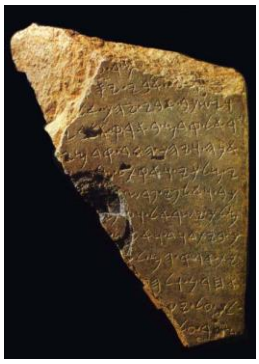
"David" Found at Dan

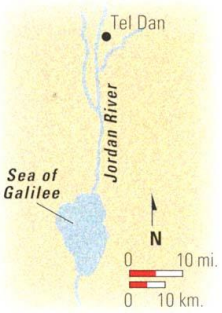
AVRAHAM BIRAN

Inscription Crowns 27 Years of Exciting Discoveries



It's not often that an archaeological find makes the front page of the *New York Times* (to say nothing of *Time* magazine). But that is what happened last summer to a discovery at Tel Dan, a beautiful mound in northern Galilee, at the foot of Mt. Hermon beside one of the headwaters of the Jordan River.[1]

There Avraham Biran and his team of archaeologists[2] found a remarkable inscription from the ninth century B.C.E. that refers both to the "House of David" and to the "King of Israel." This is the first time that the name David has been found in any ancient inscription outside the Bible. That the inscription refers not simply to a "David" but to the House of David, the dynasty of the great Israelite king, is even more remarkable.



"King of Israel" is a term frequently found in the Bible, especially in the Book of Kings. This, however, may be the oldest extra-Biblical reference to Israel in Semitic script. If this inscription proves anything, it shows that both Israel and Judah, contrary to the claims of some scholarly Biblical minimizers, were important kingdoms at this time.

Together with his colleague Professor Joseph Naveh of the Hebrew University, Professor Biran promptly wrote a scientific report on the inscription, which was published in the *Israel Exploration Journal*.[3] This special article for **BAR** readers is based on that report and on other materials supplied by Professor Biran.

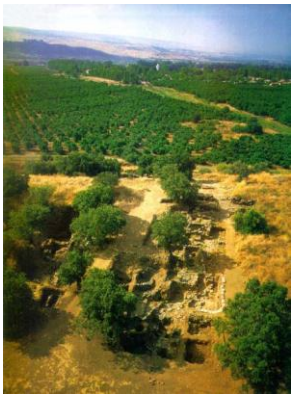
---

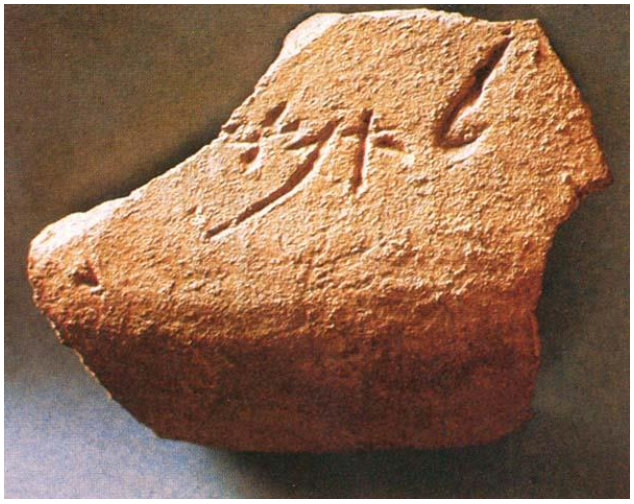
[1] See the following **BAR** articles: Avraham Biran, "Prize Find: Tel Dan Scepter Head," **BAR** 15:01; Hershel Shanks, "**BAR** Interview: Avraham Biran—Twenty Years of Digging at Tel Dan," **BAR** 13:04; John C. H. Laughlin, "The Remarkable Discoveries at Tel Dan," **BAR** 07:05.

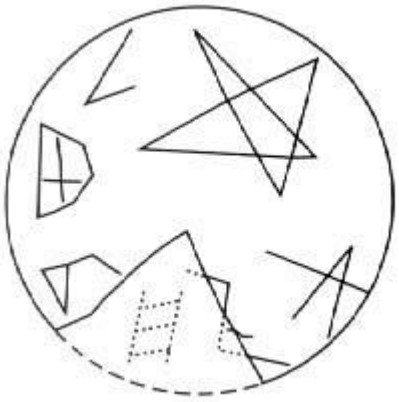
[2] From the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology of the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion.

[3] Avraham Biran and Joseph Naveh, "An Aramaic Stele Fragment from Tel Dan," *Israel Exploration Journal* 43 (1993), pp. 81–98.

Let us start with some background. In the first season at Tel Dan—27 years ago, in 1966—Biran and his team uncovered on the slope of the mound a small potsherd incised with four letters in ancient Hebrew script. Although inscriptions are quite rare in excavations in Israel, the excavators were not really surprised. In the previous year, a ninth-century B.C.E. Aramaic inscription incised on the base of a bowl had been discovered quite by accident on the surface of the site. The late Professor Nahman Avigad, who published the inscription, read it as "of the butchers." The bowl on which it was inscribed had probably belonged to the cooks or butchers in the royal household of Dan.[4]







The four-letter Hebrew inscription on the potsherd was dated to the eighth century B.C.E., about a century after the "butcher" inscription. The four letters

[4] See *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 100 (1968), pp. 42–44.

read lÕms\ (Åmal). The first letter is the common preposition meaning "belonging to"; the last three letters are a name: Amotz. This was the name of the father of the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 1:1; 2 Kings 19:2; 2 Chronicles 26:22, etc.), who prophesied in the eighth century B.C.E. The jar did not belong to Isaiah's father—the name was fairly common—but the discovery of an eighth-century B.C.E. inscription with a well-known name naturally caused considerable excitement for the members of the expedition and raised hopes of finding more.

Two years later, in 1968, while excavating a seventh-century B.C.E. building, Biran found a sherd inscribed with seven letters in Phoenician script. It read lbÔlplt\ (flpl[bl), meaning "belonging to Baalpelet." The name Baalpelet means "may Baal rescue." As Baal was a pagan god, it is unlikely that Baalpelet the jar owner was an Israelite.

We have no idea who this Baalpelet was. Twenty years later, however, on the northern part of the mound, Biran found another ostracon inscribed with the letters *l* and t\, probably the last letters of the same name. Baalpelet may have been a prominent member of the Dan community, if having two jars inscribed with his name is any indication. Alternatively, the name may simply have been popular in the seventh century B.C.E.

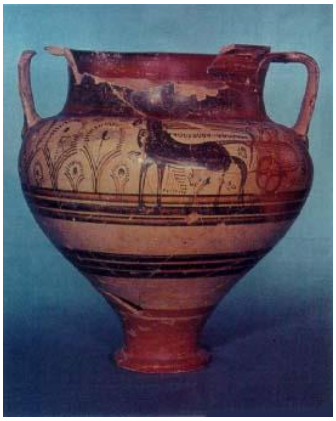
Eight years later, in 1976, in a disturbed level of occupation (thus, it cannot be precisely dated by stratigraphy), the Tel Dan team found an unusual bilingual inscription—in Greek and Aramaic—incised on a stone, mentioning the "God who is in Dan." This inscription conclusively established that the site was Biblical Dan.

Another ten excavation seasons passed without a hint of an inscription. Then, in 1986, in a layer of violent destruction attributed to the Assyrian conquest of northern Israel by Tiglath-pileser III in 733/732 B.C.E., a stamped jar handle was found, bearing the letters *l'mdyo* (wydm[l). The seal that made the impression had belonged to someone named *Immadiyo*, that is, "God is with me." The -*yo* (wy) element in the name is a shortened form of Yahweh (the personal name of the Israelite God) used in the northern kingdom, Israel.[a] Immadiyo is thus a Yahwistic name that may reflect Immadiyo's, or his parents', devotion to the Israelite God.

In 1988, they uncovered another Yahwistic name on an eighth-century B.C.E. jar handle: *zkryo* (wyrkz), meaning "God (Yahweh) remembers" or "May God (Yahweh) remember." This is a very common name in the Bible, perhaps more easily recognizable by transliterating it with vowels: Zecharya or, even more recognizably, Zechariah or Zachariah (the same name in Hebrew). Another Biblical form of the name is Zecharyahu, especially in Judah. Young's Bible concordance lists 27 different men named Zechariah in the Bible, and two named Zachariah. In the New Testament, Zechariah was the name of John the Baptist's father (Luke 1).

One of the Biblical Zechariahs was the son of Jeroboam II; he succeeded his father to the throne of Israel (in about 753 B.C.E.) and held it for a bare six months. At that time Dan was included in the kingdom of Israel. It is tantalizing to imagine that perhaps the seal belonged to a king, King Zechariah of eighth-century B.C.E. Israel. The date of the seal impression and the date of the king's reign do seem to fit.

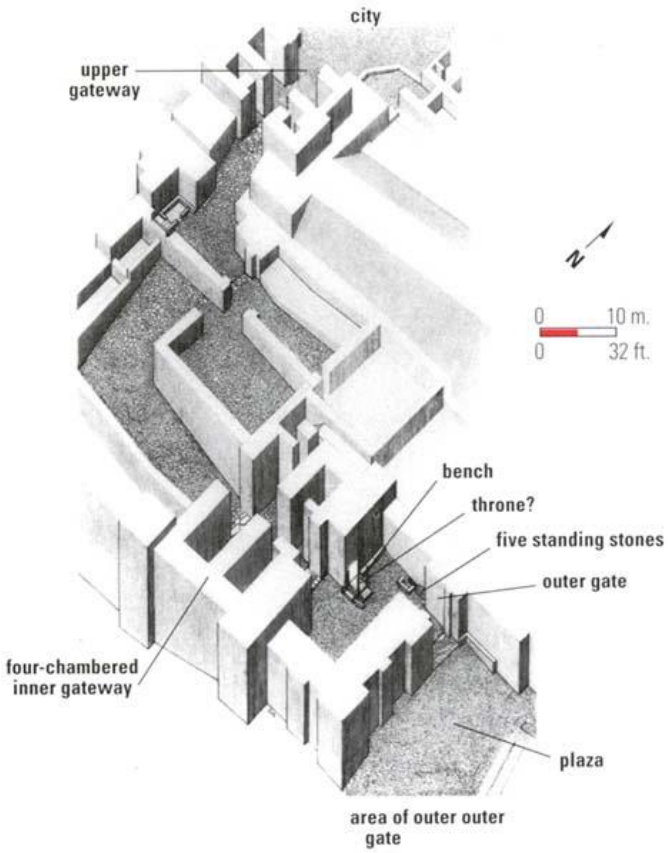
In addition to these inscriptions, the Tel Dan team made many other important discoveries: the unique triple-arched gate, the Mycenaean tomb, the scepter head and the Israelite gate complex.[b] None was more dramatic, however, than the inscription uncovered last summer referring to the "House of David" and the "King of Israel."



In a sense the find can be attributed to the fact that the Israel Government Tourist Corporation and the Antiquities Authority had decided that Tel Dan was a site worthy of a major conservation and restoration project, so that, after nearly a generation of excavation, the site can be properly presented to visitors. As part of this project, which began in 1992, the archaeologists removed the debris from the eighth-century B.C.E. Assyrian destruction level—the destruction of Tiglath-pileser III, as previously mentioned—outside the city-gate complex. The purpose was simply to remove this destruction debris. But, as so often happens in an excavation, the unexpected occurred. As the destruction debris was being removed, an intriguing new ninth-century B.C.E. gate was uncovered; it formed an additional outer gate leading to the city-gate complex.

The previously known city-gate complex consisted of an outer gate that opened into a rectangular pavement (about 28 feet long and 65 feet wide), on the other side of which stood the major, or inner, gate. In this plaza, just as one approached the inner gate, a low platform had been uncovered several years ago. It had sockets at three of the four corners (the fourth socket was missing) that apparently once supported a canopy over the platform. The platform was probably either for the city's ruler, to greet a parade of dignitaries along a beautifully paved processional route, or a pedestal for the statue of a

deity. To the right was a bench where perhaps the elders sat—to judge cases, to make deals or to welcome a royal procession.



In 1992, as part of the conservation-preservation project, Biran made an unexpected find when the layer of destruction in this area was removed. A decorated capital that may have adorned the top of one of the columns of the canopied structure above the platform was excavated.

The next surprising find was a set of five standing stones in a niche just inside the outer gate. At either end of this row of standing stones lay large, carefully hewn, rectangular blocks. These blocks apparently belonged originally to part of the structure that sheltered the standing stones. The nature of these stones and their location—along the city wall in the plaza of the city-gate complex—together with a cache of some 25 pottery vessels found west of the standing stones, suggests that they may be sacred pillars, the *massebot* often mentioned in the Bible. This suggestion is further buttressed by the votive nature of the vessels: nine oil lamps, three of which have a pedestal and seven spouts; five three-legged cups (possibly for incense); four flat and five deep bowls; and numerous other stands. All of these artifacts are known to have cultic functions.

In short, this evidence suggests that the plaza between the outer and inner gates had a small "gateway" sanctuary that could be considered a *bamah* (often translated "high place") of the kind mentioned in 2 Kings 23:1–20. That Biblical passage describes the seventh-century religious reforms instituted by King Josiah. Like King Hezekiah before him, Josiah wanted to centralize all worship of the Israelite God Yahweh in the Jerusalem Temple. To ensure this, Josiah destroyed the outlying *bamot* (plural of *bamah*). In this connection, the Biblical text specifically mentions "*bamot* of the gates" and one that was at the "entrance" (*petach*) of a gate (2 Kings 23:8). The *bamah* at Dan may have been this kind of structure.

In 1993, Biran and his team continued clearing the area outside the outer gate of the city-gate complex, because they knew that the paved plaza extended there, both to the east and to the south. There they uncovered approximately 475 square yards of pavement outside the outer city gate. Then on the east they hit a wall that had undergone considerable change, including the construction of a water channel through it in the Roman period. On the northern side of this wall, they found the "House of David/King of Israel" inscription, but that is getting ahead of the story.

South of this plaza outside the city-gate complex was a row of five unworked stones (one was missing). On either side of this row of stones lay a squared stone, on top of which was a stone pivot set inside the door socket. It seemed that they had discovered another gate, still farther out from the other one, and that this was its threshold. The two hemispherical stone pivots, made of local black basalt, once held square wooden doorposts, as reflected in the square hole in each of them. Thus the doors resting on the hemispherical pivots could be opened and closed with ease. The function of this new outer gate—an outer outer gate—is still unclear.

The biggest surprise was, of course, the inscription. The team's surveyor, Gila Cook, first noticed it. There, in secondary use in a wall, on the east side of the plaza, beneath an eighth-century B.C.E. destruction level, she saw a basalt stone protruding from the ground. As the rays of the afternoon sun glanced off this stone, Gila thought she saw letters on it and called Biran over. When he bent down to look at the stone, he exclaimed: "Oh, my God, we have an inscription!" The stone was easily removed and, when turned toward the sun, the letters sprang to life. In their words, "It was an unforgettable moment."

The piece of basalt was a fragment of what must have been a large monumental inscription. The sidebar "New Inscription May Illuminate Biblical Events" contains a drawing of the 13-line inscription, a transcript in modern Hebrew letters and an English translation. In the translation, the words and letters in brackets have been reconstructed on the basis of surviving parts of the inscription. A dot over a letter in the modern Hebrew transcription indicates that the letter has only partially survived.

Parts of 13 lines have been preserved, but not a single one is complete. In the first line, only three letters have survived. In the second line are five letters and part of a sixth; in the last line, only five letters; and the widest line has a mere 14 letters.

On the other hand, the surviving letters are clearly engraved and easy to read. The script is in Old Hebrew letters, sometimes called paleo-Hebrew, the kind of letters used before the Babylonian destruction of the First Temple in 586 B.C.E. When the Jews returned from the Babylonian exile, they brought back the square Aramaic script still used today.

Dots separate the words, as was then customary. In line 9, where "House of David" appears, however, the two Hebrew words *bytdwd* are not separated by a dot, but written together, like HouseofDavid. The dynastic name of the kingdom of Judah, whose founder was King David, was apparently regarded as one word.

Note that the first letter (farthest to the right) in line 9, just before the reference to the House of David, is the last letter of *melech*, the Hebrew word for king, so the previous line

probably ended with the other two letters of the word for king. In short, there was probably a reference to "the king of the House of David." Perhaps the missing part even gave his name.

In line 8 is a reference to *melech yisrael*, the king of Israel, so the text mentions both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah and the king of each. Unfortunately, the kings' names, if they were ever there, have not survived.

In line 5, however, is the name Hadad. Hadad was a storm god, especially popular among the Arameans east of the Jordan. "Hadad went in front of me," the text reads. This is apparently a victory stela erected in Dan by an Aramean king devoted to Hadad.

Line 4 reads: " … rael formerly in my father's land." Apparently the two letters that were at the end of line 3 were "Is" so that the original text read "Israel formerly in my father's land." There may even have been a reference to the cities of Israel.

In lines 6 and 7, the author of the text boasts that he "slew [some apparently large number of] chariots and 2,000 horsemen." Then the following lines contain references to the king of Israel and, presumably, the king of the House of David.

Thus this appears to be a victory stela erected in Dan by an Aramean, a devotee of Hadad, who is boasting of his military victory over Israel and perhaps also Judah. That this is an Aramean victory stela is confirmed by the fact that the language is Early Aramaic, related to, but slightly different from, Hebrew. The author of the text was probably not the Aramean king, but rather a military commander of the king's, because in line 6 we find a reference to "my king." On the other hand, lines 2 and 3 refer to "my father" and line 4 refers to "my father's land," indicating royalty of some sort. Perhaps the military commander who erected the stela was himself a royal personage, possibly a king who was subordinate to the king of Aram who ruled from Damascus. The Bible actually mentions two such subordinate kingdoms, Maacah (2 Samuel 10:6, 8; 1 Chronicles 19:7) and Rehob (2 Samuel 10:8). Although Maacah and Rehob were more than a hundred years before the Dan stela was written, these kingdoms may still have existed in the period of the stela.

In 1 Kings 15:16–22 (a parallel account appears in 2 Chronicles 16:1–6), we learn of a war between King Baasha of Israel and King Asa of Judah. Asa took all the gold and silver from the Jerusalem Temple and from his own palace and presented it to Ben-Hadad, king of Aram, as a gift, with a note requesting Ben-Hadad's help. Ben-Hadad responded by attacking cities in the northern kingdom of Israel, and captured several of them, including Dan (1 Kings 15:20).

Does this Biblical episode provide the historical background of the Dan stela? Did Ben-Hadad, the Aramean, erect this victory stela after capturing Dan?

The answer depends on (1) whether the date of the stela is contemporaneous with this episode, and (2) whether the two texts "fit" with one another.

The Biblical episode can be dated to the first half of the ninth century B.C.E., about 885. (Baasha's reign extended from 906 to 883 and Asa's reign from 908 to 867.)

How was the stela dated to the ninth century B.C.E.? One way to date the inscription is paleographically—by the shape and stance of the letters. On this basis, Joseph Naveh dated the inscription to the ninth century. The evidence comes from other inscriptions that have been previously dated. In the ninth century, Aramaic script and Phoenician script had not yet gone their separate ways, so comparisons to inscriptions in both scripts are relevant. Unfortunately, however, most extant ninth-century inscriptions, like the famous Mesha stela, which is most similar to the Dan inscription, come from the latter half of that century. Only the Phoenician Nora inscription[c] and an inscription from Cyprus come from the early ninth century. So, the Dan inscription can be dated paleographically to about the middle of the century, but might fall within a range of some decades earlier or later.

An archaeological analysis, however, suggests a date in the first half of the ninth century. The stela fragment that bears the inscription was used in a wall that was destroyed by Tiglath-pileser III in 733/732 B.C.E., so the stela must have been erected before this date. But that doesn't help much.

The pottery from the level beneath the stela fragment narrows the range. While the amount of pottery found there was small, none of it was later than the first half of the ninth century! This suggests that the stela was broken up around that time, so that it would have been erected sometime during the first half of the ninth century B.C.E. It must have stood at least some time before being destroyed and used secondarily in the wall. A date early in the ninth century fits nicely with the date of the Biblical episode (about 885 B.C.E.).

But an examination of the two accounts—the one in the Bible and the other on the fragmentary inscription—suggests caution. Obviously, the reconstruction of the text presents many difficulties and many possibilities. Note that in line 9, Naveh and Biran have reconstructed an "I" before "slew," so that the author of the text does the slaying. That is their best guess, although other reconstructions are possible. If the reconstruction of "I" is correct, it appears that the author of the victory stela is claiming a victory over Judah (the House of David), who is his enemy, as well as over Israel. If that is so, it would

conflict with the Biblical episode, in which the Aramean king was allied with the king of Judah, having been bribed with a gift of gold and silver. Thus the stela may be describing some other military engagement in which both Judah and Israel were allied against Aram.

There were probably several battles or wars in the ninth century B.C.E. between Aram and Israel. Not all were recorded in the Bible. Indeed, several other possibilities are mentioned in the Bible.[5] For the time being, the matter must remain in the realm of learned conjecture.

In any event, at some point Israel must have regained control of Dan, perhaps when King Ahab rebuilt the city after its destruction by Ben-Hadad I in 885 B.C.E. When the Israelites regained control of the city, the Aramean victory stela was destroyed. The only thing we can be sure of is that it was broken and that one of the fragments was used in a wall bordering a plaza in the city-gate complex.

As stated earlier, this is now the oldest extant Semitic reference to Israel. The "king of Israel" is also referred to in the famous Mesha stela, which, according to most experts, dates to later in the ninth century. The immensely important Merneptah stela, dated to 1207 B.C.E., also refers to Israel, but the text is in hieroglyphics. The Tel Dan inscription is therefore the oldest appearance in Semitic script of the name Israel—at least for now. Who knows when a new inscription that challenges this claim will be found.

AVRAHAM BIRAN (d. 2008) was the Director of the Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology at Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem for many years. Formerly Israel's Director of Antiquities and Museums, he held many government positions and directed numerous excavations, including Anathoth, Ira, Aroer and the ancient synagogue of Yesud Hamaalah.

[5] For a discussion, see Biran and Naveh, "An Aramaic Stele Fragment from Tel Dan," *Israel Exploration Journal* 43 (1993), pp. 95–98.