The Philistine Inscription 4.5 from Ashkelon (Israel)

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Abstract

The origin and the nature of the Philistines is an enigma for the contemporary historical studies. They appear to have first settled the Aegean area and then, as a Sea People, around 1200 B.C. to have invaded and settled the south part of present Israel. The recent Harvard Leon Levy Expedition excavations in the area of the port of the ancient Philistine Ashkelon recovered 18 jar handles and one inscribed ostracon made from local clay. The ostracon, classified as RN 9794, hosts the inscription 4.5 that is particularly illuminating about the origin and nature of the Philistines. The analysis of all the possible 27 spellings of the inscription reveals one of them which, compared with the present surviving Slavic languages, appears to have the specific meaning of: People come in, we see, or in loose translation: Come and see. The inscription and the considerations developed in this article indicate that the Philistines of the ancient Ashkelon, or the Philistines in general, was a Proto-Slavic tribe or people which spoke a non-survived Proto-Slavic language, which settled in the south part of present Israel in the Iron Age, i.e. well before the VII century A.D. generally accepted period of the Slavs arrival in Eastern Europe.

Keywords

1. Introduction

The origin and the nature of the Philistines is an enigma for the contemporary historical studies. Mentioned by various historical sources, including the Bible, they appear to have first settled the Aegean area and then, as a Sea People, around 1200 B.C. to have invaded and settled the south part of present Israel. The recent Harvard Leon Levy Expedition (Wilford, 2007) excavations in the area of the port of the ancient Philistine Ashkelon

recovered 18 jar handles having Cypro-Minoan signs or digraph (monograms) either identical with the Cipro-Minoan script or easily developed from it and incised after firing and one inscribed ostracon made from local clay giving evidence that the "early Philistines of Ashkelon were able to read and write in a non-Semitic language, as yet un-deciphered" and that "several signs in the Ashkelon inscriptions fit in with the well-known Cipro-Minoan" alphabet (Cross & Stager, 2006).

2. The Inscription 4.5 of Ashkelon

The inscribed ostracon, classified as RN 9794 (**Figure 1**), belonged to a storage jar and appears particularly illuminating about the origin and nature of the Philistines. It hosts the relatively long red inscription 4.5 on an ocra field. The inscription is written "in continuo", i.e. without separation between the words. It is composed by characters (1) - (9) (**Figure 1**). In looking to the characters it is possible to confirm that they adhere well, unless a minor incertitude for the characters (3), (5), (8), to the known syllabic characters of the Cipro-Minoan alphabet (Cross & Stager, 2006). Therefore, it appears admissible that the Philistine alphabet and the Cipro-Minoan alphabet (**Figure 2**) were linked together and that each Ashkelon inscription character shared the same sound value of the corresponding, similar character in the Cipro-Minoan alphabet. The orientation of characters (2), (4) (**Figure 1**) confirms a right to left reading of the inscription (Cross & Stager, 2006). Since the edges of the fragment are broken, it is possible that some further character/s completed it. A possible ligature links characters (8) - (9). The inscription was dated at the 11th century BC (Cross & Stager, 2006; Uziel, 2007).

3. Spelling, Interpretation and Translation

Because of the incertitude on the characters (3), (5), (8), possibly corresponding to either one of the Cipro-Minoan characters 25 = K/GA, 24 = LE, 23 = D/TI, 27 (cf. **Figure 2**) different spellings of the inscription are possible (**Table 1**).

3.1. Spelling

The analysis of the 27 spellings of **Table 1** reveals that the sound value group I U K/GA in spellings 1 - 9, I U LE in spellings 10 - 18, WE LE MI in spellings 20, 23, 26, WE K/GA MI in spellings 21, 22, 25, B/PA K/GA B/PA in the spelling 24 and B/PA LE B/PA in the spelling 27 are unusual and do not indicate possible words if compared with the same sound values groups in the present surviving Slavic languages. But, according to said comparison, the sound value groups of spelling 19:

Figure 1. Painted inscription 4.5 on the ceramic ostracon RN 9794 discovered in the area of the ancient Philistine port of Ashkelon. Credit Leon levy expedition (Wilford, 2007).

Cypor-Minoan signs with most certain values
Based on their comparison with signs of the Cypriot and Linear B scripts.
F1 – Faucounau1,F2 – Faucounau2,FN – Facchetti/Negri,C – Colless,O – Opheltau.

		A		E		I		O		U
-		102		38		104		64		12/19?
B/P		6		11						
D/T		4		7		23				
K/G		25				70		21?		
L		87		24		9		5		
M		55/53				91		73/75		
N		8		2						
R				33				97		
S		82		44		27				46?
W				1						
Y		69								
Z										

Figure 2. Cipro-Minoan characters with most certain sound values (Lytov, 2015; Facchetti & Negri, 2014; Faucounau, 1977; Faucounau, 1980; Faucounau, 1994; Faucounau, 2007; Colless, no date; Masson, 1994).

(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	Inscription characters
104	12/197	23	6	23	6	1	23	91	Cipro-Minoan characters
I	U	D/TI	B/PA	D/TI	B/PA	WE	D/TI	MI	Cipro-Minoan s. values

appear to indicate specific Slavic words and a reasonable meaning for the inscription.

3.2. Interpretation

[L] *IUDI PADI PA WEDIMI

Liudi: Gsl. subst.: people; Bos. Люди—people; Cro. Ljudi—people; Mac. луѓе—people; Pol. Ludzie— people; Rus. Люди—people; Ser. Људи—people; Slo. Ljudja—people; Slov. Ľudia.—people; Cze. lidé— people; Ukr. Люди—people.

Padi: Gsl. verb in imp. tense: come!; Cro. Dođete—come; Mac. Оди—come; Slo. Pojdi—come; Rus. Поди— come; Ser. Дођи—come; Ukr. Піди—come.

Pa: Gsl. pre.: on, in, at; Bos. Po—in, on; Bul. По—in, on, at; Cro. Po—in, on; Lit. po—in, on, at; Pol. Po—in, on, at; Rus. По—in, on, at; Ser. По—in, on, at; Ukr. По—in, on.

Wedimi: Gsl. v. pres. tense, 2nd plur. pers.: we see; Mac. видиме—we see; Bul. ние виждаме—we see; Cro. Vidimo—we see; Rum. Vedem—we see; Rus. мы видим—we see; Ser. Видимо—we see; Slov. Vidimo—we see; Cze. Vidime—we see; Ukr. ми бачимо—we see.

*Possible lost letter on the right of the inscription.

3.3. Translation

From the above spelling 19 and its interpretation, the consequent translation of the inscription is: People come in, we see, or in loose translation: Come and see. Probably, the inscription was an invitation to the public to discover and/or to taste the content of the jar.

4. Discussion

The inscription appears to be written in a not survived Proto-Slavic language. This explains why the inscription

Table 1. Possible correspondences (N) of the characters (1) - (9) of the Ashkelon inscription with the characters and sound values of the Cipro-Minoan alphabet.

N	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	Cipro-M. s. val. for (3), (5), (8)
1	I	U	K/GA	B/PA	K/GA	B/PA	WE	K/GA	MI	25 25 25
2	I	U	K/GA	B/PA	K/GA	B/PA	WE	LE	MI	25 25 24
3	I	U	K/GA	B/PA	K/GA	B/PA	WE	D/TI	MI	25 25 23
4	I	U	K/GA	B/PA	LE	B/PA	WE	K/GA	MI	25 24 25
5	I	U	K/GA	B/PA	LE	B/PA	WE	LE	MI	25 24 24
6	I	U	K/GA	B/PA	K/GA	LE	WE	D/TI	MI	25 24 23
7	I	U	K/GA	B/PA	D/TI	B/PA	WE	K/GA	MI	25 23 25
8	I	U	K/GA	B/PA	D/TI	B/PA	WE	LE	MI	25 23 24
9	I	U	K/GA	B/PA	D/TI	B/PA	WE	D/TI	MI	25 23 23
10	I	U	LE	B/PA	LE	B/PA	WE	LE	MI	24 24 24
11	I	U	LE	B/PA	LE	B/PA	WE	K/GA	MI	24 24 25
12	I	U	LE	B/PA	LE	B/PA	WE	D/TI	MI	24 24 23
13	I	U	LE	B/PA	K/GA	B/PA	WE	K/GA	MI	24 25 25
14	I	U	LE	B/PA	K/GA	B/PA	WE	LE	MI	24 25 24
15	I	U	LE	B/PA	K/GA	B/PA	WE	D/TI	MI	24 25 23
16	I	U	LE	B/PA	D/TI	B/PA	WE	K/GA	MI	24 23 25
17	I	U	LE	B/PA	D/TI	B/PA	WE	LE	MI	24 23 24
18	I	U	LE	B/PA	D/TI	B/PA	WE	D/TI	MI	24 23 23
19	I	U	D/TI	B/PA	D/TI	B/PA	WE	D/TI	MI	23 23 23
20	I	U	D/TI	B/PA	D/TI	B/PA	WE	LE	MI	23 23 24
21	I	U	D/TI	B/PA	D/TI	B/PA	WE	K/GA	MI	23 23 25
22	I	U	D/TI	B/PA	K/GA	B/PA	WE	K/GA	MI	23 25 25
23	I	U	D/TI	B/PA	K/GA	B/PA	WE	LE	MI	23 25 24
24	I	U	D/TI	B/PA	K/GA	B/PA	WE	D/TI	MI	23 25 23
25	I	U	D/TI	B/PA	LE	B/PA	WE	K/GA	MI	23 24 25
26	I	U	D /TI	B/PA	LE	B/PA	WE	LE	MI	23 24 24
27	I	U	D/TI	B/PA	LE	B/PA	WE	D/TI	MI	23 24 23

was correctly recognized as non-Semitic (Cross & Stager, 2006) and why it remained un-deciphered up to now, i.e. simply because its Proto-Slavic nature was not identified. The characters in the Ashkelon inscription, i.e. the characters of the Philistine alphabet, adhere well to the Cipro-Minoan alphabet which is linked to Linear A and Linear B alphabets (Evans, 1961; Chadwick, 1987; Chadwick, 1995). All said three alphabets and consequently also the Philistine alphabet appear to descend from the characters and alphabets developed by the South Balkan cultures of Gradeshnitsa, Karanovo, Tartaria, Vincha, Turdosh, Valchi Dol and Magura cave (Stein & Tomezzoli, 2016), because of the influences of said cultures towards the Mediterranean area. It is therefore reasonable to formulate a first hypothesis that the Philistines of the ancient Ashkelon, or the Philistines in general, originated in the area in which said cultures, said characters and said alphabets developed, i.e. the south Balkan, Danubian and Aegean region and a second hypothesis that they were a Proto-Slavic tribe or people. The nature of the Philistines as Proto-Slavic people is not surprising because of the presence in said region of other Proto-Slavic tribes or peoples recently recognized by several authors through the deciphering of South Balkan, Minoan and Linear A inscriptions based on their similarities with the present, surviving Slavic languages (Ambrozic, 2005; Serafimov, 2007; Serafimov & Perdih, 2009; Serafimov & Tomezzoli, 2011; Serafimov & Tomezzoli, 2012; Tomezzoli & Serafimov, 2013; Stein & Tomezzoli, 2016). Unfortunately, the most part of ancient Slavic inscriptions and inscriptions from peoples not yet formally recognized as Slavs, have been lost because written on perishable materials such as leaves, wooden boards and animal skins. Only in few cases, they survive, because written on non-perishable materials such as ceramic fragments, as in the case of the inscription 4.5, stone tablets, rocks and metal artifacts. Therefore, only now, on the basis of said surviving inscriptions it is possible to recognize the presence of Proto-Slavic tribes or peoples in Europe and Middle-Orient in the antiquity. The only regret is that the excavations of the Ashkelon port have not provided further long inscriptions (Cross & Stager, 2006) which could have permitted further confirmations and extensions of the above two hypotheses.

5. Conclusion

This inscription and the above considerations indicate that the Philistines of the ancient Ashkelon, or the Philistines in general, was a Proto-Slavic tribe or people which spoke a non-survived Proto-Slavic language, which settled in the south part of present Israel in the Iron Age, i.e. well before the VII century A.D. generally accepted period of the Slavs arrival in Eastern Europe.

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Abbreviations

Bos. Bosnian	Bul. Bulgarian	Cro. Croatian	Cze. Czech
Gsl. Generally Slavic	imp. Imperative	Lit. Lithuanian	Mac. Macedonian
Pol. Polish	pre. Preposition	pres. Present	Rum. Rumanian
Rus. Russian	Ser. Serbian	Slo. Slovenian	Slov. Slovakian
Ukr. Ukrainian	v. Verb		