Who Wrote the Aḥiqam Ostracon from Ḥorvat ʿUza?*

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ABSTRACT: Hitherto perceived as a letter containing a stationing order for three men to go to Ḥorvat ʿUza, the Aḥiqam Ostracon begins with a fragmentary word and mentions the men as '(belonging) to Aḥiqam'. Epistolographical and palaeographical considerations, however, show that it was never meant to be sent to anyone. The article demonstrates how the shape and content of an inscription may hint at the author's rank and function at the site, as well as at the possible meaning and function of the ostracon. The new understanding of the ostracon offers a contribution to the ongoing discussion about literacy in ancient Israel and an addition to the known uses of writing — that of military manpower management and administration.

THE Aḥiqam Ostracon, found in 1983 at the site of Ḥorvat ʿUza in the northern Negev, during excavations led by I. Beit-Arieh and B. Cresson, was one of 35 inscriptions discovered at this site (Beit-Arieh 2007: 139–143). Ḥorvat ʿUza, a fortress of the Judaean kingdom, was occupied only from the middle of the seventh century BCE until the end of that century or the beginning of the sixth (Beit-Arieh 2007: 4), providing a relatively short time span for the inscriptions unearthed there.

Many of the inscriptions are of a military/administrative nature, such as two lists of soldiers inscribed on a jar, with the word קצין ('officer'), interpreted as lists by hierarchical order or as a work-roster (Beit-Arieh 2007: 159–168, inscriptions nos. 23 and 24; cf. Beit-Arieh 1993b) and an ostracon with the word עשרת ('ten/tenth'), probably referring to a unit of ten soldiers (Beit-Arieh 2007: 152–156, inscription no. 19; cf. Beit-Arieh 1999b). Another ostracon is written in the Edomite language (Beit-Arieh 2007: 133–137, inscription no. 7; cf. Beit-Arieh and Cresson 1985), serving as evidence for Edomite occupation of the site at the time of the Babylonian invasions (Stern 2001: 161; for an alternative view, cf. Bienkowski and van der Steen 2001: 39; Finkelstein 1995: 144). The Edomite threat is reflected in another ostracon from the Negev, namely, Arad

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letter no. 24, asking for backup forces to come to Ramat Negev,[1] where we read: ודבר המלך אתכם בנבשכם... פן תבוא אדום שמה ('The word of the king is incumbent upon you for your very life! ... lest Edom should come there'; Aharoni 1981: 46–49; see below).

THE INSCRIPTION

The Aḥiqam Ostracon (fig. 1) bears a complete Hebrew inscription of four lines. The writing is generally well preserved, except for the first and the last words in the first line. Even though the handwriting is that of an untrained hand, it is relatively easy to read.

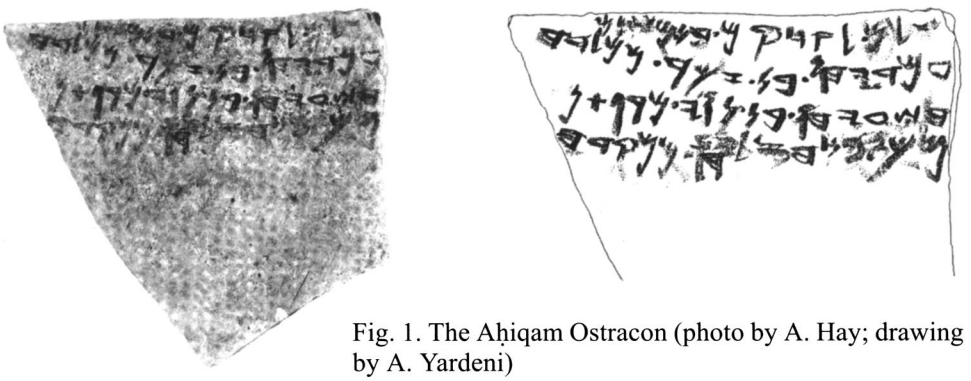

Fig. 1. The Aḥiqam Ostracon (photo by A. Hay; drawing by A. Yardeni)

Beit-Arieh reads and translates the inscription as follows:

1.	]לם. לאחקם. בן. מ[ ]ם	]*lm* to Aḥiqam, son of M[ ]m
2.	עמדיהו. בן. זכר. ממלדה	ʿImadyahu son of Zakkur, from Moladah
3.	הושעיהו. בן. נוי. מרנ/פתן	Hoshaʿyahu, son of Nawy, from Rn/ptn
4.	מכי. בן. הצליהו. ממקדה	Machi, son of Hiṣilyahu, from Makkedah

When he first published the inscription, Beit-Arieh (1985; cf. Beit-Arieh 1986–87) restored the first, fragmentary, letter as a ש, thus reading the first word שלם. The first line was accordingly understood as an opening of a letter with a greeting: 'Peace to Aḥiqam, son of *M*[ ]*m*!',[2] although Beit-Arieh admitted that this restoration was problematic (1985: 94; 2007: 139, 142–143; see discussion below). It is true that in another ostracon from the same site, namely, the Edomite

1 Y. Aharoni used to identify biblical Ramat Negev with Ḥorvat ʿUza, but later changed his opinion. Today, the identification of Ḥorvat ʿUza with Qinah is accepted by many scholars (Beit-Arieh 2007: 1, 4).

2 The name of Aḥiqam's father may be restored as *M*[*nḥ*]*m* or *M*[*šl*]*m*; see Lemaire 1995: 221.

ostracon we read השלם את (‘Are you well?’). There, however, the word שלם is not followed by the preposition ל + PN. It could, therefore, be a greeting formula, as opposed to the case in our ostracon (see below). According to Aḥituv (2008: 166), the Barley Ostracon from Samaria is the only other occurrence in Hebrew epigraphy where the word שלם appears as a laconic greeting, but as Lemaire has shown, it could be read as a verb in *piel* שִׁלֵּם (*accompli*) and it is doubtful that in the Barley Ostracon that word is meant as a greeting.[3] In 1986–87, Beit-Arieh offered a different reading for the first letter: an ע, thus restoring the first word עלם, a verb common in the Bible as an idiom, meaning ‘to take action’, also in the military sense: לעלות עליהם לצבא (Josh. 22:12). Lemaire (1995) views the traces of the first, fragmentary, letter as those of a י, and suggests restoring here [ח]ילם (‘soldiers’) (cf. Dan. 11:10; 1 Chron. 7:5, 7, 11). The only other occurrence in Hebrew epigraphy of the word חיל is in Arad ostracon no. 24; there, however, the context is unclear.

Three lines follow the first line, all displaying the same pattern: ‘[PN] son of [PN] from [toponym]’. All of the personal names, with one exception (נוי in line 3), were common in Judah at the time of the Monarchy and are known from both biblical and extra-biblical sources (Beit-Arieh 2007: 140–143). The three toponyms in lines 2–4 have been a matter of debate among scholars (for discussion, see Beit-Arieh 2007: 141–143; cf. Misgav 1990). Suffice it to mention that these three toponyms, two of which are, in all probability, identified (Moladah and Makkedah) and the third unidentified (רנתן or רפתן), probably represent three different regions in the Judaean Kingdom. This would mean that the three men came from some distance to reinforce the fortress at Ḥorvat ʿUza. If this is the case, it sheds some light, as pointed out by Beit-Arieh, on the scope of military organisation in Judah towards the end of the First Temple period (Beit-Arieh 2007: 143), and specifically on the situation in the Judaean Negev facing Edomite pressure.

The commonly accepted interpretation of the significance of the Aḥiqam Ostracon is that the three men mentioned in the text were sent with this written order (probably a stationing order) to Aḥiqam, perhaps the commander of the fortress at Ḥorvat ʿUza. Alternatively, the text might have been a copy of a letter sent from Ḥorvat ʿUza to Aḥiqam at an unspecified destination (Beit-Arieh 2007: 142–143, cf. Aḥituv 1993: 102; 2008: 166–168).[4]

3 The fact that in the Barley Ostracon the personal name ברך precedes the word שלם and lacks a preposition makes it even less probable that it is a greeting. According to Lemaire (personal communication), even though there is no attestation for שלם at the beginning of a palaeo-Hebrew ostracon, in the Aramaic ostraca from Elephantine we do find it in the sense of a brief salutation. See Lozachmeur *et al.* 2006: nos. 4, 14, 17 and 33, among others.

4 The fact that there is no mention of Aḥiqam’s ‘hometown’ suggests that he was indeed at ʿUza, at least when the ostracon was written.

This article presents some additional considerations for the meaning of the text. Based on these considerations, it puts forward a suggestion as to the general significance of the ostracon and a possible answer to the question in the article's title.

THE PALAEOGRAPHY OF THE INSCRIPTION AND THE QUESTION OF LITERACY IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

As stated by Beit-Arieh, quoting Naveh, the script is a good example of a vulgar cursive: 'The crude handwriting of the scribe[5] is discernible by its tendency toward straight strokes in certain letters (*alef, dalet, he, waw, zayin, kaf, lamed, nun, resh, taw*) and curved, widely arched lines in other letters (*mem, ayin, qof*)' (Beit-Arieh 2007: 142). In addition, besides the fact that all four lines curve upward from the middle, probably as a result of the curve of the sherd or due to the addition of words and single letters,[6] some of the letters do not follow the (invisible) floor line in an orderly manner. This is especially noticeable at the beginning of line 2 and at the middle of line 4. All in all, the inscription 'was apparently written slowly and laboriously by an untrained' person, who 'had learned to write but did not have enough practice to develop his style' (Beit-Arieh 2007: 142).

The Aḥiqam Ostracon is an important addition to the ongoing discussion about literacy[7] in ancient Israel (Hess 2002; 2006; Young 1998a; 1998b; 2005; Rollston 2008; 2010). With recent discoveries and research about the uses of writing in the administration of the Judaean monarchy (Lemaire 1981; Garfinkel 1984; 1985; Davies 2005), it may shed light on the Judaean army. Even if the person, or soldier, who wrote this ostracon was not skilled in writing, he knew how to use it when necessary. The scripts of other inscriptions from the same site, especially of administrative-military ones like the עשרת ostracon and the inscribed jar (see above), are more cursive; they may have been written by the commander(s) of the fortress (perhaps Aḥiqam, or else אלנתן/נתן, mentioned in the text on the inscribed jar).[8] The author of our ostracon may have been less skilled in writing than the commander(s), perhaps due to a higher level of literacy of officers as compared to that of common soldiers. Could it be that the commander at the site was more educated than our author, and therefore his handwriting more cursive?

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5 The term 'scribe' is Beit-Arieh's (2007: 142) interpretation regarding the function and/or profession of the author of this ostracon. I prefer to use the more neutral term 'author'.

6 Probably due to a lack of planning of the layout of the inscription: the name of Aḥiqam's father in line 1 is squeezed near the upper edge of the sherd (Beit-Arieh 2007: 140); in the middle of line 4, the second ה in הצליהו was seemingly forgotten and later added.

7 On the definition of 'literacy', see Young 1998a: 239, n. 2; Rollston 2008: 61–62.

8 נתן and אלנתן may be two different people, or one and the same person (Beit-Arieh 2007: 164).

Another instance in palaeo-Hebrew epigraphy, believed to pertain to the question of literacy in the Judaean army, is Lachish Letter 3. According to Cross, Hoshaiah, the sender, was 'a minor army officer' whose 'ability to read accurately and easily is questioned' (Cross 1985: 47; cf. Schniedewind 2000). As pointed out by Young (1998b: 414), 'a senior army officer could expect a junior officer to be illiterate or semi-literate. In no case', he emphasises, 'is the issue the literacy of the common soldiers under the command of these officers'. Young is certain, therefore, that soldiers of the lowest ranks were completely illiterate, while it is 'reasonable to expect a high degree of literacy' among officers.[9] True, we do not have as much knowledge of the hierarchy and functions in the Judaean army as we would like, but as will be shown later, the contents of the ostracon do provide a clue as to the author's function at the site. We may cautiously say that his literacy, as reflected by his handwriting, may testify to his rank — a subordinate officer.

THE EPISTOLOGRAPHY AND PHILOLOGY

To date, epistolography has not been given sufficient attention in efforts to interpret the ostracon's significance and function. Some questions still arise: What was the ostracon used for? Is it really a letter, or perhaps a stationing order (Aḥituv 1993; 2008)? Who sent it to whom? Even though Aḥiqam appears to be the focus of the text, is he indeed its addressee? All those questions may be resolved by a closer look at the inscription from the epistolographical point of view.

The interpretation of the ostracon as a letter (Beit-Arieh 2007: 140) is somewhat problematic. Were it a letter, we would expect it to contain one of the common First Temple period address and greeting formulae known to us from ancient Hebrew epistolography, such as: PN אל אדני (Arad no. 16), עבדך PN שלח להגד לאדני (Lachish no. 3), יהוה ישאל לשלמך (Arad no. 18), etc. (cf. Pardee 1982: *passim*).

PN-ל שלום may be a good opening for a modern Hebrew message, but it is unknown in ancient Hebrew ostraca; therefore, the initial suggestion for interpreting the first word (above) is highly improbable. Furthermore, the preposition ל marks the possessive in biblical Hebrew (Yadin 1959), thus precluding this from

9 Young bases this statement on his own assumption that there were differences in degrees of literacy between élites and non-élites in the general Israelite society and that officers and commanders naturally hailed from the upper class. See Young 1998a; 1998b: 413–414; cf. Hess 2002; 2006; Rollston 2008. Later evidence is provided by the Roman Empire, where soldiers with some literacy and numeracy stood a better chance of being appointed as clerks or non-commissioned officers. The fourth-century CE author Vegetius states that 'a number of offices on the establishment of the legions require men of good education. Examiners of recruits, therefore, should [...] take into account skill in writing and experience in arithmetic and bookkeeping' (*Epitoma rei militaris*, II 19; Watson 1969: 52). Thanks are due to Dr. Guy Stiebel for drawing my attention to references on the subject of literacy in the Roman army.

being a letter, with Aḥiqam the addressee. It is more likely that his name is mentioned as the (temporary) 'possessor' of the other three men, that is, the commander of a small unit of three soldiers, or of a larger unit to which they were to be joined.[10] The first line of the text may therefore be translated as follows: '[These are the] men belonging to Aḥiqam('s unit/command)'.

If the author of the ostracon was composing a stationing order (Aḥituv 1993: 102) for the three men, it is possible that he chose to leave out the greeting formula.[11] However, if it was a stationing order, carried by three different men coming to ʿUza from three different places, as suggested by Beit-Arieh, then hypothetically, three copies of the order would have existed, one for each of them. If the three men came from three distant places, each of them would probably have come to ʿUza independently. In this case, why would one have been informed of the names and residing places of the other two?[12] It seems more likely, then, that the ostracon was needed for someone whose job it was to be informed about all three soldiers, where they were going and when they were going there (and whether they arrived).

The other possibility offered by Beit-Arieh, that 'the text might have been a copy of a letter sent from Ḥorvat ʿUza to Aḥiqam at an unspecified destination' (Beit-Arieh 2007: 143) is reasonable, but should be explained more accurately: the ostracon itself is not a letter, in the sense of 'a written document effecting communication between two or more persons who cannot communicate orally' (Pardee 1982: 2). It seems that the ostracon was not meant to be sent to anyone; instead, someone composed it for his own personal use. Lines 2–4 repeat the same formula: '[PN] son of [PN] from [toponym]'. Thus, they resemble a two-dimensional matrix of columns and rows, in which the dividing lines are simply invisible. Who would need such a list? Someone who had to remember or register the names of three people that he may never have met before, someone whose job it was to document manpower strength at a given moment and changes made in it.

One might ask why the text contains no verb explaining what these three people should be doing and when[13] (in other words, why their names are listed). Two answers may be given: 1) In almost all epigraphic name lists, no verb is added. However, in light of Beit-Arieh's second reading (above), the first word may indicate the action. 2) The author saw no need for explanation when writing

10 Following Garfinkel's (1987) interpretation, Berekhyahu in the MPQD Ostracon from Tel ʿIra may similarly be the 'owner' of three men, that is, the commander of a unit of three (see below).

11 If the sender (the commander dictating the message or the author himself) was superior in rank to his recipient(s), it may seem plausible that he saw no need for politeness when addressing them. Cf. Pardee 1982: 147.

12 On the military organisation of the United Monarchy and later the Judaean Kingdom, see Galil 1987.

13 Cf. Arad no. 1: כתב שם היום ('write the name of the day', that is, the date).

the names of Aḥiqam and the other three, because he never meant to send the ostracon to anyone, and only he knew what he was referring to. It was only the names that were important.

That person could be the 'adjutant officer' of the fortress or a non-commissioned officer assisting the commander in matters of manpower and recruitment. The Aḥiqam Ostracon may be a note that he made to himself, or even an essential part of his working lists that he used at a certain period (around the time that the three were to 'go to Aḥiqam'), but later meant to keep in the archive of his office or of the fortress.

RELATED EPIGRAPHIC FINDS FROM THE NEGEV

Other epigraphic finds, mainly ostraca dating from the eighth and seventh centuries BCE from various sites of the northern Negev, provide the background for the Aḥiqam Ostracon. Arad ostracon no. 24, in particular, deals with the military organisation of manpower on the southern boundary of the Judaean Kingdom towards the very beginning of the sixth century BCE, when the Edomite pressure was beginning to be felt strongly (Aharoni 1981: 46–49). It contains instructions for the transport of units from Arad and Qinah to Ramat Negev, specifying the geographical and temporal responsibilities of three commanders at the dispatch, during the transport and at the time of their arrival at their destination.

Another ostracon, which bears even more similarities to the Aḥiqam Ostracon in that it is short and does not mention addressee or sender, is the MPQD Ostracon from Tel ʿIra, in the eastern Beersheba Valley. This ostracon was also published by Beit-Arieh (1999a: 402–405), who understood the first word to mean 'roll-call, census', but, as shown by Garfinkel, it lists people belonging to a guard unit (or units) headed by specific commanders (Garfinkel 1987; cf. Demsky 2007). Perhaps the MPQD Ostracon was similarly the work of an officer at Tel ʿIra responsible for manpower matters or of a 'captain' assisting the commander.[14]

Being a small site remote from the centre of the kingdom in Jerusalem, Ḥorvat ʿUza probably did not employ an expert scribe, in contrast to the capital and smaller sites like Lachish (Tur-Sinai 1987: כג; cf. Millard 1985: 303). However, there was still need for writing, in order to manage manpower and administer military matters. The ostraca from Ḥorvat ʿUza and from other fortresses in the Negev testify to the high degree of literacy even at the periphery of the Judaean Kingdom from the eighth century BCE until the destruction of the First Temple.

14 'Captain', in the sense of an armour bearer or aide-de-camp of a high commander or of the king, is in biblical Hebrew שליש (2 Kings 7:2). Interestingly, the same root is used in the modern military term 'adjutancy', שלישות. On the meaning of the term שליש, see Mastin 1979; Naʾaman 1988; cf. Schley 1990.

THE FIND SPOT OF THE OSTRACON AND THE DISTRIBUTION OF INSCRIPTIONS IN THE GATEHOUSE AREA

The ostracon was found in Locus 336, the front guardroom of the fortress gatehouse (fig. 2; Beit-Arieh 2007: 23–26, 139). Other inscriptions unearthed in the gatehouse area include a literary ostracon (inscription no. 1, Beit-Arieh 2007: 122–128; cf. 1993a), the Edomite ostracon (see above) and six other inscriptions of administrative/military nature. In fact, each room of the gatehouse (with the exception of Locus 377, the largest room) yielded at least one inscription, and other loci in its vicinity yielded inscriptions as well.

Apart from the gatehouse area, the entire site of Ḥorvat ʿUza yielded additional inscriptions of administrative/military nature (a total of 16). The inscribed jar, for example, was found in complex 927, across the street from the gatehouse complex, and the עשרת ostracon (see above) was found in complex 937, at the centre of the eastern section.

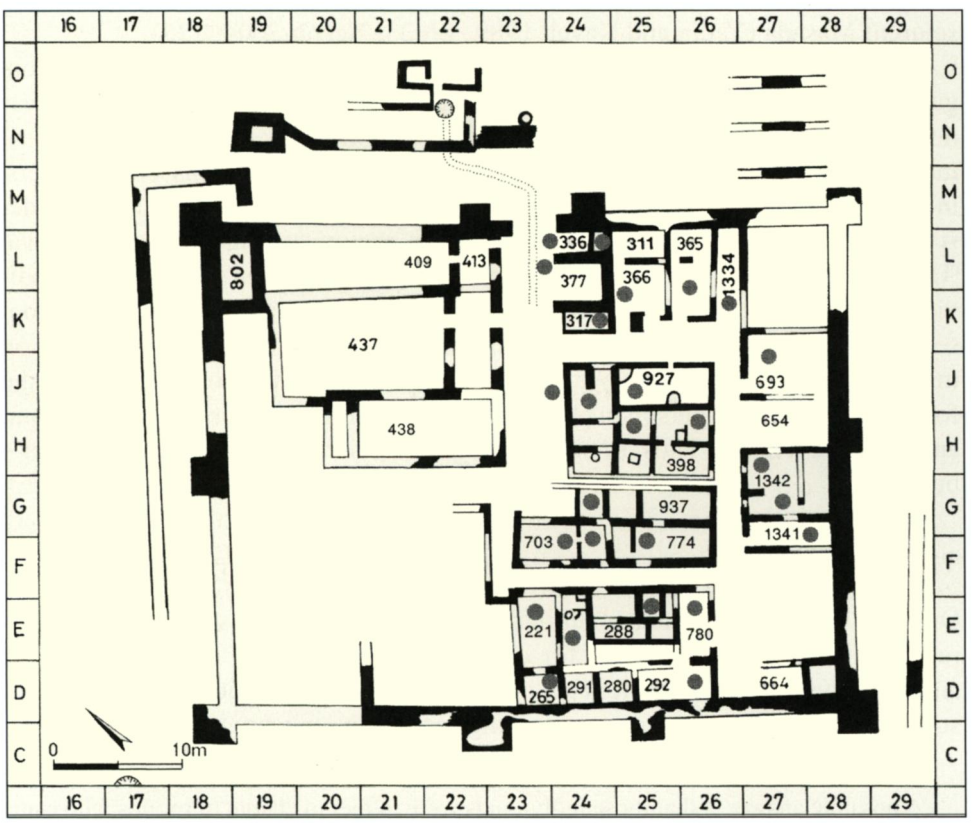

Fig. 2. Distribution of inscriptions in Ḥorvat ʿUza (after Beit-Arieh 2007); dots indicate the find spots of the inscriptions; numbers indicate loci; the gatehouse is located in the centre of the north-eastern wall

Taking into consideration the distribution of inscriptions in and around the gatehouse area, it appears that it did not serve merely as the entrance to the fortress, but had some administrative/military function. This interpretation would be consistent with our understanding of the site of Ḥorvat ʿUza as part of the contemporary network of Judaean fortresses (Stern 2001: 151–163).

Interestingly — taking into account the chronological distance — a similar situation occurred at Masada in the first century CE, when Jewish rebels inhabited the fortress. Hundreds of ostraca were unearthed in several areas near the Water Gate of the fortress (Yadin and Naveh 1989; cf. Netzer 2004). These include tags with individual Hebrew letters and with various combinations of Hebrew letters (Yadin and Naveh 1989: 12–16). Yadin suggested that those inscriptions were coupons in the system of distribution of food for the mount's inhabitants, but Netzer regards them as a method employed by the rebel leadership for a 'population registry'. Another group of 78 ostraca with Aramaic or Hebrew personal names along with combinations of Greek and palaeo-Hebrew letters was found at the gate area; Yadin regarded these as inscriptions connected with the military setup of Masada (Yadin and Naveh 1989: 17–23; Netzer 2004: 225).

Returning to our ostracon, it is not surprising that it was found in the front guardroom of the gatehouse. The registration of those entering a fortress was necessary because of its military nature, demanding precise documentation of manpower and registration of people coming and going (probably only soldiers, in the case of Ḥorvat ʿUza). The interpretation of the ostracon as a stationing order is hardly plausible: it is hard to explain why a person staying at desolate Ḥorvat ʿUza, even if he was in charge of manpower records, needed three specific individuals to come there from three distant towns.[15] Had we known more about seventh-century Judaean recruitment methods and communication, this question might have been resolved.[16] We may assume that when the soldiers entered the fortress, they told the person in charge their full names and where they came from, and he wrote it down. Thus, Locus 336 might have served as our adjutant officer's bureau.

OTHER INDICATIONS OF MANPOWER MANAGEMENT IN ANTIQUITY

One way to estimate whether military officials, responsible specifically for the registration of manpower and for other 'human resources' issues, existed in ancient Israel is to extrapolate from individual incidents mentioned in the biblical sources. One such indication, concerning recruiting, appears in 2 Kings 25:19b:

15 A possible answer is that those individuals were in fact in charge of groups who came with them (having been recruited by ʿImadyahu, Hoshaʿyahu and Machi in their respective regions). Cf. the עשרת ostracon and the MPQD Ostracon from Tel ʿIra.

16 But see Galil 1987: 508–509.

'He also took the secretary who was chief officer in charge of conscripting the people of the land and sixty of his men who were found in the city'.[17] Taking a census is also attested in the Bible, but in the civil context (Num. 1:2; Judg. 8:14; cf. Hurowitz 1988).

Name lists are a significant 'genre' in Hebrew epigraphy. They are fairly common in sites with military and administrative contexts, such as Arad (nos. 39, 58, 59, among dozens), Lachish (nos. 1, 11, 19, 22, 31, 33–35; see Lemaire 2004), Tel Masos (Fritz and Kempinski 1983: 134–135, pls. 78c–79) and Ḥorvat ʿUza itself (16 inscriptions out of 35 are name lists). Name lists are also found in Edomite contexts (at Tell el-Kheleifeh, see Naveh 1966), in Ammonite contexts (at Nimrud, see Segal 1957) and in Aramaic contexts from later periods (at Elephantine, see Porten and Yardeni 1999: 194, 206–211). To be sure, we seldom know who wrote name lists and for what purpose; however, it is not impossible that in some cases, they represent some aspect of manpower administration, especially in military contexts like Ḥorvat ʿUza.

Analysing artistic depictions is another method to distinguish between types of army officials. In war reliefs of the late Assyrian kings, military scribes are depicted recording the number of enemy dead, according to the number of severed limbs held up before them by soldiers (Yadin 1963: 399) and counting booty in the days of Tiglath-pileser III and Sargon II (Yadin 1963: 413; Barnett and Falkner 1962: 11, pl. VI; cf. Num. 31:26). The war reliefs in Sargon II's palace at Khorsabad, with realistic depictions of cities under siege, are probably based on sketches made on the spot by official army scribes or artists who accompanied Sargon's expeditionary forces (Yadin 1963: 414). Finally, pairs of scribes, one writing on a clay tablet and the other on a leather sheet, depicted on reliefs from the days of Tiglath-Pileser III onwards, are generally perceived as registering war spoils (Haran 1982: 88).

In the Roman army, there was the function of *cornicularius*, a senior non-commissioned officer on the staff of the provincial governor. This officer, who was in charge of clerical duties, was next in rank to a centurion (Campbell 1994: 28–29; Watson 1969: 77). A new recruit who was literate and had some knowledge of arithmetic would stand a good chance of appointment as clerk.[18]

We have epigraphic finds that reflect practices of adjutancy in the Roman army. To name but a few, a soldier in Egypt wrote a letter to his father in 107 CE, telling him how he came to be a clerk (Campbell 1994: 30–31); a papyrus from Oxyrhynchus (Egypt), dated to 103 CE, lists soldiers by name, age and distinguishing marks, such as scars, to be included in a roster (Campbell 1994: 13); a second-century CE letter mentions transfer to a cohort (Campbell 1994: 33); a third-century CE letter mentions transfer to an *ala* (Campbell 1994: 35–36); an

17 I wish to thank Prof. André Lemaire for bringing this reference to my attention.
18 See above, n. 9.

inscription contains a list of 239 veterans discharged on one occasion, probably in 160 CE (Campbell 1994: 221).

Taking all of the above into consideration, I believe that the Aḥiqam Ostracon was written by a member of the military personnel of Ḥorvat ʿUza, who was responsible for recording manpower movements and whose bureau was located in one of the rooms of the gatehouse.

SUMMARY

The possibility that the Aḥiqam Ostracon was a letter is ruled out, because it lacks the distinctive features of a letter of the First Temple period. Aḥiqam was probably the commander of the fortress (or one of the commanders of the smaller units). Other inscriptions from ʿUza, as well as from other sites in the Negev, testify to the presence of officers (קצינים) and commanders, who probably manned the fortress in preparation for the Edomite invaders (Stern 2001: 161).

The author of the ostracon's text probably held a function similar to modern-day military adjutant officers, or else was a non-commissioned officer assisting the commander in such matters. The script indicates that he was relatively inexperienced in writing (Misgav 1990: 216; cf. Naveh 1982: 8, 75), compared to the author(s) of other inscriptions from the site — perhaps the commander(s), who had a higher level of education. In my view, the ostracon may well have been a memo for our officer in his daily work, in which he scribbled the names of the three men who had come to reinforce the fortress. It was probably composed at Ḥorvat ʿUza and never left the site.

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