

Shifting Borders?

The Benyaw Inscription from Abel Beth Maacah

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FIVE FADED LETTERS inscribed on a storage jar is all the textual evidence we have from ninth-century BCE Abel Beth Maacah in the far north of Israel. However, this short and unassuming text may shed new light on ancient Israel's borders as we know them.¹

The biblical site of Abel Beth Maacah (2 Samuel 20:14–22; 1 Kings 15:20; 2 Kings 15:29) is a prominent 25-acre mound in the northern part of the Hula Valley not far from the Israel-Lebanon border. Located at the crossroads of ancient Israel, Aram-Damascus, and Phoenicia, this region likely shifted its political allegiance many times, especially during the tenth and ninth centuries as these kingdoms were expanding and competing with one another.

A small village at the beginning of the Iron Age, Abel Beth Maacah expanded in the 11th century to become the largest city in the region. Even though the city had somewhat decreased in size during the tenth and ninth centuries, its intense urban character continued, as is attested by its massive architecture, which includes a possible citadel with casemate rooms, courtyards, and silos. Fascinating finds from this period include a faience figurine head of an elite bearded man and a hoard of several hundred astragali bones of sheep, goat, and deer found in an amphora near an earlier shrine.*

Archaeologists also found 35 storage jars, buried in the mudbrick debris of a storehouse that was destroyed in the late ninth or early eighth century BCE. Stacked neatly in rows on a beaten earth and plastered floor, their standardized shape, size, and manufacture point to a specialized mode of production that was probably centralized and controlled by a local authority. The jars, which stand nearly 2 feet high, have a capacity of about 11 gallons, and some were most likely used to store wine. Petrographic analysis indicates that they were made from clays typical of the northern Hula Valley and were therefore probably produced in a local workshop.

Significantly, one of the jars is inscribed. Written in black ink using the Old Hebrew script, the little inscription is slightly over 2 inches long, running around the middle of the jar's body, just below and to the left of the handle, which bears a deeply incised cross-shaped potter's mark. It consists of the prepositional *lamed* ("for" or "belonging to") followed by four letters that spell out the personal name *bn(y)w* (vocalized Benyaw), meaning "Yahweh has built."²

* Nava Panitz-Cohen and Naama Yahalom-Mack, "The Wise Woman of Abel Beth Maacah," *BAR*, July/August/September/October 2019.



PHOTO BY NAVA PANITZ-COHEN

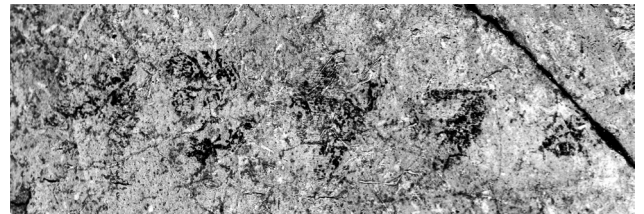
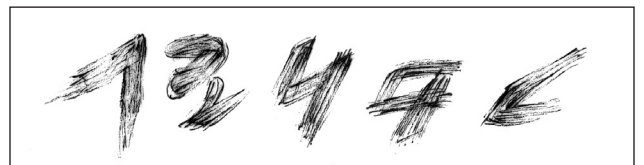


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DRAWING BY YULIA RUDMAN

A storage jar from Abel Beth Maacah featuring an Old Hebrew inscription "belonging to Benyaw" (middle image: infra-red photo, bottom: line drawing). The Yahwistic name Benyaw, which translates as "Yahweh has built," suggests the site was under Israelite control already by the ninth century BCE.

Although the verbal element *bn(h)* ("to build" or "create") is common in Semitic languages, what makes the name uniquely Israelite is the *-yaw* ending. This is a shortened form of the divine name Yahweh, the national deity of Israel and Judah. The *-yaw* was typically used in names from the Northern Kingdom of Israel; in Judah, the ending was *-yhw* and *-yh* (vocalized "yahu" and "yah," respectively). Furthermore, the script itself has diagnostic features that are clearly Old Hebrew rather than Phoenician, and it cannot be Aramaic, which only developed as an independent script in

the late eighth century. The Benyaw inscription can thus be safely assigned to the Old Hebrew language and script, fitting comfortably in the ninth or possibly early eighth century.

So who was Benyaw anyway? He certainly is not the famed Benaiah ben Yehoiada from the time of David and Solomon (2 Samuel 23:20; 1 Kings 2:25, 46). We assume he was a resident of the city. He may have been the owner and sender of the jar, its recipient, or even a tax collector. Or perhaps he was a local entrepreneur or a local agent who was commissioned by the state.

We also do not yet have concrete answers about the jar's contents, the building in which it was found—whether a private or state-run facility—or the identity of the kingdom in control of the site. Indeed, we have no compelling evidence as to whether Abel Beth Maacah was under Israelite, Phoenician, or Aramean control in the tenth and ninth centuries. But finding an Israelite name or any name honoring the Israelite national god this far north is a good indication that the city was under Israelite control or had close contacts with the Northern Kingdom. Continuing research will hopefully paint a better portrait of this individual, who would have never guessed that his name would become the focus of so much interest and debate nearly 3,000 years later! 📖

¹ For full discussion, see Naama Yahalom-Mack et al., "The Iron Age IIA 'Benyaw Inscription' on a Jar from Tel Abel Beth Maacah," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* (2021), pp. 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00310328.2021.1975070>.

² Reading courtesy of Christopher Rollston of the George Washington University.


WHAT IS IT? (SEE QUIZ ON P. 13)

Answer: **2 Gold Bead**

WHILE SIFTING MATERIAL from a Roman building in the City of David excavations in Jerusalem, a volunteer discovered a tiny gold bead. The bead, more than 1,600 years old, was created through a complex and delicate process, affixing 14 tiny golden balls together into a ring shape.

While beautiful and precious, the tiny gold bead is likely only a small part of a necklace or bracelet. This style of bead, which likely first appeared in Mesopotamia around 4,500 years ago, was uncommon due to the complex technique that it took to create such works of jewelry. A few other beads of this style have been discovered in excavations around Israel, but nearly all were made from silver instead of gold.


The bead came from a building, possibly a house, dated to the Roman period (c. 37 BCE–324 CE) and excavated in the City of David's Pilgrimage Road, a controversial underground tunnel that follows the ancient Roman road. The building sat on this ancient road and likely belonged to a wealthy family.



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