



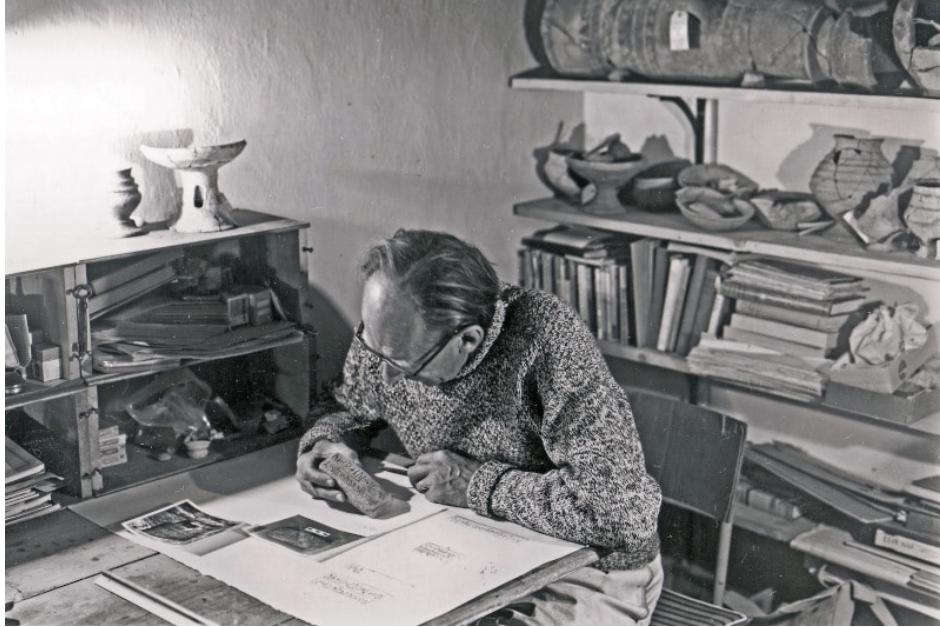
## **The Enigmatic Tablets from Late Bronze Age Deir ‘Alla**

**By Michel de Vreeze**

On April 1, 1964 Henk Franken and his Leiden University based team stumbled upon two clay tablets. Two days later a third tablet was found. These tablets still form an archaeological riddle up to this day. At some excavations tablets are a routine find but Franken and his teams were excavating at Deir ‘Alla, a sizeable tell in the middle of the Jordan Valley, just above where the Zerqa river, the biblical Jabbok, conflues with the Jordan River.



The site of Tell Deir ‘Alla in the Jordan Valley and the hills around Salt in the back as viewed from the Northwest. (APAAME\_19990503\_KDP-0195. Photograph by Konstantinos D. Politis, courtesy of APAAME)



Henk Franken carefully examining tablet 1440, which was among the first tablets found within an auxiliary room of the temple complex. (Photo courtesy of the Deir ‘Alla excavation archive.)



5 cm

Tablet 1440 found in 1964, which remains rather hard to read due to some unique signs but possibly refers to sacrifice and prophetic inquiry. (Photo courtesy of Gerrit van der Kooij.)

Deir ‘Alla harbors habitation layers dating back to the Middle Bronze Age but is most famous for the Iron Age text relating to the biblical diviner Balaam, found written in beautiful Aramaic script on a plastered wall in one of the Iron Age buildings. During earlier seasons, the team was also exploring a temple with auxiliary buildings from the latest phase of the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1185-1140 BCE) with rich evidence for burning and destruction. Similar destruction was later attested in other parts of the settlement during subsequent seasons of excavations. It is these heavily burned layers that yielded the enigmatic clay tablets with a hitherto unknown script.



Tablet 3291 found in situ in 1994 in the southern area of the settlement. (Photo courtesy of Gerrit van der Kooij.)

Among the many finds associated with the Late Bronze Age temple were ceramics including goblets and ceremonial vessels, Mycenaean imports, scaled armor and scarabs, and faience vessels including a gift from Egyptian Queen Twosret which provided an approximate dating for the destruction not too long after 1180 BCE. But most striking perhaps were some clay tablets which bore a script that still have no exact parallels.

These rectangular tablets were inscribed with a stylus and featured linear signs with dots marking the ends. Franken and his team found a total of nine tablets or fragments, some of which only bear incised dots (in groups of 7 or 8). Throughout the years more tablets turned up in excavations by a joint Leiden-Yarmouk University expedition, also outside of the temple precinct. The total number of tablets found up-to-today is 15, the last consisting of two separate fragments miraculously fitting together although found in separate places.



5 cm

Tablet 3291. One can clearly see the repetition of the three signs (half circle and dot, single dot and vertical line) in three separate words pointing to a consistent grammatical feature. The first of these signs denotes the 'ayin (eye symbol). The dot stands for the vowel i and vertical line for the u (giving suffix 'ayu). If the reading is correct, the tablet might refer to building activity and praising giving praise. (Photo courtesy of Gerrit van der Kooij.)



A fragment of tablet 3524 found in a large hall. (Photo courtesy of Gerrit van der Kooij and taken by Youssef Zooubi.)



A fragment of tablet 3524 found in situ next to a Late Bronze Age juglet on the floor of a large hall. (Photo courtesy of Gerrit van der Kooij.)



Tablet 3524 fitted together, showing one of the five inscribed sides. The text is relatively long and possibly demands to forget a demised city and speaks of food offerings. (Photo courtesy of Gerrit van der Kooij.)

Soon after the first discovery was published by Franken, a wide range of interpretations was given for the tablets and their script. These ranged from the Sea People who roamed the Levantine coast at the end of the Late Bronze Age and were seen as responsible for the upheaval in the area, to links with South Arabian writing, known from Yemen, with which the script shares a very general resemblance. Other scholars stuck to more local languages such as Canaanite. But a satisfying reading of the tablets was never achieved and the language in which they were written has remained a mystery. Since then, and despite new tablets having been found in more recent years, the tablets have shifted to the background of academic attention, largely because a satisfying interpretation of the script and language has been lacking.

#### **New insights into the Deir ‘Alla tablets**

In 2014, archaeologist Gerrit van der Kooij published an overview of the tablets bearing script and established the writing direction as left to right. Using these paleographic observations but altering the sign list, new insights could be gained from the tablets. It can now be established that the script was predominantly written from left to right and contained a small enough number of signs (around 29) to justify calling it an alphabet.

Building on these conclusions it seems that the Deir ‘Alla tablets indeed bear a unique form of alphabet that shares similarities with its apparent ancestors (the proto-Sinaitic script) and sister proto-Canaanite alphabets attested at other Late Bronze Age sites and predominantly found in the Shephelah area. These contemporary alphabets allowed for the confident identification of some parallel consonants in the Deir ‘Alla script. The Deir ‘Alla script also shows some unique sign combinations, particularly two signs which co-occur with a sign resembling an eye. This sign can be identified as an ‘ayin—inherited from the alphabets’ pictographic days and denoting the word ‘eye’ (‘ayin)—thus the letter ‘akin.



By putting needles into the punctured holes left by the stylus, Gerrit van der Kooij carefully analyzed the angle of the tool used and the writing direction of the tablets. (Photo courtesy of Gerrit van der Kooij.)

	PROTO-SINAITIC	DEIR 'ALLA	UGARITIC
a	𐤀	𐤀	𐤀
b	𐤁	𐤁	𐤁
g	𐤂	𐤂	𐤂
h	𐤃	𐤃	𐤃
d	𐤄	𐤄	𐤄
h	𐤅	𐤅	𐤅
w	𐤆	𐤆	𐤆
z	𐤇	𐤇	𐤇
h	𐤈	𐤈	𐤈
t	𐤉	𐤉	𐤉
f	𐤊	𐤊	𐤊
k	𐤋	𐤋	𐤋
l	𐤌	𐤌	𐤌
i	𐤍	𐤍	𐤍
n	𐤎	𐤎	𐤎
m	𐤏	𐤏	𐤏
r	𐤐	𐤐	𐤐
s	𐤑	𐤑	𐤑
l	𐤒	𐤒	𐤒
d	𐤓	𐤓	𐤓
z	𐤔	𐤔	𐤔
h	𐤕	𐤕	𐤕
h	𐤖	𐤖	𐤖
h	𐤗	𐤗	𐤗
h	𐤘	𐤘	𐤘
h	𐤙	𐤙	𐤙
h	𐤚	𐤚	𐤚
h	𐤛	𐤛	𐤛
h	𐤜	𐤜	𐤜
h	𐤝	𐤝	𐤝
h	𐤞	𐤞	𐤞
h	𐤟	𐤟	𐤟
h	𐤠	𐤠	𐤠
h	𐤡	𐤡	𐤡
h	𐤢	𐤢	𐤢
h	𐤣	𐤣	𐤣
h	𐤤	𐤤	𐤤
h	𐤥	𐤥	𐤥
h	𐤦	𐤦	𐤦
h	𐤧	𐤧	𐤧
h	𐤨	𐤨	𐤨
h	𐤩	𐤩	𐤩
h	𐤪	𐤪	𐤪
h	𐤫	𐤫	𐤫
h	𐤬	𐤬	𐤬
h	𐤭	𐤭	𐤭
h	𐤮	𐤮	𐤮
h	𐤯	𐤯	𐤯
h	𐤰	𐤰	𐤰
h	𐤱	𐤱	𐤱
h	𐤲	𐤲	𐤲
h	𐤳	𐤳	𐤳
h	𐤴	𐤴	𐤴
h	𐤵	𐤵	𐤵
h	𐤶	𐤶	𐤶
h	𐤷	𐤷	𐤷
h	𐤸	𐤸	𐤸
h	𐤹	𐤹	𐤹
h	𐤺	𐤺	𐤺
h	𐤻	𐤻	𐤻
h	𐤼	𐤼	𐤼
h	𐤽	𐤽	𐤽
h	𐤾	𐤾	𐤾
h	𐤿	𐤿	𐤿

A sign-list of the Deir 'Alla tablets in comparison with proto-Sinaitic and Ugaritic alphabetic script. (Courtesy of the author.)

The other two signs, a single dot and a short vertical bar, occur in combinations that suggest they might function as so-called *matres lectionis*; signs for the vowels i and u that are common in Semitic languages. These were sparingly used in the script and finds interesting parallels in the Ugaritic alphabet, in vogue exactly at the same time as the Deir ‘Alla tablets but written in cuneiform script.

Using some sign identifications based on parallels and patterns within the Deir ‘Alla tablets themselves, a preliminary identification of most signs can be offered. This allows the language in the tablets to be identified as Northwest Semitic, which we can call Canaanite after its Late Bronze Levantine inhabitants. Nevertheless, the reading of the tablets remains problematic and far from ideal. What does seem clear is that by reading the signs with reference to later Hebrew grammar, which preserves earlier Canaanite forms, the texts appear to contain short ritual utterances and poetic proverbs written within a cultic setting, related to the temple activities. A *very* preliminary reading of tablet 3524 is thus:

- a.1 forget! [the] city which is twisted/conspiring | twisted/crooked? a.2 the praised . . . [broken] | and they filled . . . ?
- b.1: the mound(s) he would go | and on that (which) burns
- b.2: brought out | and they became vain? | like the chief /cattle /a thousand?
- c.1: and to the sheep food/ (alt.) and from the lamb she has eaten | they give
- d.1: the oppression | despise land strive with
- e.1: the heart/lion/ (alt.) she shall shave

Far more research is needed to fully understand these texts.

The significance of this unique Canaanite alphabet at Deir ‘Alla is manifold. For one thing it is the only Late Bronze Age alphabet we have from Jordan. In general, the sporadic nature of alphabetic writing during the Late Bronze Age has largely been explained as a function of inscriptions having been written on perishable media such as papyrus and parchments. The fact that the scribes at Deir ‘Alla used clay tablets for their scripts, and the additional ‘bonus’ of heavy burning which improved their survival are thus an exceptional opportunity to explore writing in this crucial period of Levantine history.

The tablets help us better understand the Canaanite language spoken in this region. But their association with ritual practices also points to another important conclusion. As far as we know, literacy was not very widespread until the later Iron Age. During the Bronze Age writing only occurred in certain pockets and was directly related to the scribal practices of powerful neighbors such as the Egyptian state, and the Mesopotamian dominated writing practices to the north (Hazor and Ugarit). Although the alphabet was most likely invented in the Middle Bronze Age, its presence is ephemeral until the Iron Age. This might be because of limited preservation, except in cases such as Ugarit, where texts were written on clay tablets and within a highly literate society, but it could also point to something else.

Alphabetic writing could have been used locally among small groups of scribes, perhaps partially concentrated within temple settings. The Deir ‘Alla tablets might be the last remnant of a practice of writing curated by temple institutions in the Southern Levant, before this Bronze Age world succumbed to wide scale collapse across the wider region. Both the Ugaritic and the Deir ‘Alla alphabet disappeared around the same time. Like the cuneiform alphabetic script of Ugarit, the Deir ‘Alla tablets thus attests to extinct alphabetic species, which upon their demise gave way to one dominant alphabet in the Early Iron Age Levant, which eventually made it to the letters we know.

***Michel de Vreeze is Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Durham.***