses can fit the Lachish scenario, i.e. the extant Lachish epistolary documents could have been a mixture of orally-delivered messages and received written messages.

Even so, I must stress some observations that would make the concept of actual received letters more practical than oral messages, at least in some cases of the Lachish epistolary documents.

For the sake of consistency I will henceforth refer to the epistolary documents as letters (note the lack of inverted commas). Some of the messages of the Lachish corpus are quite long and elaborate to be orally-delivered messages. Most of the letters are written in very neat if not elegant cursive Palaeo-Hebrew script, which shows the patient skill of the scribes behind the inscriptions. Moreover, the virtual absence of scribal mistakes (except for Lachish 3.21 and 5.9) coupled with the constant use of elaborate letter formularies do not fit a scenario where a scribe or scribes took down orally-delivered messages at the gate with such patience and attention to detail. Granted, the elaborate formulae (so far attested only in the Lachish corpus) likely constituted stock language employed by scribes and literate people of the time, and therefore such diction was well-known to scribes to easily cite by heart. Then again, for the same reason given above, would scribes afford the time to write such long elaborate greetings in a message dictated by messengers at the gate? That the messengers uttered or requested such formalities to be included in their messages, perhaps by default and as a sign of respect towards the addressee/s, is a possibility. Then again, the reality of such a painstaking scenario would be rather far-fetched. I can bring to attention the Mešad Ḥashavyahu “judicial plea” as a case-in-point of an oral message delivered at the gate by a common worker (not a messenger in this case), and taken down by a professional scribe (§4.4). The “judicial plea”, written in apparent epistolary form, is said to have been dictated by the afflicted worker to a scribe at the gate of the Mešad Ḥashavyahu fortress. The neat script is testimony to a skilled scribe, but the constant repetition, the lack of a *praesciptio* (neither address nor greeting), and the obvious lack of standard letter formulary knowledge indicate a rather passionate direct speech by the disgruntled worker, who is not well-versed with epistolary tradition. This dictation was apparently taken down word-for-word by a scribe at the gate to be eventually delivered to its intended recipient, whom we know only

through the epithet *śr*. To date, the unique layout and content of this inscription make it stand out as a *unicum* in the extant Palaeo-Hebrew ostraca.¹⁹⁵

On the contrary, the elaboration and attention to detail found in the Lachish letters rather calls for a much more plausible scenario of having the senders dictating their letters to their scribes, or perhaps the senders writing the letters themselves (cf. arguments for Lachish 3 in §§3.1.3, 4.1, and 4.2) in the comforts of their own stations. The latter idea tallies with the “actual received letters” scenario. Moreover, the Lachish letters constantly refer to other letters that were passed around (*spr* – Lachish 3.5, 9 [“letter/scribe”], 10, 11; Lachish 18.2; *spr.tbyhw* – Lachish 3.19; *sprm* – Lachish 5.5 [reconstructed], 6–7; *spr.hmlk*, *spry.h[śrm]* – Lachish 6.4), which all the more accentuates the common practice of writing and sending letters (§4.3).

5.11 The controversial identities of the correspondents

In this final section it is time to discuss the debated identities of the correspondents of the Lachish letters. If these messages did come from outside Tell ed-Duweir, it remains unclear why only three of the extant legible letters feature the name of one common recipient, whereas only one ostrakon features the name of its sender. The rest of the ostraca only feature the respective epithets of the sender/s (*ʿbdk*) and the recipient/s (*ʿdny*), which reflect an inferior–superior relationship.

¹⁹⁵ See Pardee et al. 1982: 153–154, 156.

5.11.1 The recipient/s: Yā'ûš and the anonymous *'dny*

For the past decades, most scholars have come to accept the notion that the recipient of the Lachish missives was a military commander or a superior officer, who went by the name of Yā'ûš (or Yā'ôš). This PN clearly appears in the respective address formulae of Lachish 2.1 and 6.1, and in the reconstructed Lachish 3.2, all with the epithet *'dny* preceding it. Aside from the faded Lachish 13, which seems to constitute an instruction from a superior to his subordinates, with nothing to indicate, least of all confirm, that Yā'ûš was the superior in question, the rest of the legible messages of Lachish are from inferior to superior, hence the recurring epithets of *'dny* for the recipient/s and *'bdk* for the sender/s.¹⁹⁶ Since Yā'ûš is addressed as *'dny* by his subordinate/s, most scholars have, by default, assigned this PN to the nameless “lord” or high-ranking officer, who is greeted anonymously in the other legible messages through the simple use of the epithet *'dny* and without any address whatsoever (4, 5, 8, 9, 18) (§4.5.3).¹⁹⁷ The scholarly majority, with Torczyner as forerunner, have thus posited that the *'dny* must have been the same person throughout who received the supposed letters. Thus, Yā'ûš was believed to be the governor of the fortress of Lachish, who likely held office at the gatehouse.

Thus far in my discussion, I have argued that to conceive a sole historical context for this very small extant corpus of inscriptions would be unjustified and difficult to prove. The ostraca present random, laconic pieces of information, and the letters themselves are few in number, as opposed to what might originally have existed in the “guardroom” before the conflagration destroyed it (see other scholars’ reactions in §5.6). Apart from the three ostraca above, the PN

¹⁹⁶ Or else, Lachish 13 could be the remaining part of another long message, perhaps a report (see discussion in §3.1.13).

¹⁹⁷ Cf. the Mešad Ḥashavyahu judicial plea, which includes only the epithet *šr* for the recipient, and never his name.

Yā'ûš does not appear anywhere else on the site of Tell ed-Duweir.¹⁹⁸ The little information we possess about Yā'ûš is that he was a person of high rank, towards whom his subordinates were grateful (for remembering them and forwarding them letters), and to whom they sent routine politico-military reports. Moreover, if we accept the reconstructed PN of Yā'ûš in Lachish 3.2, then we can say that Yā'ûš also knew a subordinate with the name of Hôša'yāhû, whose literacy he questioned, and from whom he received reports about the movements of the military and of letters involving the royal court and an anonymous prophet. All these sporadic tidbits of information are simply snapshots. They can only suggest that Yā'ûš was an important figure in the contemporary politico-military scene, and a high-ranking official in the Shephelah. This is as far as one can cautiously discern about who Yā'ûš was historically, and the idea that he could have been the governor of Lachish is, at this stage, a mere possibility.

5.11.2 The sender/s: Hôša'yāhû and the anonymous 'bdk

Contrary to most of the Arad letters, which are written from superior to inferior, the legible Lachish letters are from inferior to superior, namely submitting reports and requesting information.¹⁹⁹ Whoever was responsible for the writing of these messages is a highly debated matter. The similarity in greetings and deferential formulae (§4.4), as well as in the conjunctions (*whnh* – Lachish 6:5; *wky* – Lachish 3:8; 4:4 (obv.); *w'th* – Lachish 3:4; 4:2; 9:2–3 [reconstructed]), may reasonably reflect the scribal tradition in ancient Judah, and does not mean

¹⁹⁸ Except perhaps in the reconstructed Aramaic inscription on a limestone altar discovered at Lachish (5th–4th century B.C.E.), which many scholars discussed, and the questionable PN reconstructed in lines 1–2 varied between J[oa]s son of Meh[ir](?) (Dupont-Sommer), Ya'osh(?) son of Mazzer(?) (Albright's old reading), 'Iyyōš son of Ma[h]lî (Cross, and Albright's revised reading), and Yaush son of Maḥalyah (Aharoni) (see Diringer 1953: 358–359 on A. Dupont-Sommer's note; see also Albright 1982 and references there). Even so, the altar dates to the Persian period, and the fragmentary PN remains controversial.

¹⁹⁹ See arguments by Pardee et al. 1982: 145–163, esp. pp. 157–161.

or guarantee that the writer was the same.²⁰⁰ Birnbaum and de Vaux regarded the “Lachish Letters” as the product of different scribes, with which I fully agree, as I have shown in §§2.3 and 4.2.²⁰¹ Of course, one could argue that scribes were perhaps employed by the different low rank officials or subordinates sending the messages, which would explain the different handwriting and idiosyncrasies. Alternatively, the learned subordinates wrote the letters themselves. From the information presented in the extant legible ostraca we only know of the servant Hôša‘yāhû, who identifies himself in the opening greeting of Lachish 3.1–2.

As discussed in §4.5, Lachish 2–6, 8, 9, and 18 reflect correspondence between subalterns and their superiors. We cannot be sure of the number of the senders, or whether they were one and the same with the servant Hôša‘yāhû (Lachish 3). One should tread with caution when dealing with such a small surviving corpus of documents. As other scholars remarked before me, the similarities in most formulae and the sometimes repeated themes discussed in the letters do not necessarily reflect a correspondence between two people only.

Furthermore, there have been attempts at tracing the source of the letters. If the messages were sent to Tell ed-Duweir, and with such quick response from the senders, given the many allusions to other letters sent around and a few temporal indications as well (Lachish 3.6; 5.9; 18.1), the location of the senders had to be in other outposts in the Shephelah. As discussed in §5.9, Begin’s studies revolve around Lachish 4 in particular. He argues that the location of the sender of Lachish 4, who reports he can see Lachish but not Azekah, had to be stationed at Mareshah, if one takes the statement in Lachish 4 as simply a question of topographic visibility. Apart from

²⁰⁰ See Na’aman 2003: 175; Rollston 2015:89–90; see also §4.1.

²⁰¹ Birnbaum 1939: 20–23; de Vaux 1939: 205.

some epigraphic evidence that suggests Mareshah as a likely contender to fit the source theory, this Iron II fortress is the only one in the area which meets the two constraints mentioned in Lachish 4, i.e. Maresha had a better line of vision towards Lachish than towards Azekah.²⁰² This theory remains an attractive possibility for the Lachish 4 ostrakon. Can we apply it to the other letters? Unfortunately, we cannot. Whilst Lachish 4 gives us a few geographic hints that can aid us in a reconstruction of events revolving around the Lachish 4 ostrakon, its sender, and the information it gleans, we cannot go any further than cautious suppositions. As mentioned in §5.9, Thomas was right in dismissing Lachish 4 from the list of other pieces of evidence that give good reason to identify Tell ed-Duweir with Lachish, because Lachish 4 alone is not strong enough evidence, and we do not know the history of this ostrakon, just as we do not know the history of the rest of the ostraca, for that matter.²⁰³ The sources of the letters could have been anywhere in the kingdom of Judah, ranging from the Shephelah, to the Negev, to Jerusalem even.

If, for the sake of argument, we accept the notion of not one but several subordinates behind the letters, then we can argue that these senders were in the military circle, perhaps low-ranking officials, who submitted routine reports. They informed their superiors of troop movements, correspondence that presumably dealt with the contemporary political scene, logistical information, movements of certain personages, and confirmation of the execution of their superiors' instructions. In the inferior-superior relationship of the letters, we notice straight away the ever present respectful politeness of the subordinates towards their superiors (§4.5). Other than that, the information in most legible messages is rather simple and straightforward, sprinkled

²⁰² See Begin and Grushka 1999; Begin 2000; 2002.

²⁰³ Thomas, D. W. 1940.

with brief reports of politico-military affairs that recall events mentioned in the Book of Jeremiah.

5.12 Concluding remarks

When looking closely at the above archaeological and epigraphic issues, we are left with several open questions. The limitations in the archaeological method, recording, and post-excavation documentation left certain lacunae in our understanding of the so-called “Lachish Letters”. Contrary to the popular belief that was originally advocated by the editor, this corpus actually comprises a small extant sample of varying documents, likely constituting a mixture of incoming information and compositions *in situ*. The epistolary ostraca are the product of skilled and well-versed scribes, but it remains debated how many actual recipients and scribes were involved in this correspondence, since we are left only with the PNN of a superior Yā’ûš, his subordinate Hôša’yāhû, and vague addresses to nameless superiors (*'dny*) by their nameless subordinates (*'bdk*). Equally debated are their stations or locations. The terse content presents us with mere politico-military glimpses of the last decades of the Judaeian monarchy.

6. The “Lachish Letters” in their Historical Context: Textual and Archaeological Conformity

It is clear that the 21 ostraca under study comprise various types of documents, the majority of which are written in a late 7th–early 6th-century Palaeo-Hebrew script (Chapter 2) and were discovered in a destruction layer of the early 6th century B.C.E. (Chapters 1 and 5). The small glimpses of information in the legible “guardroom” messages locate this corpus in the final decades of the Judahite kingdom (Chapters 3 and 4). It is now time to place the “Lachish Letters” in their wider historical perspective, in an attempt at a better understanding of the ostraca in their contemporary world and of their import for our knowledge of the period.

6.1 Textual sources and the last decades of the Kingdom of Judah

For the period between the respective summers of 609 and 587/6 B.C.E. we have a number of sources that describe the political development of the period and the internal activities in Judah, among them the Hebrew Bible (MT) and the Septuagint version (LXX), 1 Esdras, Josephus (*Antiquities* X, 5–7), and a fragmentary series of Babylonian tablets that provide a chronicle of political and military accomplishments of various Neo-Babylonian kings.

6.1.1 Biblical Texts and the Babylonian Chronicle

The Book of Jeremiah

The Hebrew Bible throws light on the political development of the aforesaid period and the internal activities in Judah in its final decades. Aside from the historiographical compositions of 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles, and some information in the Book of Ezekiel, the Book of Jeremiah sheds the most light on these decades.¹

During the time of Jeremiah, the kings of Judah were the following: Josiah (640–609 B.C.E.); Jehoahaz II (Shallum) (609 B.C.E.); Jehoiakim (Eliakim) (609–598 B.C.E.); Jehoiachin (Jeconiah/Coniah) (597 B.C.E.); Zedekiah (Mattaniah) (597–586 B.C.E.). Historically, the book spans from 627 B.C.E. (the 13th year of Josiah, during which the call of Jeremiah supposedly happened) to 538 B.C.E. (the Fall of Babylon).² In the Oracles Against the Nations (OAN) (Chapters 25:15–38 and 46–51), Jeremiah proclaims Assyria's destruction at the hands of Babylon and the latter's struggle with Egypt, the last remaining mighty contender for control over the region. Judah is caught in the middle and faced with the choice either to side with Egypt as its loyal vassal or to surrender to Babylon, the latter becoming the focus of interest in the closing chapters 50–51.³ Jeremiah preaches subservience to Nebuchadnezzar II but knows that ultimately Yahweh is Lord and Judge of all nations.⁴ Many prophets other than Jeremiah are mentioned in the book (e.g. Jer. 6:13–15; 23:9–40; 28), who proclaim words of peace and divine salvation, thus likely creating a difficult situation for the people of Judah in deciding which was the authentic word of God, what choices to make, and the resulting consequences (as hinted at in

¹ On the Book of Jeremiah, see Carroll 1989; Davidson 1993; McKane 1996; van der Wal 2004; Smelik 2004a; Grabbe 2006; Brueggemann 2007; Lundbom 2010.

² See Seitz (1989: 12–13) for a list of specifically dated passages in the Book of Jeremiah.

³ See Brueggemann 2007: 111–115 and references there; see also arguments in Smelik 2004b.

⁴ Lundbom 2010: 105.

Jer. 20:7). Many of the prophets remain anonymous, while others are mentioned by name, such as Micah of Moresheth (Jer. 26:18–19) (not a contemporary of Jeremiah), Uriah son of Shemaiah from Qiryat-Ye‘arim (Jer. 26:20–23), and Hananiah (Jer. 28). Jeremiah accused the latter of being a false prophet, while the other two spoke in the name of Yahweh and proclaimed disaster upon the nation and Jerusalem. Hezekiah acted upon Micah’s prophecy by trying to honour Yahweh and win his favour, whereas Jehoiakim tried to have Uriah killed, and when the latter fled to Egypt, the king sent Elnathan son of Achbor and some men to Egypt to fetch the prophet. They brought him to Jehoiakim, who had him killed and his body thrown in a public burial-ground (see arguments in §§5.6 and 6.3.2).

Among the miscellaneous narratives (Chapters 26–36) are biographical pieces (Chapters 26–29, 32, 34–44) that claim to recount key incidents in Jeremiah’s life, and are usually provided with precise dating, the earliest dated to 609 B.C.E. (Jer. 26:1).⁵ Many of the events described in these chapters find parallels in the Babylonian Chronicle. An account of the events leading to the siege of Jerusalem is given in Chapters 37–45 (including Jeremiah’s imprisonment, the Babylonian siege, the fall of Jerusalem, and the aftermath) and again in Chapter 52, and it further finds repetition in 2 Kgs 24:18–25:30 and 2 Chr. 36:13–21.

In his essay on the alleged “lying pen of the scribes”, Grabbe fully accepts the general understanding that the Book of Jeremiah has a long history of development and redaction, especially as reflected by the differences between the LXX and the traditional MT text.⁶ He concludes that a number of texts seem to have been written close to the time of the events

⁵ Davidson 1993: 346. See analysis in Grabbe 2006, and the arguments on the biblical narrative of Jer. 37–44 in Roncace 2005.

⁶ Grabbe 2006: 201; see in particular Carroll’s (1989) analysis.

described, and that although the original form and transmission of these texts is a separate question, despite (extensive) editing, some of the data tackled by Grabbe could have been borrowed from 2 Kings (which seems to have some reliable information for this period of Judahite history), while others are only known from Jeremiah (cf. e.g. 2 Kgs 25; Jer. 34, 37, 52).⁷

The Babylonian Chronicle

Supplementing the above biblical texts are a few external sources that offer a detailed framework of dates, namely Egyptian documentation and, to a much greater extent, the Babylonian Chronicle, the series of cuneiform tablets recording major events in Babylonian history (today held in the British Museum).⁸ Unfortunately, only a few compilations survived, and they give a fragmentary chronicle ranging from at least the mid 8th century till the 3rd century B.C.E. Seven tablets (Grayson's *ABC* 1–7) have so far been discovered of the Neo-Babylonian Series, which begin from the reign of Nabunaser (747–734 B.C.E.) and reach to the Persian conquest of Babylon (539 B.C.E.). They thus fill in some of the gaps in our knowledge of the Neo-Babylonian Kingdom or Chaldaean regime, including the battles of Carchemish and Hamath, and the capture of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar II in 597 B.C.E. Tablet B.M. 21946 (Grayson's *ABC* 5 – the Jerusalem Chronicle) is of interest to the present discussion, as it covers part of Nebuchadnezzar's history (49 lines for 11 years, 605–595 B.C.E.).⁹

⁷ Grabbe 2006: 197, 201; see also Liverani (2010) on the historiography of 1 and 2 Kings.

⁸ Grayson 2000: 8–14; cf. also earlier editions and works by Wiseman (1956) and Malamat (1968; 1975). See also the catalogue by Sigrist, Figulla, and Walker (1996).

⁹ See Grayson 2000: 19–20; 99–102; Glassner 2004: 226–230; cf. first edition by Wiseman (1956: 68–74, pl. V [tablet B.M. 21946]).

6.1.2 The last decades of the Kingdom of Judah according to biblical and other texts

The 7th century B.C.E. is noted for the reshufflings in the international political, economic, and military spheres surrounding the Southern Levant. Judah was a small, peripheral, mountainous kingdom within this sphere, and the intense trauma inflicted on the kingdom by the Neo-Assyrian king Sennacherib's campaign in 701 B.C.E. had disastrous consequences for the Shephelah, weakening its military might, and diminishing its human resources (except for the strong recovery during Manasseh's reign) (see §6.2).

With the Neo-Assyrian Empire's collapse in the 7th century B.C.E., owing to its failure to control repeated revolts in Babylon during the reign of Sin-šar-kun, a power-struggle between Egypt and the rising Neo-Babylonian Empire was left in its wake over inheritance of the former Assyrian territories spreading from the Euphrates down to Sinai.¹⁰ Strategically, both Egypt and Babylon tried establishing footholds on either side of the Euphrates, where direct conflict began, with Egypt's main economic interest in the Levant being Phoenicia, its ports, and its cedars, and Babylon's the area west of the Euphrates.¹¹ Egypt posed a constant threat to the Babylonian control of Mesopotamia and a danger of invasion beyond the Euphrates.¹²

The small kingdom of Judah lay between these two great empires, but the recklessness of the last Judahite monarchs, alongside the political and religious turmoil among the various Judahite sectors of the Jerusalem elite, led to Judah's decline and eventual fall.¹³ Following Josiah's death

¹⁰ See Lipschits 2006: 10–20 and references there.

¹¹ See further references in Lipschits 2006: 25–27.

¹² Lipschits 2006: 31.

¹³ Lipschits 2006: 42–43.

in 609 B.C.E. (2 Kgs 23:29–30; 2 Chr. 35:20–25),¹⁴ the Judahite kingdom lost prosperity and any hope for restored grandeur, and, along with many of its neighbours, was swept into a conflict that ensued for two decades, until its eventual fall. Loyalties on the part of the Judaeans to either Egypt or Babylon were vacillating. Josiah was succeeded by his younger son Jehoahaz (Shallum) (609 B.C.E.), who represented the anti-Egyptian faction of the royal house until Necho intervened to depose him and deported him to Egypt after a short reign of three months (2 Kgs 23:30, 33a, 34b; 2 Chr. 36:1–4; see also Jer. 22:10–12; 1 Chr. 3:15). Necho appointed Jehoahaz’s brother Jehoiakim (Eliakim) (609–598 B.C.E.) as his successor, loyal vassal, and ally (2 Chr. 36:4). The successive reigns of these three Judahite kings marked a rapidly changing political situation in Judah.¹⁵

For a brief period Necho controlled the entire area from the northern border of Egypt to the Euphrates (2 Kgs 24:7), until the military campaigns of the Babylonian Crown Prince Nebuchadnezzar II (ca. 605–562 B.C.E.). Nabopolassar died in the spring or summer of 605 B.C.E. His son Nebuchadnezzar defeated the Egyptian army in the Battle of Carchemish, and subsequently defeated the remnant Egyptian force in the land of Hamath, thus sealing the fate of Syria and Palestine (Jer. 46:2; cf. Jer. 25:1–14). He ascended the throne in 605 B.C.E.¹⁶ As a result, Jehoiakim was forced to transfer his allegiance from Egypt to Babylon, and eventually

¹⁴ See also the corresponding Babylonian Chronicle of Nabopolassar (*ABC* 3/tablet B.M. 21901, lines 66–68) in Grayson (2000: 19, 96); cf. also Glassner 2004: 223–224, 225; Wiseman 1956: 19, 62, 63. On the controversial death of Josiah, see Cogan and Tadmor 1988: 301–302; Hughes 1990: 225; Cline’s (2002: 89–100) treatment of the various sources; Avioz’s (2007) attempt at a theological explanation for Josiah’s death.

¹⁵ Lipschits 2006: 43–44 and references there.

¹⁶ Lipschits 2006: 45 and references there.

became Nebuchadnezzar's ally for 3 years, until he subsequently rebelled against him (2 Kgs 24:1).¹⁷

All these events may well have shackled Judahite high authorities, who looked up to Egypt as a powerful military aid in time of need. At this point, Jeremiah was prophesying submission to Babylon. Such words were directed against other voices that probably called for resisting Babylon and supporting Egypt (Jer. 2:36).¹⁸ The rapprochement of Jehoiakim and Necho is hinted at and actively condemned by Jeremiah in the oracle against Egypt (Jer. 46: 1–12). The prophesying and political murder of Uriah son of Shemaiah from Qiryat Ye'arim dates to this period (Jer. 26:20–23). Uriah fled to Egypt after Jehoiakim sought to kill him, probably because the prophet believed he would find political asylum in Egypt, although the text does not give the reasons for his choice¹⁹ (see also §§6.3.2 and 6.3.3, on Lachish 3.14–16a,20).

In 601/600 B.C.E. Nebuchadnezzar failed to invade Egypt, and no evidence exists thus far that he entered Egypt, much less conquered it (cf. Jer. 46:13–26).²⁰ While the Babylonian hold on the region of Assyria's former western provinces was loosened (referred to as "the land of Hatti" in the Babylonian Chronicle), Egypt renewed its influence on the region that had been under its exclusive control five years previously.²¹ For the following year, the Babylonian army was forced to rejuvenate itself and rearm to re-establish control over "the land of Hatti", and Nebuchadnezzar employed Chaldaean garrison troops and encouraged Transjordanian units to

¹⁷ Hughes 1990: 226–227.

¹⁸ Lipschits 2006: 45.

¹⁹ Seitz 1989: 93–94.

²⁰ Grabbe 2006: 199, 200.

²¹ Lipschits 2006: 50.

invade Judah (2 Kgs 24:2).²² Judah's subjugation to Babylon was soon to follow. As gleaned from Nebuchadnezzar's Chronicle, by the time of the latter's first two regnal years, Ashkelon was conquered, and the southern Coastal Plain was under his control, although much of the tablet is incomplete. By his seventh regnal year, Nebuchadnezzar's army laid siege to Jerusalem in the winter of 598/7 B.C.E., as reported in that year's entry in the Babylonian Chronicle (*ABC* 5).

Jehoiakim died on the eve of Nebuchadnezzar's campaign to suppress the Judahite revolt and destroy the city, and his son Jehoiachin (Jeconiah) (ca. 598–597 B.C.E.) ascended the throne, and surrendered to the Babylonians (2 Kgs 24:12). Nebuchadnezzar did not destroy Jerusalem, but he deported many of its residents and plundered it in order to impair the kingdom's economic strength.²³ He deposed Jehoiachin and installed Zedekiah (Mattaniah) (ca. 597–588 B.C.E.) as the new Judahite king.²⁴ The exile of the nation's social, religious, military, and economic elite took place in two deportations: one prior to or upon the surrender of Jerusalem (Jer. 13:18–19; 52: 28–30); and a second that happened by the eighth regnal year of Nebuchadnezzar, which was a mass exile of the upper class of Jerusalem, headed by Jehoiachin, to Babylon (Jer. 24:1; 29: 2; cf. 2 Kgs 24:12; Ezek. 40:1).²⁵ Nebuchadnezzar and Zedekiah signed a treaty of vassalage and an oath of allegiance, which was eventually breached by Zedekiah (2 Kgs 24:19–20, 25:1; Ezek. 17:12–15; 2 Chr. 36:13). He rebelled against Babylon upon thinking that Babylonian rule in “the

²² Lipschits 2006: 51–52 and references there; see the Babylonian Chronicle of Nebuchadnezzar (*ABC* 5/tablet .M. 21946, rev. line 8) in Grayson 2000: 20, 101; cf. Glassner 2004: 228, 229; Wiseman 1956: 29, 31, 70, 71. The term כְּשָׁדִים (*kšdm* – “Chaldaeans/Chaldaeae”) designates either the people or their country, and sometimes “the land of the Chaldaeans” is used (e.g. Jer. 24:5). Chaldaeae was the geographical area in southern Babylon, on the lower Euphrates and Tigris (modern southern Iraq). The Chaldaeans were a Semitic people who became dominant in Babylon, yet the biblical writers frequently apply the term to the Neo-Babylonians and/or Neo-Babylon.

²³ Lipschits 2006: 53–55 and references there

²⁴ See *ABC* 5/tablet B.M. 21946, rev. lines 11–13 in Grayson 2000: 102; cf. Glassner 2004: 230, 23; Wiseman 1956: 72, 73. The entry in the Babylonian Chronicle does not name the Judahite king, as opposed to Jer. 24:1 and 37:1. The Jeremian passages do not prove anything about history but are rather incidental references to date Jeremiah's vision. Grabbe (2006: 193–194) remarks that such casual passing remarks are often the marks of authenticity.

²⁵ Grabbe 2006: 230–231; Lipschits 2006: 55–62 and references there; cf. also Malamat 1968: 145–150; 1975: 134.

land of Hatti” was weakening whereas Egypt was strong enough to confront the Babylonian army and to assist the rebellious states. Moreover, the leaders, activists, and prophets in Jerusalem who promoted rebellion against Babylon probably influenced the king even further.²⁶

The last decade of the Judahite kingdom, from the first Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem till its final fall is largely narrated in the Book of Jeremiah. Unfortunately, the Babylonian Chronicle of Nebuchadnezzar comes to an end by his tenth regnal year (594 B.C.E.); only a few incidental events are recorded after that in other sources, and no extant Mesopotamian source mentions the fall of Jerusalem.²⁷ Following Necho’s death, his son Psammetichus II ascended the throne (595–589 B.C.E.). He was succeeded by his son Hophra (589–570 B.C.E.). When Nebuchadnezzar set out for Judah in 589 B.C.E., Zedekiah sent envoys to Egypt for military aid (Ezek. 17:15) (see §6.3.3, on Lachish 3.14–16a), and an Egyptian relief force managed temporarily to have the siege lifted, an incident known only from Jer. 37:5–11, and alluded to in Ezek. 17:17, both of which stress the weakness and futility of this Egyptian operation (cf. Lam. 4:17). Nebuchadnezzar laid siege to Jerusalem at the start of 588 B.C.E., when Judah was in a critical military position following the exile nine years prior. Except for the late incoming aid from Egypt and the passive support of the Ammonites, Judah was isolated at its crucial moment.²⁸ Jer. 34 and most of 37 treat the events before and during the invasion of the Egyptian relief force that had crossed the border, whereas Chapters 32, 33, 37 (end), 38, and possibly also 21 refer its failure’s aftermath. At the start of the siege, Jeremiah foresaw for Zedekiah a bearable fate if he were to surrender to Babylon in time (Jer. 34:1–5), and apparently there was freedom of movement for the prophet in Jer. 37:4. The fortified towns of Judah were conquered,

²⁶ Lipschits 2006: 70-72 and references there.

²⁷ Grabbe 2006: 195.

²⁸ Malamat 1968: 151.

except for Lachish and Azekah southwest of the capital, which formed the last possible line of communication with the invading Egyptian force (Jer. 34:7; see §6.3.5, on Lachish 4.10–13).²⁹

The biblical description of the siege of Jerusalem (2 Kgs 25) is brief and dry, with no theological commentary or historical lessons. It focuses on the king's fate, Jerusalem's destruction, and the fate of the city's inhabitants. There is an emphasis on the respective dates of the Babylonian siege, capture, and destruction of Jerusalem: the siege started "in the ninth year of [Zedekiah's] reign, in the tenth month on the tenth day", the capture took place "[in the fourth month] on the ninth day" (cf. Jer. 39:2; 52:6), in the 11th year of Zedekiah's reign, and the destruction of the city and the inhabitants' deportation took place in the fifth month on the seventh day (MT), with variations in LXX (ninth day) and Jer. 52: 12 (tenth day).³⁰ The Book of Jeremiah supplies most of the information on the siege itself that is missing from 2 Kgs 25, including the mention of an Egyptian army coming to assist Judah when the siege was taking place (Jer. 37:5–16). After a failed attempt to escape, Zedekiah was severely punished by Nebuchadnezzar, having his sons slaughtered before his eyes, and immediately afterward he was blinded and eventually deported to Babylon (2 Kgs 25:6–7; Jer. 39:7; 52:11). Whether Jerusalem fell in 587 or 586 B.C.E. remains debated.³¹ Nebuchadnezzar eliminated Jerusalem as a religious and political centre by burning the centres of government and bringing religious ritual in the city to an end. Jeremiah implies that the entire population of Jerusalem was deported to Babylon, although a cluster of peasants was left behind to work the vineyards and fields (cf. 2 Kgs 25:11; Jer. 39:9; 52:15).³²

²⁹ Malamat 1968: 152.

³⁰ Hughes 1990: 155-158 and references there.

³¹ See Hughes 1990: 231.

³² See Lipschits 2005: 72–84 and references there.

The Davidic dynasty in Judah was brought to an end, the kingdom was abolished, and a Babylonian province was established in its place. The officials were Babylonians, yet Nebuchadnezzar appointed as governor Gedaliah, son of Ahikam, a high official of Zedekiah (2 Kgs 25:22–26; Jer. 40: 7–18).³³ A 50-year gap exists in the biblical account of the history of the Province of Judah (or Yehud), i.e. from the destruction of Jerusalem (587/6 B.C.E.) till the first years of Persian rule and the Return to Zion (538 B.C.E.). There is an overall paucity of sources, but some information may be gathered from the prophetic literature (Ezekiel, Isa. 40–66, Obadiah, Haggai, Zech. 1–8, and Malachi), from the lamentations on the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and from the psalms written in Judah after Jerusalem's fall, during the Babylonian exile, and during the period of the Return to Zion.³⁴

The following section summarises selected archaeological data that contribute to the historical picture of 7th–early 6th-century B.C.E. Jerusalem, Judah, and the Negev, especially the repercussions brought about by the various military campaigns in the region.

6.2 Surveys, excavations, and ostraca in Judah and the Negev

Both biblical and other texts create an historical narrative on the Kingdom of Judah that was always under the threat of attack from its imperial neighbours – Assyria, Egypt, and Babylon – from 701 till 586 B.C.E. The 7th–early 6th-century B.C.E. epigraphic material retrieved from Judah and the Negev is plentiful and varied when compared to earlier periods, not to mention that

³³ Lipschits 2005: 112–122.

³⁴ See Lipschits 2005: 97–126 and references there; see also in particular Albertz 2003. For the period following the Neo-Babylonian exile until the late Persian era see the various essays in Lipschits and Blenkinsopp 2003, Lipschits, Knoppers, and Oeming 2011, and Lipschits, Knoppers, and Albertz 2007.

archaeological surveys and excavations have revealed the devastating effects of the Babylonian attack on several Judahite sites and the Arad and Beersheba Valleys.³⁵

The Shephelah

Although it is a common conception that 7th-century Judah was a mere shadow of that of the 8th century, Faust argues that the available archaeological evidence indicates that the recovery was actually faster than is usually assumed and the destruction somewhat less encompassing than is commonly accepted. The only region not to have recovered was the Shephelah, since Sennacherib's campaign of 701 B.C.E. focused on this region and only a limited army marched towards the capital.³⁶

A number of surveys have been conducted in the Shephelah.³⁷ The Assyrians destroyed Lachish Level III and probably several other cities, thus ending the Iron IIA–B settlement of the entire region.³⁸ During the Iron IIC, settlement in the Shephelah underwent drastic change. The survey and excavations indicate that the number of settlements declined significantly, given that several of them were destroyed or abandoned, and that many tells (cities) were abandoned or resettled on a small scale. Pottery indicative of settlement was identified at 123 survey units, contrary to 731

³⁵ See also further references in Dagan 2004; Lipschits 2005: 206–271; Faust 2008; 2012: 21–32.

³⁶ See Faust 2008 and references there.

³⁷ Dagan (2004) reports the change in settlement patterns observed in the Shephelah region from the Pottery Neolithic down to the Hellenistic periods, as gleaned from the survey results. The Survey of Western Palestine (SWP) of the Palestine Exploration Fund of the 19th century was the forerunner. In 1977 a systematic survey of the region of the Shephelah was initiated and, until 1994, was conducted on behalf of the Lachish Archaeological Expedition of the Institute of Archaeology of Tel Aviv University (sponsored by the Israel Exploration Society and the Yo'av Regional Council). Since 1994, the survey has been conducted on behalf of the IAA.

³⁸ Dagan 2004: 2681, 2688. In the annals of his campaign, Sennacherib boasts that he captured 46 fortified Judahite cities, fortresses, and smaller settlements in their environs, including Lachish, which fell after an intensive siege, and that he deported “200,150 people, young and old, male and female”. Lachish is not mentioned by name in Sennacherib's Annals, but only on the Lachish relief (see Ussishkin 1980; 2014b); on Sennacherib's records of his military campaigns (Taylor Prism, B.M. 91032) see Grayson and Novotny 2012: 15, n. 33, 167–186, esp. pp. 176–179 (text no. 22, iii, lines 18–49); on the Lachish Relief inscription see Grayson and Novotny 2014: 110–111 (text no. 66).

survey units of the Iron IIA–B. The pottery collected from the survey units is typical of Lachish Level II, and the Iron IIC date of the ceramic assemblage rests on diagnostic sherds of types which appear at Lachish Level II.³⁹ Settlement in this period was concentrated on the eastern part of the Shephelah, and it appears that the population chose to resettle only those cities that offered significant protection, namely Tel Lachish, Tel Goded, Tel ‘Azekah, and Tel Sochoh. Lachish was probably second in importance in Judah during the late Iron Age. The Level III city reached its golden age until Sennacherib destroyed it, and the Level II city was rebuilt to a more modest scale (§1.3). The Babylonian campaign of 588/6 B.C.E. in Judah not only marked another end to settlement history in the Shephelah, but also brought an end to the Judahite kingdom and destroyed Lachish Level II, where the major evidence of intensive destruction lies, and other cities and fortifications.⁴⁰

Afterwards, a gap in settlement is noted at Lachish, the key site for the Persian period in the Shephelah. Apart from additional sites in the survey, six mounds yielded remains from this latter period: Tel Batash, Tel ‘Azekah, Tel Zafit, Tel Mareshah, Tel ‘Erani, and Tel Lachish, the latter of which served as the Persian administrative centre.⁴¹ The survey data is not sufficient to indicate whether settlement in the region continued without interruption after 586 B.C.E.⁴² Prior to the resumed excavations at Tel ‘Azekah (Tel Zakariyah) there was no clear-cut evidence of an early 6th-century B.C.E. destruction at the site.⁴³ Hence, we await future publications on the current excavations at ‘Azekah (§5.9). Pottery assemblages at Tel Goded (Tell Judeideh) are

³⁹ Dagan 2004: 2682.

⁴⁰ See Dagan 2004: 2682; Lipschits 2005: 218–223 and references there; Faust 2012: 27–28; see also the discussions in §§1.3 and 1.4.

⁴¹ *Renewed Excavations*, I: 50–119; Fantalkin and Tal 2004.

⁴² Dagan 2004: 2862.

⁴³ Lipschits 2005: 219 and references there.

parallel to those found at Lachish Levels III and II, and there is evidence of a small Hellenistic settlement. Apparently, the site underwent a large gap in settlement throughout the entire Persian Period, as is similarly noted at Mareshah (Tell Sandahannah), since there is a large gap between the city's destruction at the end of the Iron Age and the Hellenistic city.⁴⁴ On a similar note, the sites of Moza and Beth Zur apparently "ceased to exist" in the Persian Period, and Hebron had a settlement gap during the aforesaid period.⁴⁵ The 7th-century B.C.E. town of Khirbet Rabud (Debir) was destroyed during the Babylonian campaign, and the later Persian Period settlement was very limited.⁴⁶

Jerusalem and its Environs

Jerusalem and the surrounding area flourished and reached their zenith in the 7th century B.C.E., until the site was destroyed by the Babylonians in 587/6 B.C.E.⁴⁷ The major evidence of burning and destruction from this period comes from Areas G and E1 in the City of David.⁴⁸ Similar contemporary destructions were recorded in a late Iron Age complex in the Ophel excavations.⁴⁹ Whilst Lipschits suggests a total desolation of Jerusalem in the destruction's aftermath until the middle of the Persian Period, Barkay believes that some of the population continued to live amid the ruins.⁵⁰

The situation at the fortress of Ramat Raḥel is, on the other hand, different. Recent excavations and studies have shown that the edifice of Building Phase II (Stratum VA/Iron Age II–Persian)

⁴⁴ Lipschits 2005: 220 and references there.

⁴⁵ Faust 2012: 24, 25, and references there.

⁴⁶ Faust 2012: 26 and references there. See also Faust 2008: 172–173 for further summaries on the Shephelah.

⁴⁷ See Lipschits 2005: 210–218 and references there; Faust 2008: 177–178 and references there; 2012: 23–24.

⁴⁸ Shiloh 1984.

⁴⁹ Mazar and Mazar 1989: 59.

⁵⁰ Lipschits 2005: 211, 218; Barkay 1993; 2003.

was not destroyed by the Babylonians in the early 6th century B.C.E., but thrived during the Babylonian period along with administrative and other activities, not to mention the presence of a Persian palatial garden, with both exotic and native trees, that dates to the 5th–4th centuries B.C.E.⁵¹

The Southern Part of the Judaeian Hills and the Negev

The southern border and the Arad and Beersheba Valleys enjoyed an unprecedented settlement activity following Sennacherib's campaign. Whereas five sites had been established during earlier phases (Iron Age IIA–B) (Tel 'Ira, Tel Arad, Tel Beersheba, Tel Malḥata, and Tel 'Aroer), six new sites were established during the 7th century B.C.E.: Tel Masos, Ḥorvat Anim, Ḥorvat 'Uza, Ḥorvat Radum, Ḥorvat Tov, and Ḥorvat Qitmit. In addition, around 25 small sites were discovered in partial surveys of the region, and were apparently associated with the establishment of the main sites.⁵² This peak of settlement, however, was short-lived, and most of the Negev sites and fortresses show clear evidence of the destruction that took place in the early 6th century B.C.E., probably at the hands of neighbouring Edom.⁵³

Our knowledge on Edom and the Edomites remains full of questions. Both the historiographic and biblical traditions are very limited or difficult to interpret, and the few surveys and archaeological excavations of Edom present problems of interpretation, especially in dating.⁵⁴

⁵¹ See Lipschits, Gadot and Langgut 2012; Langgut et al. 2013; cf. previous arguments in Lipschits 2005: 213–214; see also Faust 2008: 178; 2012: 24–25.

⁵² Arieḥ 2011: 28–29 and references there.

⁵³ See Lipschits 2005: 224–232 and references there; Faust 2008: 175–176; 2012: 27–28 and references there. On Tel Arad, Tel 'Aroer, Ḥorvat 'Uza, and Ḥorvat Qitmit see also King 1993: 53–58, 61–63, 58–59, 60–61.

⁵⁴ See Lemaire 2010. See also the questions raised by Bartlett (1989) prior to the later archaeological discoveries made by I. Beit-Arieḥ in various sites of the Negev; see Layton 1996: 62.

Edomite epigraphy is equally very limited,⁵⁵ but the epigraphic material from Arad throws light on the perpetual pressure or threat of Edomite attacks on the Negev, probably around 597 B.C.E. Moreover, numerous Edomite pottery sherds and ostraca are attested at other Negev sites, especially Ḥorvat ‘Uza, Tel Malḥata, and Tel ‘Aroer.⁵⁶ Arad 40, dated to the late 8th century B.C.E. (possibly at the time of Sennacherib’s campaign of 701 B.C.E.), likely indicates that Edom was a loyal ally to the Neo-Assyrian Empire, and later remained a faithful Neo-Babylonian vassal fighting against Judah, with Edomite raiders possibly intervening in the Negev.⁵⁷

The Arad corpus furnishes an interesting potential parallel with the Lachish corpus in terms of more or less contemporary affairs and similar traditions of communicating via ostraca in the Negev. Lemaire has shown that most of the latest Arad Hebrew ostraca (Stratum VI) are to be dated during the “tenth month”, i.e. the month of Tebet 597 (January 16–February 14), while Nebuchadnezzar was on his way to Jerusalem.⁵⁸ In contrast, Lipschits suggested that the border forts, fortified towns, and the entire array of settlements in the Negev collapsed when Judah was no longer able to provide defence, i.e. after the 587/6 B.C.E. destruction of Jerusalem.⁵⁹ Lipschits’ view has been challenged by Na’aman in his recent treatise and reappraisal on a number of ostraca from the Eliashib Archive (Arad 3, 5, 10, 12, and 18), where he aims to offer new solutions for some issues on the history of the Negev in the late years of the Judahite Monarchy.⁶⁰ He argues that the references to the Kittiyim mercenaries in the Arad ostraca do not correspond well with such a late collapse of the Negev settlements as proposed by Lipschits,

⁵⁵ Lemaire 2010: 225, n. 2, and references there.

⁵⁶ Lemaire 2010: 238, nn. 75–78, and references there; on Ḥorvat ‘Uza, see Beit-Arieh 2007a: 133–137; Beit-Arieh and Cresson 1985: 100; 2007b: 15–29; on Tel Malḥata, see Beit-Arieh 2015a; 2015b; Na’aman 2015: 55–56; on Tel ‘Aroer, see Naveh 2011; Na’aman 2015: 56–57. See also King 1993: 61–63.

⁵⁷ Lemaire 2010: 235–240 and references there.

⁵⁸ Lemaire 1977: 192–195; 231–235; see also Lemaire 2010: 237.

⁵⁹ Lipschits 2005: 229–230.

⁶⁰ Na’aman 2011.

since mercenaries were always stationed with the king (e.g. 2 Sam. 18:15, 20:7; 1 Kgs 1:38, 44; 2 Kgs 11:4, 19), and thus Arad and the other Negev settlements were destroyed *before* the downfall of Jerusalem and other major centres, when the king could still send his elite troops to defend the kingdom's southern front.⁶¹

Na'aman further posits that, among other ostraca from the Eliashib Archive, Arad 3 marks the arrival of the Kittiyim mercenaries in the Beersheba Valley and their stationing at Beersheba (Bir es-Seba'), the major local town, while in Arad 24, a commander urges Eliashib to urgently dispatch reinforcements to Ramat-Negeb "lest Edom should come here".⁶² Na'aman thus stresses that the Edomite attack was evidently launched at a time when the kingdom was still strong, well organized, and able to provide for the mercenary unit.⁶³ The efforts of the Judahite king to protect the southern front failed, and "the heavy destruction inflicted by the Edomites on the Negev district was deeply engraved in the collective memory and provides the background for the distinctive negative attitude to Edom in biblical prophecy of the exilic and post-exilic periods".⁶⁴

⁶¹ Na'aman 2011: 87–90. Aharoni (1981: 12–13, 144b, 149–150) also regarded the Kittiyim of the Arad ostraca as Greek or Cypriot mercenaries serving in the Judaeian army, perhaps in garrisons of remote fortresses, from the time of Josiah until the end of the Judahite kingdom. Others have suggested, however, that the Kittiyim served under Egyptian supervision, although Na'aman argues that the Kittiyim of the Arad ostraca could not have been Egyptian mercenaries, since they served in the Negev in the time of the Babylonian occupation of the Kingdom of Judah (Na'aman 2011: 88 and references there). See also King 1993: 57.

⁶² For Arad 3 see Aharoni 1981: 17–18; Ahituv 2005: 98–102; Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005: 15–18; Na'aman 2011: 83, 89; for Arad 24 see Aharoni 1968a: 17–18; 1981: 46–49; Ahituv 2005: 126–133; Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005: 47–53; Na'aman 2005: 202–203; 2011: 89); see also Lemaire 2010: 238.

⁶³ Na'aman 2011: 89.

⁶⁴ Na'aman 2011: 89–90. For the destruction of the Negev forts and settlements see Lipschits 2005: 224–229 and references there; Beit-Arieh 2007c).

An exceptional fragmentary ostrakon bears what seems to be a royal letter or copy thereof (Arad 88), as first suggested by Millard.⁶⁵ Aharoni dated this ostrakon to Arad Stratum VII (destroyed in 609 B.C.E. by the Egyptians), i.e. to the reign of Jehoahaz. He deduced that the letter was sent by Jehoahaz to the commander of the Arad fortress, Eliashib son of Eshiyahu, after the death of his father Josiah.⁶⁶ However, Na'aman restores the inscription into (a copy of) a letter from the king of Judah, either Jehoiachin or Zedekiah, which could have been distributed among secondary towns and fortresses of the kingdom, Arad included. Ahituv also regards Arad 88 “a scratch copy of an urgent message from a new king of Judah, such as Jehoahaz or Jehoiakim, or even more likely, Jehoiachin (or possibly, but less likely, Zedekiah)”.⁶⁷ Given that Edom took control of the Negev after 597 B.C.E., then any one of the three kings – Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim, or Jehoiachin – could have sent the urgent message. Na'aman restores the reading of this letter as a royal order to commanders to strengthen their forces because the king of Egypt did not come out of the country to assist Judah against Babylon (lines 2 and 3).⁶⁸ According to this reading, Na'aman remarks that this inscription throws light on Judah's rebellion against Babylon and on the Judahite king's vain hope that Egypt would come to his aid. The king is thus ordering his commanders to prepare for the impending Babylonian or Edomite assault and to fortify their places.⁶⁹

Following the takeover of the Negev by the Edomites, Zedekiah still maintained diplomatic relations with Edom, resorting to an attempt at setting up a new regional coalition against Babylon with the help of the kingdoms of Edom, Moab, Ammon, Tyre, and Sidon, a project

⁶⁵ Millard 1985.

⁶⁶ Aharoni 1981: 103–104.

⁶⁷ Ahituv 2005: 152.

⁶⁸ Na'aman 2015: 51–52.

⁶⁹ Na'aman 2015: 52.

which was met with opposition from the prophet Jeremiah (Chapters 27–28). Edom remained a loyal vassal of Babylon, and took part in the Neo-Babylonian campaign against Jerusalem at the disposition of Nebuchadnezzar.⁷⁰

6.3 The value of the “Lachish Letters” in their late Monarchic context: interpretative fallacies *versus* open debates

As far as the archaeology and the British expedition’s records can tell us, the 16 “guardroom” ostraca were recovered in a secure and dated context, namely Lachish Level II, with a *terminus ad quem* of 588/6 B.C.E. The same applies to the Lachish 20 label from Room L12:1065, found among the ashes of the same destruction level (see §6.3.5). The “guardroom” ostraca hold the most legible and longest of the 21 inscriptions under study, notwithstanding what other inscriptions were likely lost in the conflagration and/or also through time. The fact that we are dealing with a very meagre sample of varying documents is imperative to keep in mind. Over the past eight decades, the scholarly majority attempted to tie or equate certain information given in the ostraca to events described in Jeremiah and other biblical texts. The “Lachish Letters” are thus generally deemed an independent source of data about the Neo-Babylonian attack on Judah. Thus, the pieces of information given in the legible messages hint at the contemporary socio-political situation on the eve of the eventual demise of Lachish Level II and the rest of the Judahite kingdom.

After having reflected on the archaeological scene, the epigraphic information, and the historical scenario provided by biblical and other texts alike, it is now time to contemplate the various

⁷⁰ Lemaire 2010: 239–240.

titbits of information read in the Lachish ostraca that have been widely regarded to reflect the Neo-Babylonian campaign in pre-exilic Judah. This exercise attempts to determine what is plausible, what is obsolete or fallacious, and what remains openly debatable. If any historical information is discerned, it is worthwhile assessing, if indeed possible, to which specific period/s or reign/s the “Lachish Letters” might belong.

6.3.1 The politico-military scene

As far as the general contemporary politico-military scene in Judah is concerned, it is possible to judge from the extant Lachish messages that it had not yet become critical, as Thomas observed.⁷¹ What few ostraca have survived at Lachish/Tell ed-Duweir provide slight indications of a rather fluid situation at their time of writing:

- communication was maintained by letter and messenger between Jerusalem and Lachish (see §6.3.2), and between Lachish and other outpost(s), on a frequent basis;
- people seemed to move freely between Lachish and the capital, and other outposts (e.g. in Lachish 4.6b–7a, one Semakyāhû and one Šema‘yāhû could expect to arrive safely in Jerusalem), and so communication itself was still possible when the Lachish ostraca were written, not to mention that neither Lachish nor Jerusalem was as yet in imminent danger from the Babylonian troops (see §6.3.6);⁷²
- an army commander (Konyā[hû] son of [ʿEl]natan) went down to Egypt, possibly for military aid (Lachish 3:14–16a), hence communication and travel between Judah and Egypt were apparently still possible (see §6.3.3);

⁷¹ Thomas, D. W. 1950: 2–3.

⁷² Thomas, D. W. 1946a: 90–91.

- the subordinate’s wish for a good harvest to his superior (Lachish 5.7b–9a) and the request for royal grain (according to one likely reading of Lachish 5.9b–10) (see §6.3.2);
- notwithstanding de Vaux’s debatable reading of *kśdm* in Lachish 6.6, there is no mention of the Babylonians in the extant legible Lachish ostraca (see §6.3.4);
- the system of fire-/smoke-signals was in operation at this time (Lachish 4.10–13), understandably with a code by which the recipient understood the signals given, and this kind of signal installation is the same as the one mentioned in Jer. 6:1 (see §6.3.6); in addition, the reading “for we cannot see Azekah” (Lachish 4.12–13) does not necessarily warrant an interpretation that Azekah had fallen (see §§5.9 and 6.3.6).

Other surviving late 7th–early 6th-century ostraca from the Negev provide additional information on what was taking place on the southern border, at least up to ca. 597 B.C.E. The politico-military situation gleaned from these inscriptions is a mixed one, indicating freedom of movement with alleged imminent Edomite threats (as mentioned in §6.2). A growing tension between Judah and Edom is constantly hinted at in the Arad corpus (cf. Arad 3, 24, 40, and 88; the Edomite PN *qws* [קוס] in Arad 12.3 and 26.3), yet communication and travel was still possible. Communication was maintained by messenger and letter between (various) commanders at other (unnamed or unknown) outposts and the commander of Arad, Eliashib son of Eshiyahu, with apparent freedom of movement between Arad and other stations or settlements. Most ostraca from the Negev fortresses bear PNN lists of what have been hypothesised as lists of military troops, roster calls, registered noblemen (given the patronymics), and the like. The Arad Eliashib Archive throws light on the distribution of rations from the storehouses of the Arad fortress to the military troops and the Kittiyim (mercenaries), and on the open communication

and interaction with the supplier. Lemaire suggests that Eliashib's archive encompasses the registration of around one month's expenses.⁷³ The Arad fortress "evidently had clerks in action from the [8th] to the early [6th] centuries B.C.E., recording or receiving military and other messages as well as daily receipts and issues of supplies".⁷⁴

There is evidence of possible Edomite presence and penetration into the Negev, namely at Tel Arad, Ḥorvat 'Uza, Tel Malḥata, and Tel 'Aroer, as well as possible Edomite attacks on any or all of the aforementioned sites. This has been suggested by the respective excavators on account of the mention of Edomites in various Arad ostraca, the recovery of Edomite ostraca and pottery sherds at other Negev sites, and the set-up of an Edomite shrine at Ḥorvat Qitmit (possibly after 597 B.C.E.).⁷⁵ If these sites did succumb to any Edomite attacks, it likely happened around 597 B.C.E., and, *contra* Lipschits, when the king was still able to provide for the mercenary unit (§6.2).

6.3.2 An anonymous prophet and a "servant of the king"

The "prophet" mentioned in Lachish 3.20 remains of questionable identity and role (§§5.6, 5.7, and 5.8). Lachish 3 bears the first occurrence of the word *nb'* outside the Hebrew Bible, but neither Torczyner's identification of this prophet with Uriah (Jer. 26:20–23) nor the more popular identification with Jeremiah can be sustained with absolute certainty. As remarked in §§5.6 and 6.1.1, there were other prophets, most of whom were anonymous, who were contemporaries of Jeremiah. Given the extant data and small glimpses of the contemporary scene of pre-exilic

⁷³ Lemaire 1977: 230–231.

⁷⁴ Millard 1995: 212.

⁷⁵ See further bibliography in Faust 2008: 175; Lemaire 2010: 239, nn. 81–83.

Judah, the prophet Jeremiah remains merely one contender for the identification of the *nb'* in Lachish 3.

The complex syntactical construction of Lachish 3.19–21 cannot help us determine with certainty the roles and actions of the persons mentioned therein (§5.8). The warning “Beware!” (line 20) could have been the start, or part, or a keyword, or summation of some utterance, possibly even prophetic, yet we do not know whether its intention was positive or negative, given the “decontextualised” state of the text. This warning could have been passed among the military officials between different outposts, and the message itself could have originated from the capital. This is because among the personages mentioned in Lachish 3.19–21 is one Ṭōbiyāhû, “the servant of the king”, who could have written the letter mentioned therein (according to one of the plausible interpretations). Ṭōbiyāhû’s title suggests to us that he was a court official or a messenger in the king’s employ, and that, as such, he probably resided at Jerusalem.⁷⁶ Although the role of the *nb'* as mere messenger has been debated (§5.8), the scenario still makes it plausible that Ṭōbiyāhû’s letter, after it had left the capital, reached “the prophet” on one stage of its journey, after which it was passed on by him to Šallūm, to be received in turn by Hōša‘yāhû, the sender (and possible writer) of Lachish 3, who then sent the letter to Yā’ūš at Lachish. The letter thus passed through several hands before arriving at its final destination.⁷⁷ If indeed that final destination was Lachish/Tell ed-Duweir, it did not survive in the archaeological record (especially if it was written on papyrus). Nevertheless, the role of the prophet remains debated. As discussed in §5.8, the identification of Ṭōbiyāhû with the *nb'* is possible though debatable.

⁷⁶ Thomas, D. W. (1946a: 90) mentions Asahiah, called עבד הַמֶּלֶךְ, who was one of the company sent by Josiah to “enquire of the Lord” after reading “the book of the law” (2 Kgs 22:12), and Huldah the prophetess, who was consulted by the party, lived in Jerusalem (2 Kgs 22:14).

⁷⁷ Thomas, D. W. 1950: 90.

Why would Ṭôbiyāhû be called a servant of the king in one instant and a prophet in the next? Why would Hôša‘yāhû not call him “Ṭôbiyāhû the prophet” straightaway? Moreover, was a prophet considered to be at the king’s service or employed at court to be given the title of “royal servant”? Alternatively, it is also possible that the anonymous prophet was known to both Hôša‘yāhû and Yā’ûš, so his name was left out.

Another Ṭôbiyāhû features in Lachish 5.9b–10, and the words *zr’ lmlk* in line 10 created an interpretative dilemma among scholars, i.e. whether to read it as simply “royal grain” with reference to the harvest mentioned earlier, in lines 7b–9a, or whether it is a title for Ṭôbiyāhû, calling him member of the royal family or court (§3.1.5; Catalogue A). Nonetheless, given the flimsy epigraphic information, it is far-fetched to assume that Ṭôbiyāhû of Lachish 3 is one and the same with the one of Lachish 5 without further concrete evidence. If he is indeed one and the same individual, it is one among several possibilities. What is tangible is that a certain Ṭôbiyāhû from the royal court was apparently known to the commander of Lachish and his subordinates (Lachish 3) and, again, a certain Ṭôbiyāhû was apparently expected to deliver royal grain to the sender of Lachish 5 (which in itself implies dealings with the royal court). In addition, the fact that the sender of Lachish 5 is wishing his superior a good harvest, suggests that the times were still rather pleasant ones, without any imminent danger.

6.3.3 Appeals to Egypt

Lachish 3.14–16a mentions an army commander, Konyāhû son of ’Elnatan, departing to Egypt. In §5.6, I discussed Torczyner’s initial assumption that the ostracon’s scribe switched the names of the biblical Elnathan son of Achbor and instead wrote [y]kbryhw bn ’ltn. This idea was

amongst many of Torczyner's now obsolete interpretations in an attempt to tie the "Lachish Letters" with the fate of the prophet Uriah. His thesis about the name confusion was contested by other scholars and later rejected by Torczyner himself, who then accepted the reading *knyhw bn 'ltn*. To equate the biblical Elnathan with the Lachish 3 *'ltn*, without confusing or switching names around, would imply three alleged generations within one family: the grandfather (Achbor), the son (Elnathan), and the grandson (Konyāhû/Coniah, short for Jeconiah), but given the fragmentary evidence, the claim that the Lachish 3 *'ltn* happens to be one and the same with the biblical individual is extreme.⁷⁸ It can only be considered a mere possibility. In this regard, Seitz argues that the "Lachish Letters" (especially Lachish 3) are less likely to fit the period of Jehoiakim's reign (*contra* the much more plausible Saqqara Papyrus), as they fit better the circumstances during Zedekiah's reign.⁷⁹

We do not know Konyāhû's rank nor the object of his expedition. Lachish 3.13–18 reports that Konyāhû has a number of men to accompany him ("Hôdawyāhû, son of Aḥīyāhû, and his men"). These men apparently comprised a military unit that had been posted with Hôša' yāhû but were commandeered "from this place" in order to accompany the army commander to Egypt.⁸⁰ The Book of Jeremiah reveals how Zedekiah and his court were strongly pro-Egyptian after having rebelled against Nebuchadnezzar and, in Jeremiah's view, sinned against Yahweh. It is feasible to regard the ostrakon's brief information as a possible indication that a military commander of high rank was sent to Egypt at this time (i.e. Zedekiah's reign) to seek aid from Pharaoh Hophra

⁷⁸ See Mykytiuk (2004: 231, nn. 70 and 71), who considers the identification doubtful. Malamat (1947–1948) additionally argued that the scribal switch actually happened in the Jer. 26 passage, where supposedly the writer intended to mention Coniah son of Elnathan (the personage from Lachish 3), who allegedly was the son of the biblical Elnathan, according to Malamat. This is because the biblical Elnathan is presented rather as a supporter (or, at least, not an enemy) of the prophets in Jer. 20 and 36, so it would be strange for Yehoiakim to send a supporter of Uriah to fetch the latter from Egypt. Again, this entire argument is far-fetched in light of our terse evidence.

⁷⁹ Seitz 1989: 94, n. 218.

⁸⁰ Aḥituv 2008: 69.

against the Babylonians, as reported in Ezek. 17:15.⁸¹ No hint of the event described in Lachish 3 is mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, and such journeys to Egypt may have been routine at the time (2 Kgs 17:4; Jer. 26:22–23).⁸² One might infer from this that the Babylonian army was not at that time present in Judah, which would diminish the alleged dramatic background of Lachish 4⁸³ (see §6.3.6). It is nevertheless not impossible to suppose that an army commander had managed to go to Egypt to urge Hophra to come forth with his troops (cf. Jer. 37:5–12).⁸⁴ Such a mission is here reported to Yā’ûš at Lachish, and it is thus conceivable that the commander at a frontier fortress would be kept informed about such missions and dealings with Egypt, in the face of looming Babylonian attacks. The scenario is hinted at even by the fact that this mission to Egypt and the alleged prophetic warning are reported in the same ostrakon, but nothing indicates whether one report is related to the other, and thus no more can be said. Sadly, we lack any corroborative information from Babylonian records for the period after 597 B.C.E. till the fall of Jerusalem (§6.1.2). Psammetichus II was Pharaoh in Zedekiah’s early years, and any hopes for Egyptian aid under the reign of his son and successor, Hophra, are referred to in Jer. 37, Ezek. 17:15; 29–30, and Lam. 4:17, but without great detail.⁸⁵ Seitz remarks that “Egyptian aid at this point in time was at best a perfunctory, if not coincidental effort”, as “the Egyptians may have simply been on their way to assist the Tyrians or consolidate their position on the maritime coast”, and yet “this would not rule out a measure of hope within [Jerusalem], realistic or otherwise”.⁸⁶

⁸¹ Thomas, D. W. 1950: 2; Malamat 1968: 151; Seitz 1989: 254–255.

⁸² Aḥituv 2008: 68–69.

⁸³ Aḥituv 2008: 69.

⁸⁴ Aḥituv 2008: 69.

⁸⁵ Seitz 1989: 254 and references there; see also Malamat 1975: 140–141.

⁸⁶ Seitz 1989: 254 and references there.

6.3.4 The debated Chaldaean threat

The laconic Lachish 6 remains controversial in terms of tracing any political tie-ins with biblical and other texts (§5.8). Even so, this fading inscription (perhaps coupled with Lachish 3), is the one text that stands out of the corpus in giving slight hints of an unnerving politico-military situation. Firstly, this is the only long message or letter to start off with a different blessing formula. The words “May YHWH cause my lord to see, at this time, peace” perhaps hints at a tumultuous time, when compared to the other wished-for blessings of peace and good (tidings) read in Lachish 2–5, 8, and 9 (§4.5.1). The blessing formulae for peaceful and/or good news in the other Lachish messages are less likely to suggest looming danger, since they may be viewed as mere stock phrases. The laconic Lachish 6, however, seems to accentuate the scenario of the nation’s high authorities and military troops being agitated due to the national/international political machinations in the little remaining information it provides.

In Lachish 6.3–4 there is a reference to “the letter of the king” and “the letters of the commander[s]”. As Thomas noted, it may be fairly assumed that the letters in question were sent from Jerusalem, where the royal court and the central military authority were to be found. These letters reached Yā’ûš at Lachish, and were sent on by him to the sender of Lachish 6, who probably was a junior officer stationed at an outpost within the sphere of Yā’ûš’s command. Then again, this information also suggests that communication between Jerusalem and Lachish/Tell ed-Duweir (and other outposts) was still possible when Lachish 6 was written. Apparently the military situation in Judah had not yet entered upon a critical stage.⁸⁷ However, the phrase “And behold, the words of the [commander(s)?] are not good. To weaken your? hands...” in Lachish 6.5b–6 harks back to the agitation implied in the opening blessing formula.

⁸⁷ Thomas, D. W. 1946a: 90–91.

As shown in §§3.1.6 and 5.8, the outdated suggestion of reading “the words of the [prophet]” has been deemed less likely in favour of “commanders”. Furthermore, different reconstructions have been proposed for the lacuna at the end of Lachish 6.6 (*lrpt ydyk*[_ _ _]), either the conjectural *kšdm* (“Chaldaeans”), or simply *ydyk* (“your hands”, i.e. the hands of the addressee, Yā’ûš), not counting what may have been written in the following lacuna. The laconic inscription does not permit any significant reconstruction. The phrase “to weaken the hands” appears in Jer. 38:4, but there is no guarantee that both passages are to be equated, since this is a stock phrase recurrent in the Prophets.

Furthermore, the second half of Lachish 6 indicates that the sender begs his superior to write, presumably to, the officials, asking them why they are behaving in such a manner, and that he himself is agitated after having read the letters. It is feasible that the sender is referring to the contents of the letters (of the commanders), who are perhaps dealing with the politico-military situation, or even prophetic utterances related to it, and the high authorities are taking either the words of the prophet or the situation in general seriously, and passing the word on for the consideration of the commanders, unlike the reaction presented in Jer. 38:4.⁸⁸

6.3.5 The “ninth year” date

In Lachish 20.1, the phrase *btš’yt* (“in the ninth year”) in the jar label has been regarded by most scholars to refer to the ninth year of Zedekiah, i.e. the same year that Nebuchadnezzar besieged Jerusalem, according to Jer. 39:1. The siege of Jerusalem began in the ninth year, tenth month of Zedekiah, and the city walls were breached in the eleventh year, fourth month, ninth day (see also 2 Kgs 25:1; Jer. 52:4; Ezek. 24:1–2).

⁸⁸ Parker 1994: 76; see arguments in §5.8.

Lachish 20 was retrieved from the burnt debris in Room L12:1065, atop the mound. This label was written on a (water?) jar of the same type as label Lachish 29 (“the fourth year”), discovered in Room 4086 (inside the inner city-gate). Therefore, we have two storage jars of the same type, bearing two individual date formulae that have been respectively attributed to Zedekiah’s fourth and ninth regnal years, and which have been recovered in Lachish Level II, with the final Babylonian campaign in Judah as *terminus ad quem* (§5.5). Another date formula is found on Arad 20 (“the third year”), on a vessel of the same type that was retrieved from Arad Stratum VI, but since the Arad fortress was likely destroyed by ca. 597 B.C.E., it is possible that this date refers to Jehoiakim’s third regnal year.

It is worth mentioning Starkey’s suggestion of autumn as the season during which Lachish Level II was destroyed, based on the burnt olive stones recovered in the corresponding destruction layer, which nonetheless could not be subjected to ¹⁴C-dating that was to be developed years later (§1.5.1). Starkey’s idea lacks solid ground, since the olives could have been stored away for fermentation, and were not necessarily freshly harvested (in autumn). As mentioned in the same section, modern laboratory tests following Ussishkin’s excavations have not contributed anything further to this hypothesis. Therefore, the seasonal date of the final Babylonian attack on Lachish is left open for debate.

6.3.6 The presumed fall of Azekah

One striking feature of Lachish 4 is the mention of two fortified cities that feature in a corresponding biblical passage in Jer. 34:7. First off, the word *ms’t* ([fire/smoke-]signals)

(Lachish 4.10) occurs in Jeremiah where the prophet warns of an imminent invasion from the north (Jer. 6:1). Lachish 4 provides striking evidence for the use of signal installations at the time.⁸⁹

In Jer. 34:7, Lachish and Azekah are said to be the last two Judahite fortresses to succumb to the Babylonian army before the latter attacked Jerusalem. The opening unit of Jer. 34 (1–7) is problematic, since in Jer. 34:1 Nebuchadnezzar is fighting against all the cities around Jerusalem, while in 34:7, only Lachish and Azekah are left.⁹⁰ Seitz remarks that, in the original form of the unit, vv.6–7 functioned to provide the temporal setting of Jeremiah’s word to Zedekiah in vv.2b–5 (about the king’s fate and that of Jerusalem). If this analysis is correct, then Jeremiah delivered the oracle to the king “when the army of the king of Babylon was fighting against Jerusalem” and only Lachish and Azekah were left of the fortified cities of Judah (34:7).⁹¹ Seitz continues by saying that the unit Jer. 34:6–7,2b–5 fits remarkably well as a word from the prophet in response to the sending of a delegation at Jer. 37:3 (to ask Jeremiah to pray to Yahweh on behalf of the nation). The details of the siege and the notice that Babylonian forces were engaged in fighting in the Judahite countryside (Jer. 34:6–7), states Seitz, provide important and plausible background for Zedekiah’s action in Jer. 37:3, and the report that only Azekah and Lachish remained of the fortified cities forms a perfect backdrop for the military situation suggested in Jer. 37–39.⁹² Seitz thus remarks that it is “more than coincidence that the letters [namely Lachish

⁸⁹ See also Jack 1936: 281 (albeit with outdated readings); 1939: 119.

⁹⁰ On the problematic texts of Jer. 34:1–7 and 37:1–10 see Seitz 1989: 248–257.

⁹¹ Seitz 1989: 250, 251.

⁹² Seitz 1989: 254–156.

3)] found at Lachish itself make mention of an army commander's intent to go to Egypt, at just this period. But more than this cannot be said."⁹³

When we come to the information presented in Lachish 4, most scholars have mistakenly translated Lachish 4.12b–13 as “for we can *no longer* see Azekah” (emphasis added), when in actuality it reads “for we *cannot* see Azekah”. The “no longer” misreading, almost taken for granted, has incited the general assumption that Lachish 4 reports the fall of Azekah at the hands of the Babylonian army, since its signals presumably could *no longer* be seen by the sender of Lachish 4, and thus Lachish would have been next to meet a similar fate. This assumption, coupled with the striking similarity to the Jeremian passage (34:7), has led general scholarship to believe that Lachish 4 reports the attack of Nebuchadnezzar's army on the Judahite countryside, thus providing alleged evidence for the final days of the Judahite kingdom.

Nevertheless, the phrase in Lachish 4.10–13 does not ascertain this kind of scenario (§5.9), again displaying the classic problem of dealing with a brief inscription that forms part of the one extant side of an otherwise historically mute correspondence. Other possible options could explain the sender's statement, be it topographical or climate conditions. It has also been suggested that the Lachish beacon formed part of a network of signals linking the fortresses in the Shephelah with Jerusalem, and the sender of Lachish 4 is reporting the testing of the signal system and hence the training of the army to use the beacon prior to the arrival of invasion forces.⁹⁴

⁹³ Seitz 1989: 256.

⁹⁴ Mazar 1981; see also Lindenberger 2003: 117.

Both Thomas and Begin raised red flags on the underlying suppositions of the Lachish 4 message, especially since the latter mentions a number of people and places, and actions or events thereof that create a convoluted picture to the unsuspecting reader (§3.1.4). We do not know the location of the sender of the message, who apparently has a clear line of view to Lachish but not Azekah, if we take the topographical perspective into consideration, and not simply that the Babylonian army's attack was in full swing. If the sender of Lachish 4 was stationed somewhere else besides these two fortresses, probably at an unimportant post, then the Babylonians and the editor of Jeremiah overlooked this outpost because they presumably considered it insignificant.⁹⁵ If there was another standing outpost apart from Lachish and Azekah (with Maresha being Begin's suggested contender [§5.9]), and with such freedom of communication by messenger and letter, then it contradicts the dramatic scenario that most scholars tied to this inscription vis-à-vis Jer. 34:7.

In addition, Lachish 4 indicates that men were able to travel freely between Lachish and the capital. One S^cmak^yāhû and one Šema'yāhû were to go up to "the city" (Jerusalem), and the sender is telling his superior that he will be able to send his servant "there" (presumably Jerusalem) in the morning (lines 6b–7a) (§3.1.4). Strictly speaking, such movements suggest that neither Lachish nor Jerusalem was as yet in imminent danger from the Babylonian army at the time when Lachish 4 was written.⁹⁶ The only doubts revolve around the fact that some settlement called *bythrpd* (Lachish 4.4b–6a), suggested by Begin to be located close to Maresha (§§3.1.4 and 5.9), is reported to be desolate ("there is no one there"). More than this cannot be said, as is normal with such brief texts lacking their contexts.

⁹⁵ Begin 2002: 168.

⁹⁶ Thomas, D. W. 1946a: 90–91.

6.3.7 Is religious belief reflected in the Lachish ostraca?

The Lachish ostraca make little to no contribution to our knowledge of religion in Judah in the Jeremian age. The frequent use of the Divine Name in these ostraca is limited to stock phrases and greeting formulae, and Thomas remarked that “no religious significance can be properly read into its use” (§4.6).⁹⁷ He further rightly commented that not much can be deduced from the theophoric names, and attempts to see them as a reflection of the success of Josiah’s reform have proved unconvincing (§4.7). The value of the PNN mentioned in the ostraca, coupled with those found on several seal impressions and bullae, lies in the study of Hebrew PNN in the Jeremian period, of which they are typical. Interestingly, at least six of the 20 or so names met in the “Lachish Letters” occur in a single chapter of Jeremiah (36).⁹⁸ As far as the identity and role of the prophet goes, nothing of substance can be said from Lachish 3 and the implications in Lachish 6, but it is a fact that prophets were very much active during the time of writing of the Lachish messages (§6.1.1). All in all, the Lachish ostraca are just another testimony of stock phrases involving blessings and pledges in the name of Yahweh, as well as of varied theophoric names that by the early 6th century B.C.E. had become popular more by way of tradition than of faith.

6.3.8 A glimpse of contemporary script and language

One of the major values of the Lachish corpus, alongside other corpora from Judah and the Negev, lies in their script. These ostraca are proof of the kind of script used in the late Monarchic period for daily activities. Thomas listed all the scribal and epigraphic features these ostraca display that shed a light on our textual criticism of the Hebrew Bible: the use of the word-divider;

⁹⁷ Thomas, D. W. 1950: 2.

⁹⁸ Thomas, D. W. 1950: 4.

the splitting of the words at the end of a line; scribal errors; the spelling out in full of the Divine Name; the use of *scriptio defectiva*; and the frequent change of person.⁹⁹ Moreover, these ostraca preserve the language and (perhaps) dialect in Judah at the time of Jeremiah, up to the early the 6th century B.C.E.¹⁰⁰ This observation applies, of course, to the other epigraphic corpora, the respective discoveries of which were made later during the 20th century. Thomas adds that the language of the Lachish ostraca “is, to all intents and purposes, but with some differences, the classical Hebrew we know from the [Hebrew Bible]”, and it aligns itself especially with the Book of Jeremiah.

6.4 Concluding remarks

Should biblical and other texts be readily integrated with archaeology? Certainly. Each field and each source contributes different pieces to the puzzle. The evidence on the ground and the artefacts retrieved therein can fill in the gaps in the historical scenario reconstructed from biblical and other texts alike.

The biblical texts underwent numerous edits and redactions, so one needs to carefully sift through the texts to separate the ideological embellishments from the historical narratives. Similarly, the Neo-Babylonian texts are historiographical records with their flair for ideological and majestic portrayal of the military achievements of the respective rulers. In contrast, the personal and informal nature of the “Lachish Letters”, and other ostraca, reflects the tangible and human reality of the time, not only the individuals featuring in the inscriptions but also the corresponding archaeological contexts. Furthermore, a greater advantage lies in the fact that such

⁹⁹ Thomas, D. W. 1950: 4.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas, D. W. 1950: 4.

intimate scribbles were not subjected to any editing whatsoever, unlike biblical texts. For that matter, Palaeo-Hebrew inscriptions in general, when compared to the Hebrew Bible, have the great advantage of being original, primary sources rather than texts with a long history of transmission, and they “[furnish] us with documents incontestably composed in the time of the persons and events described in far greater detail in the Bible”.¹⁰¹ The disadvantages lie in the restricted time span of extant inscriptions (which fall mostly between the mid 9th and the early 6th centuries B.C.E.), the restricted literary types (practically no narrative and no poetry), the brevity of individual documents, and the frequently fragmentary state of preservation.¹⁰²

A purely historical approach to both biblical and other texts offers a socio-historical backdrop to better understand the “Lachish Letters” and other ostraca. This is especially true for the period between the first and second Babylonian campaigns in Judah, leading up to the fall of Jerusalem. We unfortunately lack any Babylonian records for this decade, and most historical events are picked up in short glimpses from the biblical texts, with Jeremiah as leading source.¹⁰³ The meagre corpus of Lachish ostraca is additional factual data at best, because, as fragmentary as the evidence is, we must not fall into the common trap of reading too much into the inscriptions. The Lachish messages in particular are just a terse sample of one side of one or many correspondences of the time. The same applies to the copious letters at Tel Arad, although the Lachish corpus is poorer than the latter, yet contains controversial information very much akin to what is written in the above biblical texts, particularly Jeremiah.

¹⁰¹ Pardee 1979: 64.

¹⁰² Pardee 1979: 64.

¹⁰³ Seitz 1989: 254.

It is indeed valuable that the “Lachish Letters” (alongside the Negev epigraphic evidence) contribute tangible albeit fragmentary evidence, summed up as follows.

- The corpora of Lachish and the Negev sites provide evidence of a literate society, especially among military officials.
- They above all shed light on the day-to-day activities of regional centres in a time of military agitation (Lachish 2–6, 8, 9, and 18, and other Negev ostraca).
- PNN lists (Lachish 1 and 11, and other Negev lists) indicate registrations, roster calls, and receipts of officials and peasants, who set foot at these fortresses at the time.
- Ration requests (Lachish 9, and the Arad Eliashib archive) indicate diet as well as the degree of comfort these embattled soldiers and hired mercenaries had.¹⁰⁴
- The evidence highlights active correspondences between subalterns and their superiors between the capital, major cities in the Shephelah, and fortresses on the southern border.
- There is freedom of movement and daily communication by messenger and letter, but there is also a growing agitation among the military troops and officials to an apparently increasingly unnerving situation (especially in Lachish 6, and the Arad Eliashib ostraca mentioning Edomites).
- An army official commandeers a group of men and departs to Egypt, possibly to seek military aid there.
- An anonymous prophet, one amongst many prophets active at the time, was involved in the contemporary political scene and known among the military troops and the Jerusalem elite.
- Signal installations were used at Lachish, and presumably at Azekah and other outposts in Judah (cf. Jer. 6:1).

¹⁰⁴ Matthews 2007: 86–87.

- Letters from the high authorities in Jerusalem were passed around among the military stationed at different outposts, including Lachish. These letters presumably contained unsettling words that were “weakening hands” (of whom we are not sure, given the fragmentary inscription).
- A date formula mentioning “the ninth year” in a storage-jar label was retrieved from a destruction layer at Lachish (with a *terminus ad quem* of 588/6 B.C.E.), attributed to Nebuchadnezzar’s final campaign in Judah, the latter which commenced around 589 B.C.E., during Zedekiah’s ninth regnal year.
- The “guardroom” ostraca of Lachish were found at the upper surface/horizon of a layer of ash with a *terminus ad quem* of 588/6 B.C.E.

The above evidence provides glimpses of information mentioned in different ostraca, most of which are fragmentary or too brief and vague to reconstruct a grander picture. The information nonetheless makes the Lachish ostraca fall under either Jehioakim’s reign or that of Zedekiah. The problem is that between the two Babylonian destructions of Jerusalem is a span of only ten years. Jehoiakim reigned from 609 B.C.E. and died around 598 B.C.E. His son Jehoiachin ascended the throne during the siege of Jerusalem (in 597 B.C.E.), only then to surrender to Babylon, and Zedekiah was appointed by Nebuchadnezzar in the same year. About a decade later, Nebuchadnezzar destroys Jerusalem, and Zedekiah is punished and deported to Babylon. The short span of years means that our ostraca can fall during any of those reigns, the succession of which rapidly changed the political situation among the Judahite elite.

If we look at the long reigns of both Jehoiakim and Zedekiah, we find that both kings were appointed by foreign kings: the former by Necho, the latter by Nebuchadnezzar. Whilst Jehoiakim was loyal to Necho (with the exception of his three-year vassalage to Nebuchadnezzar) and shared the same interests, Zedekiah breached the allegiance made with Nebuchadnezzar. The actions of both kings were condemned by Jeremiah, who proclaimed surrender to Babylon. Their individual actions led to the double-campaign of the Neo-Babylonian king in Judah. During both reigns we are given descriptions of activities of prophets contemporary to Jeremiah. Egypt was seen as a potential military aid in times of need and against the Babylonians, and this desperation increased during the later years of Zedekiah's reign.

The circumstances of the "Lachish Letters" reflect situations during the final two decades of the Judahite Monarchy (i.e. the major reigns of Jehoiakim and Zedekiah). It is plausible that the Lachish ostraca, especially the letters/messages, are more likely to date to Zedekiah's time, given the archaeological context and the fragmentary glimpses of an agitated political situation that finds similarities with that narrated by Jeremiah during the final decade of Judah (e.g. the delegation to Egypt, the agitation among military troops, and the alleged, underlying prophetic activity). The freedom of movement and communication indicated by the letters may suggest that they were not written during the critical times of the last years of Zedekiah's reign but perhaps in a less dangerous atmosphere, although this is simply a supposition based on random facets of epigraphic information that has come down to us in bits and pieces. The reality is that not much can be said with absolute certainty. My reservations revolve around the fact that these ostraca are a very small sample of highly fragmentary reports and letters. On their own they are insufficient to reconstruct a concrete picture of a specific time-frame without any further

evidence, yet they are valuable in supplying us with glimpses of the contemporary scene that are missing from the Neo-Babylonian records yet expressed in Jeremiah.

Conclusion

This holistic reappraisal aimed at a systematic understanding of the 21 ostraca known as the “Lachish Letters”, by integrating past and present scholarship on this group of inscriptions in light of modern advancement in the following disciplines: the archaeology and history of Lachish/Tell ed-Duweir, palaeography of the pre-exilic Palaeo-Hebrew script, Classical Hebrew philology, the Hebrew Bible, and other texts. Eighty years of scholarship on these ostraca have determined outstanding controversial issues and a firm dismissal of old-fashioned proposals that considered the “Lachish Letters” a homogenous dossier or archive of a surviving one-side of a correspondence between two people. The downside to past studies was their focus on the most legible ostraca, which allude to events or feature PNN similar to those described in the Book of Jeremiah. By contrast, the faded or illegible ostraca were seriously overlooked, ironically when the corpus has more or less been regarded as a homogeneous group of documents.

It was therefore necessary to physically examine all 21 ostraca under the lens to accept or reject any lingering palaeographic and philological doubts, and make room for any fresh observations. A closer look at the fabric of the various ostraca also played an important role in the understanding of these handwritten ceramic sherds. Crucial to the investigation was the access to archived and unpublished textual and visual documentation of the British Mandate Period excavations and other miscellaneous material (such as Olga Tufnell’s personal letters), which added nuanced layers of information and threw precious light on the discovery of the ostraca, the British Mandate Period excavation and documentation methods, and initial studies on and perceptions of the “Lachish Letters”. Indeed, lingering lacunae were either addressed or

remained unsolved, and new archaeological and epigraphic issues have arisen. The following is a summary of the principal findings from this multi-disciplinary exercise.

The archaeological discovery and documentation

The archaeological excavation and recording of the “guardroom” (E.18:C) of Lachish/Tell ed-Duweir had their limitations and drawbacks, given the times and methods of excavation. Starkey’s typed reports of the Lachish excavations in general, which he sent to Sir Henry Wellcome, were merely fortnightly journal entries. We therefore lack any detailed on-site reports of the discoveries, the findings, and the processes of excavation. Some discrepancies were also noted between published and unpublished information. The recording of the findings unearthed within the “guardroom” was limited in detail, especially with regards to the ostraca and other ceramic sherds, and any architectural features of Room E.18:C. We are only given textual descriptions in both the unpublished and published reports, and visual aids are inadequate. Detailed plans of Room E.18:C are virtually non-existent, and the few archived photographs are of little scientific use. We thus lack any valuable information on the vertical relationship of the 16 ostraca unearthed inside with the rest of the contents of the room, and on the original use of the so-called “guardroom”, for that matter.

A few ostraca discovered outside the “guardroom” had dubious findspots. The unpublished typed reports describe a different discovery for ostrakon 17 than the information presented in *Lachish I*. Ussishkin raised the issue of the identification error of Saddle Area 500 (the southwestern corner of the tell), which was excavated and misinterpreted by the British team and in reality turned out to be part of the Assyrian siege ramp. If that is the case, then ostrakon 19, said

to come from one Area 500 from the south-western corner, was discovered among debris used for the siege ramp and is likely to date to around 701 B.C.E., as does its older Palaeo-Hebrew script. Therefore, this ostrakon apparently belongs to a century or so earlier than the “guardroom” cache, Lachish 20, and 21. The discovery of ostrakon 21 below the floor of Room L.12:1065, atop the mound, might indicate that the sherd belongs to an earlier time than the room and its contents, perhaps only by a few years. Although the excavators also suggested an earlier date for this ostrakon’s script, I have argued otherwise. I have also hypothesised that the sherd perhaps ended up below the floor during the room’s construction. Moreover, the fragmentary information on the ostrakon indicates that it may have carried another message, with a reconstructed *praescriptio* and opening formulae similar to those of the “guardroom” epistolary documents. Its findspot atop the tell remains openly debatable.

Therefore, we have 21 ostraca that were discovered in various areas of Tell ed-Duweir, and belonging to different contexts (a few of them found in secondary use) and different periods, (cf. Lachish 19). The situation is similar with the rest of the Lachish ostraca (22–35), for that matter, and which were also retrieved from different areas of the tell. Aharoni’s ostrakon 22 and a number of those discovered by Ussishkin (24–31), virtually comprising fragmentary lists and jar labels, are contemporary with the Level II “guardroom” ostraca, Lachish 20, and perhaps 21, while the rest (23, 32–35) belong to earlier periods or were retrieved from unstratified contexts.

Ceramic analysis

Tufnell’s classification of the Type 498 holemouth storage jar (with two handles and a round base) remains highly unclear and dubious. It inhibits sound conclusions on the original source of

the vessel in question and of the five ostraca (2, 6, 7, 8, and 18) written on some of its fragments. If further uncatalogued fragments from the same vessel as that of the above five ostraca exist, they are either held in the British Museum storage or in any of the other Lachish collections in museums worldwide. Equally ambiguous is the identification of sherd 7941 (British Museum), which supposedly was discovered in the “guardroom” and forms part of another Type 498 jar.

Palaeography and philology

It is clear that the 21 ostraca, including the “guardroom” messages, are the product of different scribes, and all display a mastery of the cursive script. The close observations of the fading/faded ostraca (7, 8, 10–12, 14, 15, 18) revealed nuanced differences in readings and observations *contra* Torczyner and other scholars. Sadly, their individual state today makes identification of the ink writings difficult, for some even impossible, but high quality archived photographs of the lot remain a valuable asset for the preservation and re-examination of these documents. I also firmly reject the reading *nb*’ (“prophet”) in the fragmentary ostrakon 16, and, like the majority of scholars, dismiss Torczyner’s idea of a court dossier implicating Hôšā yāhû and his alleged indiscretion in relation to the prophet Uriah of Qiryat-Ye‘arim. I also abandon the idea of identifying the anonymous *nb*’ in Lachish 3 or in the dubious readings of the badly faded Lachish 6 with either Uriah or Jeremiah. Though possible in the politico-historical context of the Lachish ostraca, it is far from probable, least of all certain. The evidence is too terse and fragmentary to build such a convenient historical picture, not to mention that many prophets, most of them left anonymous in the Hebrew Bible, were active at the time.

The “Lachish Letters” label

The homogeneity of the Lachish ostraca has always been questionable among most scholars. I fully confirm that the popular label of “Lachish Letters”, used throughout the present study for conventional purposes, is indeed fallacious when we consider that, already in 1935, the first batch of 18 ostraca constituted mixed types of documents, let alone with the addition of the other three miscellaneous ostraca in 1938. Altogether the 21 ostraca comprise an assorted archive of varying documents and genres: PNN lists; messages/letters/(military) reports between subordinates and high officials; a possible short instruction from a superior to his subordinates, or else the last part of another long message/report; a storage-jar label; faded ostraca that once bore long documents; and small fragmentary pieces that once belonged to multiple-line inscriptions, some of which were found in secondary contexts. The “guardroom” cache must have been larger than the extant quantity of 16 ostraca, given the hundreds of blackened ceramic sherds found inside, and if the burnt ones bore any kinds of documents, then sadly much information of a grander picture has been lost! This further nullifies the impression of the “guardroom” ostraca, or the legible ones for that matter, as a homogenous archive, least of all of belonging to a court dossier, as Torczyner maintained.

The controversial origins and functions of the “guardroom” ostraca

With the problematic Type 498 jar identification, we certainly cannot make assumptions about the origin of the five ostraca pertaining to this one jar, four of which are messages. The rest of the “guardroom” ostraca are even more ambiguous. The lack of addressee and recipient names in most extant messages does not ease the issue. We only know about the high-ranking recipient Yā’ûš and the servant Hôša’yāhû as two of the protagonists in the meagre fragmentary data that

has come down to us so far. We cannot assume, least of all conclude that these two personages were the same individuals throughout the surviving correspondence, hence the identity and number of correspondents remains questionable. This has a huge implication on the places of origin of the epistolary documents. We cannot determine where they were written and whether Tell ed-Duweir was the intended destination. Granted, the archaeology of this massive site has, over the centuries, determined its identification with ancient Lachish, yet the flimsy evidence of these ostraca, on its own, is not a reliable factor in the site's identification, given all the outstanding issues. Lachish 4, mentioning the signals of Lachish and (those of) Azekah, could have originated from outside and give geographical hints, but on its own it is certainly not a strong piece of evidence, neither for the Tell ed-Duweir's identification nor for any suggested place of origin of the messages (e.g. Mareshah). The missives, if indeed coming from outside, could have been sent from low-ranking officials in (military) circles stationed anywhere in Judah. The surviving "guardroom" lists and messages (especially those lacking addressees) fall under both possibilities: (i) *in situ* inscriptions (memos, notes, drafts, copies, or even dictations of orally-delivered messages); and/or (ii) received messages/lists, i.e. handed over by incoming messengers/visitors. There is the likelihood that a few fragmentary ostraca, comprising inscribed and non-inscribed pieces (repaired post-excavation) (e.g. Lachish 11 and 15), were written on site on available broken pottery. The "guardroom", situated by the outer gate, seems to have, at least, partly functioned as storage of assorted pottery and a depository of ostraca, possibly incoming ones. We unfortunately lack evidence that suggests the use of this room as a *scriptorium*.

Historical context

As far as the general consensus is concerned, the legible ostraca from the “guardroom”, the Lachish 20 storage-jar label, and perhaps the fragmentary Lachish 21, are indeed indicative and representative of the final years of the Judahite kingdom, with an elegant late 7th–early 6th century script, a mastery of the language and epistolary style, and with most featured PNN and reported events striking similarities with the Book of Jeremiah (and its parallels in 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles). As far as the very small sample of surviving information can tell us, the ostraca could be contemporary with either Jehoiakim’s (and Jehoiachin’s) time or, perhaps more likely, with Zedekiah’s reign. The documents reflect relationships between high officials and their subordinates, snippets of daily life and military operations, and throw light on the role played by the Judaeen army and current prophetic activity in the life of the kingdom and its citizens, especially against superpowers of the period, Egypt and Babylon. Unfortunately, we have a few faded “guardroom” ostraca that once carried (long) inscriptions but are virtually impossible to make out in their entirety, except for a few sporadic letters. One can only imagine and keep in mind what other information lay on these sherds, and especially on any other potential ostraca lost in the conflagration of the “guardroom”, which would have added further data to the present picture or perhaps altered it entirely!

Concluding statements and the way forward

This research presents a revised, complete edition of these varied 21 ostraca, and systematically places them in their wider socio-political and historico-archaeological contexts. I approached these ostraca holistically and have treated them individually, paying proper attention to their respective physical natures, archaeological contexts, all the accessible documentation, and the

inscriptions themselves. Their physical examination and the unpublished archived material were a great asset to this revised edition, as it took me “back to basics” in dealing with the history of these artefacts from scratch, in all the little nuanced details that were not readily available to the general public. Aside from addressing any laconic data, they have also certainly raised further questions for posterity, as well as an appreciation and awareness of the limits of the British Mandate Period excavations, post-excavations, and documentation techniques.

Over the years, all the laboratory tests and observations with the naked eye have provided us with the information we currently have thus far. If any further tests will be possible and carried out on any of these ostraca in the future, let us hope it will be beneficial for the analysis of the handwritten inscriptions, especially the fading or faded ones. It is a worthwhile study before the iron-carbon ink disappears completely. In addition, we can only wait and see what the future holds with the excavations that are underway at Tell ed-Duweir at the time of writing.

Last but not least, it would be beneficial for future epigraphic studies to incorporate multi-disciplinary exercises such as the one in the present research, where one can analyse the nature of an inscription or group of inscriptions in its entirety. In recent decades, we have seen other corpora of ostraca from various fortresses of the Negev being regularly published in journal articles and their respective excavation reports. What about older discoveries of ostraca? The extensive Arad corpus comes to mind, which was discovered during the 1960s and later published by Aharoni in an illustrated monograph, both in Hebrew and English. Discussions and re-evaluations on different selections from this corpus have appeared over the last decades in various journal articles, penned by different scholars. If such a holistic reappraisal would be

carried out for this corpus, as an example, it would be interesting to see a revised edition of the Arad ostraca that incorporates recent revised readings and a detailed update about the site, its excavations, and any other studies associated with the ostraca.

To conclude this research, we can definitely appreciate that the Lachish ostraca, as minimal as they are, will keep holding many unspoken secrets between the lines. They are a scratch on the surface of a reality that belonged to the final decades of the Judahite Monarchy.

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