

SAMSON AND DELILAH IN A PHILISTINE TEXT FROM ASHKELON

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Resumen

Un ostracón filisteo se encontró en la excavación de un edificio de tipo comercial en la ciudad filisteo de Escalón. El edificio fue destruido por los ejércitos de Nabucodonosor de Babilonia en 604 a.C. El ostracón pertenece a este nivel de destrucción. Como se interpreta en este estudio la cerámica representa un despacho diplomático del rey de Escalón al rey de Gaza. Trata de la mudanza de la cabeza del hebreo Sansón. Por lo tanto, cuando Sansón murió en la destrucción del templo de Gaza, se cortó su cabeza antes que se mandó su cadáver de vuelta a Israel. Se preservó como un trofeo o un talismán mágico representando la victoria de los filisteos sobre sus enemigos. La decapitación también ocurre en el caso de Goliat y en los casos de Saúl y Jonatan, al ser derrotado en la batalla por los filisteos. El texto también menciona los nombres de tres reyes filisteos de la última parte del séptimo siglo a.C.

Abstract

A Philistine ostracón was found during the excavation of a commercial-type building at Ashkelon. The building was destroyed by the army of Nebuchadnezzar of Babylonian in 604 BCE. The ostracón belongs to this destruction level. As interpreted in this study, the text on the sherd is a diplomatic dispatch or letter from the king of Ashkelon to the king of Gaza. It deals with the movement of the head of Samson the Hebrew. When Samson died in the destruction of the temple of Gaza, therefore, his head was cut off before his body was taken back to Israel. It was preserved as a trophy or magic talisman representing the Philistine defeat of their enemies. Decapitation also occurred in the case of Goliath and in the cases of Saul and Jonathan when they were defeated on the battlefield by the Philistines. The text also includes the names of three Philistine kings of the late seventh century BCE.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the mid-1990s the excavators at Ashkelon cleared several buildings along a street that ran west through the business district of the ancient city. Buildings located along that street included market stalls in a bazaar, a warehouse and an administrative center. The building that was excavated at the southwestern end of that street was designated as the Counting House.¹ A large cache of “ankle” bones of sheep and goats was found in the Counting House. These bones were not just byproducts of butchering but they also served as counters, as dice and to make bone tools.² In this same

¹ Lawrence E. Stager, “The Fury of Babylon,” *BAR* 22.1 (1996): 56-69, 76-77. See page 63 for the layout of the street and the location and architecture of the remains of the Counting House.

² Brian Hesse and Paul Wapnish, “Pigs’ Feet, Cattle Bones and Birds’ Wings,” *BAR* 22.1 (1996): 62.

Counting House a Philistine ostrakon was found which is the subject of this present study.

In the popular report on the excavations at Ashkelon the emphasis is upon the destruction of the site wrought by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon in 604 BCE. The same conquest is mentioned in the Babylonian king's own chronicle for that year. Thus the chronicle provides a historical date for the destruction level that has been excavated as Ashkelon. The destruction was so thorough that it brought a dramatic end to the ancient city. As the excavator reports, "One thing is clear: this large, sophisticated Philistine metropolis of the late seventh century BCE was thoroughly destroyed. The destruction of Philistine Askelon was complete and final. The Iron Age, in archaeological terms, had ended."³

It was in that late seventh century destruction level of the Counting House that the ostrakon discussed here was found. The text was written in ink on a pottery sherd from an Iron Age II jar which is consistent, in general terms, with the general period of Nebuchadnezzar's conquest. A preliminary report on the ostrakon is given in a sidebar with the main archaeological article.⁴ The sidebar is accompanied by a clear photograph of the sherd that was taken by Zev Radovan. In this brief treatment the text was identified as an agreement for the purchase or delivery of grain. The study of the text proposed here suggests that it should be seen in a broader historical context.

2. EPIGRAPHICAL DISCUSSION OF THE ASHKELON OSTRACON

The ink on three lines of the text, while partially abraded, is fairly dark and evident. Three other lines of text between these darker lines are fainter and less distinct, but enough of them remain that they too can be studied. They aid in developing the setting for the three darker lines of text. The lines of the text read from right to left and from top to the bottom of the sherd. The text is studied in that order.

³ Stager, "Fury of Babylon," 69.

⁴ Frank Moore Cross, "A Philistine Ostrakon from Ashkelon," *BAR* 22.1 (1996): 64-65.



Figure 1: Line Drawing of the Philistine Ostrakon from Ashkelon (courtesy William H. Shea)

2.1. Line 1

L: Given that the lines of this text read from right to left the first letter of the first line is the one that was written in the right upper corner of the sherd. The letter there looks like a shepherd's staff with its crook pointing to the left in the right upper corner and its tail extends down to the left at an angle. This is the form of the *lamed* and it serves here as a preposition to introduce the person to whom the text is addressed.

H: The next letter to the left on the top line is a rectangular box written with double lines. It lies out horizontally and there is a vertical line within the box towards its right end. This is the form of the *beth*. It serves here as the first letter in a personal name that identifies the addressee of the text.

At this point the first line bifurcates. It continues with large letters on the upper line and smaller letters below. For purposes of recognition they may be identified as lines 1A and 1B. Line 1B continues on from the *beth* with the personal name that identifies the addressee of the letter. Line 1A with the larger letters identifies the place

where this person was located. Since line 1B is the continuation from the *beth* that line is completed here first before turning attention to line 1A.

2.2. Line 1B

ʾ: A fairly small example of the V-shaped *'aleph* follows the *beth* and it is located directly below the oval *'ayin* on line 1A above. There is a faint crossbar that angles up between the two arms of the V and that makes this letter an *'aleph*. This is the second letter in the personal name written here.

N: The sharply angled and notched head of a *nun* follows to the left of the *'aleph*. Its head angles up to the right and its tail angles down to the left. It lies below the *ayin* on line 1A.

W: The next letter in this man's name is short and stands vertically. Its tail is down and a cup-shaped head extends up to the lower horizontal stroke of the *ayin*. This is a *waw* and it serves here as a final vowel letter in the man's name.

Name summary: the name of this man to whom the letter was addressed is H-N-W or Han(n)o. The place where Hanno was located is discussed next in line 1A.

2.3. Line 1A

ʿ: The letter with which the place name starts was written in the middle of the very top of the sherd. The letter there consists of a large oval oriented horizontally with a dot in it. This is the form of the *'ayin*. It contrasts slightly with the more round example of this letter at the beginning of line 2. It serves here as the first letter in the place name associated with Hanno.

Z: To the left of the oval *'ayin* are two long parallel horizontal lines with a vertical crossbar that connects them in the middle, which makes this letter a *ayin*.

ʾ: At the far left end of the very top line there is a large V-shaped letter that points to the left. It was written with double lines. There is a more faint crossbar that angles up to the right between them. This form makes that letter an *'aleph*.

Name Summary: the name of this place was spelled '-Z-' . In the Bible this is the name for Gaza.⁵ This is the place where Hanno lived and probably ruled.

Line summary: The first line of this text translates as, "To Hanno of Gaza". Since the rest of the letter below indicates that this letter was written by someone in Ashkelon, it is probable that Hanno was the king of Gaza. One king is reporting to another fellow Philistine king. A king of Gaza by the name of Hanno was known in the

⁵ Generally, in the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible Gaza is spelled גָּזָא involving a final *he* (cf. Gen 10:19; Deut 2:23; Josh 10:41, etc.). The Philistine spelling of the name of Gaza prefers a final *'aleph* in contrast to the final *he* in Hebrew. Note a similar phenomenon in the use of a final *'aleph* with the *he* at the end of the name of Delilah and the final *'aleph* alone in the name of Agga below.

eighth century BCE, in the time of Tiglath-pileser III of Assyria. That Philistine king is mentioned in the inscriptions of that Assyrian king.⁶ This is not the same person as that king, but the use of this name again in the time of Nebuchadnezzar II at the end of the seventh century BCE indicates that this was a dynastic name which was used by a later king or kings.

2.4. Line 2

A male human head (pictograph): The first sign in the second line has previously been read as a *mem*. Examination of this sign indicates that it is not a letter of the alphabet but the depiction of a person's head. It was used here as a pictograph to represent that person's head and it does not need to be read with a phonetic value. If one were to translate it in Hebrew it would be *rsh*, the word for "head". Presumably, the Philistine word would be approximately equivalent.

The head is shown in frontal view turned slightly to the left. The eyes, nose, mouth (even with teeth) and pointed chin (possibly with beard) are present. There may possibly be some kind of cap on top of his head.

‘: The round eye with a central circular open space has been correctly read in the previous study as an *ayin*.

B: The triangular head with a tail that curves down to the left has been correctly read in the previous study as a *beth*.

R: The smaller triangular head with the straight tail has been correctly read as a *rsh* in the previous study.

Word summary: These three letters have been correctly read in the previous study as ‘-B-R. With the *mem* in front of it now removed it can be read as the common word for "Hebrew", vocalized as עִבְרִי, *‘ibri*.⁷ It was the head of a Hebrew that is referred to here.

Š: The W-shaped letter that follows the *rsh* has been correctly read in the previous study as a *shin*.

M: This letter has a tail that curves down to the left and a head that curves up to the left. A vertical downstroke crosses the head which makes it a *mem* instead of the *taw* suggested in the previous study.

Š: The W-shaped letter at the end of this line is another example of the *shin*, as it has been correctly read in the previous study. It is more faint than the *shin* which precedes it in the same line.

⁶ "Building Inscription describing Tiglath-pileser's III Campaign against Syria and Palestine," translated by A. Leo Oppenheim (*ANET*, 282-85).

⁷ The term is commonly used in the Hebrew Bible. See, for example, Gen 14:13; 39:13; Exod 1:15, 16, 19; etc.

Name summary: these three letters thus far read Š-M-Š. To these should be added the first letter from line 4 which is a notched *nun*. Adding that *nun* to these three previous letters indicates that the name written here was, vocalized, Shimshon. This is the Hebrew name for Samson (Judg 13:24).⁸ Thus it was the head of Samson which was being reported upon here.

Line summary: the pictograph with the two words that follow in this line read, in translation, “the head (pictograph) of the Hebrew Samson...”. Line 4 gives further information about the fate of Samson’s head but there is an intervening line that supports the identification of this head as belonging to the biblical Samson from the time of the Judges.

2.5. Line 3

L: The letters in this line are more faint than those in the line above or the line below but they still can be read with adequate magnification and illumination. The first letter in this line was written just below and to the right of the human head in the line above. It is a curved loop of a letter that lies out horizontally so that it is concave from below and convex from above. This is another example of the *lamed* in a different orientation than that which was seen with this letter previously. It serves the same function as the one at the beginning of the first line, namely, that of a preposition, “to”. Here it is used in the sense of “belonging to”. The person to whom Samson belonged is then named next in this line.

D: A large triangular letter with a short tail on the lower right was written just below and to the left of the human head in the previous line. This is the form of a D or *dalet*. It is the first letter in this person’s name.

Y: Along the left upper side of the triangular *dalet* there is a short letter that lies out horizontally with a tail on the right and a small cupped head on the left, which is the form of the *yod*. It serves here as a vowel letter in this person’s name.

L: From the left lower corner of the triangular *dalet* there is a loop of a letter that lies out horizontally with a curve up on the right and a curve down on the left lower end. While somewhat irregular in form it should be taken as another example of the *lamed*. It serves as the second consonant in the person’s name.

Y: From the right upper end of the *lamed* another *yod* extends out horizontally to the left. It is similar to the preceding *yod* and it serves the same function, namely that of a vowel letter.

L: This letter consists of a loop that is curved back over on itself, which makes it another *lamed* of a slightly different configuration. It serves as another consonant in this person's name.

⁸ The Hebrew vocalized form is שִׁמְשׁוֹן.

ʾ: A very faint V-shaped letter follows the curved-back example of the *lamed*. It points down to the left and its crossbar is even more faint than its main strokes. This is the form of an *'aleph*.

H: To the left of the space with the faint *'aleph* a line was written that curves up to the left. From this curved stroke three bars were written that angle down to the left. This is the form of the letter *he*.

A female human head (pictograph): At the end of line 3 another human head was drawn. This one is female according to the longer hair. She faces to the left and the outline of her forehead, eye, nose, mouth and chin can be seen. This drawing serves as a determinative following the name that precedes it on this line. This determinative indicates that the person named is a female.

Line and name summary: the name written here is that of D-Y-L-Y-L-ʾ-H. Reading the name with its vowel letters suggests Delilah, the name of Samson's companion who led to his downfall (Judg 16).⁹ She is introduced here with the preposition "to" indicating that Samson, whose head is referred to in the preceding line "belonged to" her. It is stated here that Samson belonged to Delilah, not that Delilah belonged to Samson. This is the Philistine point of view and she may well be mentioned here not just to identify who this Samson was, but because she was a Philistine heroine who led to the downfall of the troublesome Israelite.

2.6. Line 4

N: The notched shape of the head of the first letter of this line identifies it as a *nun*. In this case, however, the notch in the head of the letter is on the right rather than on the left where it would normally be seen. It may have been written this way because of the inexperience of the scribe or to indicate that this letter belongs to the name at the end of line 2. Here it completes the name of Samson.

ʾ: This V-shaped letter points to the left with the vertical bar running down between its two limbs. The lower limb of the V is less visible than the upper limb. This is the form of the *'aleph*.

N: The notched shape of the head of this letter stands in the correct orientation in contrast with the *nun* at the beginning of this line. The tail of this *nun* curves down to the left.

Y: This letter has a forked or cupped head with a tail that extends down to the left. This was read as a *yod* in the previous study and that interpretation may well be correct. Because of the squiggly lines of this letter it is difficult to differentiate it from the *waw*. Thus this letter could be either a Y or a W.

Word summary: these three letters spell out the word *'ani* or *'anu*. The first possibility is that of the first person singular pronoun, "I". The other possibility is also pro-

⁹ The BHS has here דלילה , without the final ה as a vowel letter.

nominal, in this case the first person plural, “we”. In either case it refers to the actor here, the one who is the subject of the following verb.

Š: The W-shaped form of this letter is readily recognizable as a *shin* and so it has been read in the preceding study.

T: This letter consists of a vertical stroke that is crossed by a shorter horizontal stroke. This is the common form of the *tav*.

Word summary: these two letters, Š and T, were used to write the common verb *šyt* meaning “to put, set, place.”¹⁰ Since there does not appear to be an ending written upon it, it may be taken as an infinitive, or it may be a perfect form in which the vowel ending, *i* or *u*, was not expressed. It is the verb which follows the preceding subject pronoun, thus this phrase can be translated, “I put”. The object pronoun is understood here but not expressed because it has been referred to previously, i.e., Samson’s head. Thus the person acting here put Samson’s head someplace. The rest of this line and the next line tell where his head was placed.

B: The next to the last letter of this line has a small triangular head and a tail that curves down to the left. That makes it a *beth*. The head of this *beth* is smaller than the example in the second line but in other respects the letter is the same. It functions here as the preposition “into”. The subject person put the head of Samson “into” something.

Y: To the left of the *beth* and slightly above it is a letter with a forked head on the right and a tail that extends down to the left. That makes it a *yod*. This is the first letter of the word that continues at the beginning of the next line.

Line summary: this line begins with the last letter in the name of Samson then it gives the pronoun and verb of the statement. It ends with a preposition and the first letter of the object that is identified in the next line. After the opening letter this line translates, “I put (it, i.e., the head of Samson) into....”

2.7. Line 5

D: At the far right corner of this sherd there is a large triangular letter with a short tail on its right lower corner that identifies this as another example of the *dalet*. It is smaller than the example in line 3 but in other respects the same.

Word summary: the last letter from the previous line together with the first letter of this line read this word as Y-D or, vocalized, *yad*, “hand”. Thus the person acting put the head of Samson into the hand of the person who is named next in line 5.

’: Only the three corners of this V-shaped letter have survived here and its full limbs need to be reconstructed. The same is true of the crossbar that accompanies this

¹⁰ The verb appears, for example, in Gen 41:33; 46:4; Exod 21:22; 2 Sam 2:8; Ruth 3:15 and Ps 84:4. More information can be found in William L. Holladay, ed., *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich./Leiden: Eerdmans/Brill, 1988), 368.

V-shape. So this damaged letter is another example of the 'aleph. It points up to the left.

G–G: Two letters of exactly the same type were written next, one above the other. Both have a sharply angled head which makes them *gimmels*. Both of these letters lie in a horizontal position. The upper example has its head on the right pointing upwards and the lower example has its head on the left pointing downwards. Both of these letters have tiny hooks on their tails which appear to be a specific Philistine trait. Normally these letters would stand vertically but they may have been written in this way here to show that the letter was doubled, a feature not written out in Hebrew. Both letters may also have been written out here because they belong to a personal name.

': Another V-shaped letter follows the two *gimmels* and it points upwards and slightly to the right. This 'aleph can be seen more clearly than the preceding 'aleph. The crossbar is partly visible.

Name summary: the interesting arrangement of these four letters appears to be partly aesthetic in nature. The 'alephs are reciprocals of each other. They both point upwards, and slightly towards each other. The one on the right leans to the left and the one on the left leans to the right. In addition, as described above, the two *gimmels* in the middle of this name are also reciprocals of each other, one above and the other below. This interesting arrangement yields the personal name of 'G-G-' or Agga. Agga is known from ration tablets from the archives of Babylon in the time of Nebuchadnezzar as the last king of Ashkelon.¹¹ He was the king who was deposed when Nebuchadnezzar conquered the city in 604 BCE. His sons are listed as exiles in Babylon.

': Another V-shaped 'aleph points down to the left and its crossbar is particularly visible following the last 'aleph in Agga's name.

Q: A circular headed letter follows with a tail that extends down vertically from it which makes it a *qoph*.

Š: The W-shape of a *šin* is evident at the end of this line.

Name summary: these three letters spell out the personal name of 'Q-Š or, vocalized, 'Aqiš. This name is known in the Bible from earlier times as אֲחִישׁ, Achish (1 Sam 27:2 and 1 Kgs 2:39). It is known from Assyrian inscriptions of the seventh century BCE as Ikasu.¹² There it served as the name for a king of Ekron and a text of this king has been found at Ekron.¹³ As this text from Ashkelon makes clear (see below) the

¹¹ Ernst F. Weidner, "Jojachin, König von Juda, in babylonischen Keilschrifttexten," in *Mélanges Syriens offert à Monsieur René Dussaud* (2 vols.; Paris: Guethner, 1939), 2:923-35.

¹² "Essarhaddon's Prism A dealing with the Syro-Palestinian Campaign," translated by A. Leo Oppenheim (*ANET*, 291, 294).

¹³ Compare here Seymour Gitin, Trude Dothan and Joseph Naveh, "A Royal Dedicatory Inscription from Ekron," *IEJ* 47.1-2 (1997): 1-16.

Achish of Ashkelon is not the same person as the Achish of Ekron. In this case there is a shift in velar letters between K and Q, but the name is still essentially the same. The question here is, what is the relationship between Agga and Achish who is named after him. Normally this would express the relationship of son and father. That relationship is made explicit in a short line that was written above line 5.

2.7. Line 5B

B: Directly above the second *'aleph* in the name of Agga there is a faint letter with a triangular head and a tail that curves down to the left. This form makes that letter out to be a *beth*.

N: Next on the left from the *beth* is the faint form of a notched letter that stands in vertical orientation for a *nun*.

Word summary: these two letters spell out the word B-N or *ben* for “son” which expresses, in this supralinear position, the relationship between Agga and Achish below. Thus far this line should be read, “the hand of Agga son of Achish.” More of the identification of Agga’s father follows in the space above line 5B.

Stick figures of father and son: There is a small line drawing here that demonstrates the relationship already expressed with the word for son. The lines on the left show the father in a sitting position with a smaller child-sized figure on his right. More identification of the father in this pictograph follows to his left in the superscript line 5B.

’: To the left of the father figure in the pictograph is a very small V-shaped letter pointing down to the left. Only the left arm of the crossbar shows. This shape makes that letter an *'aleph*.

Š: Immediately to the left of the *'aleph* are two connected but open loops of a letter. Ordinarily this would be a W-shaped letter but here, in this small space it was written with curved strokes. This shape makes it a *šin*.

Q: Above the *šin* is a letter with a round head and a vertical tail. The tail extends down to the middle of the strokes of the *šin*. This suggests the form of a *qoph*.

Y: Directly under the *šin* is a letter with a forked head on the right and a tail that extends down to the left, which makes it a *yod*.

L: To the left end of the *šin* and the *yod* is the curved open loop of a letter which makes it a *lamed*.

W: To the left of the *lamed* is a letter with an open cupped head and a vertical tail which makes it a *waw*.

N: Along the very left edge of the sherd is the last letter in this superscript line. It has a notched head and a vertical tail which makes it a *nun*.

Word summary: these letters spell out the name of 'Š-Q-Y-L-W-N or the place name of Ashkelon. The place name is used here to modify the name of Achish. It may have been used to contrast him with Achish of Ekron.

Line summary: with line 5 combined with the superscript line 5B the whole line reads, (y)d 'gg' *bn* (pictograph of father and son) 'qš' 'šqylwn. This translates as, "the hand of Agga, the son of Achish of Ashkelon."

2.8. Line 6

M: Along the right side of the triangular wedge at the bottom of the sherd a very large letter was written. It has a head that curves to the left and a tail that angles out to the right. Crossing the curved head is a horizontal stroke which runs parallel to the tail above. That makes this letter a *mem*, like the *mem* in line 2. In this case, however, it angles in from the right lower edge of the sherd.

L: Starting from the left lower end of the *mem* a large curved letter extends out to the left and then it bends back to the right. It was written with double lines. It is another example of a large *lamed* in this text.

K: Starting at the right lower end of the *lamed* there is a horizontal stroke that extends to the edge of the sherd. At the left end of this line there is a small head that has three short branching strokes that point downwards. This is the form of the *kaph* except that it ordinarily has two branching strokes in the seventh century rather than three. These are too closely bunched together to make the *he*. It must, therefore, be a *kaph*.

Word summary: these three letters spell out the word M-L-K or, vocalized, *melek*. This is the word for "king" and it identifies Agga in the previous line as occupying that position.

3. FULL TRANSCRIPTION AND TRANSLATION

Final Text Transcription:

1. *l p'nw z'*
2. (head pictograph) *cbr šmš*
3. *I dylyl'b* (head pictograph)
4. *n 'ny št by*
5. *d 'gg' 'qš'*
- 5B. *bn* (father and son pictograph) 'šqylwn
6. *mlk*

Final Text Translation:

1. “To Hanno of Gaza:
2. The head of the Hebrew Samson,
3. (who belonged) to Delilah,
4. I placed in the hand of
5. Agga, the son of Achish of Ashkelon,
6. king.”

4. CONCLUSION

The first question that arises about this text has to do with its nature. What exactly was its purpose? From the translation developed above it can be seen that it was a letter, which was intended to communicate information from one person in one location to another person in another location. The actual sender is not named in the text. He evidently was the courier who brought the head of Samson from Gaza to Ashkelon and with this letter he was informing the king of Gaza, Hanno, that his mission had been accomplished.

The question which stems from the identification of this text as a letter is, was the letter ever sent? The reason why this question arises is because the letter was found at the city of the sender, not in the city of the person to whom it was addressed. There are two possibilities here. One is that this is a copy of the original which was indeed sent and this copy was retained at the location from which the original was sent. The second possibility is that it was never sent. In that case some other circumstances must have intervened. The obvious culprit in that case is Nebuchadnezzar II. His troops may have arrived on the scene of action before the messenger had time to send his message.

A technical question about the characteristics of the text is why are there alternating lines of light and dark text. There are several possibilities here. It may have to do with irregularities in the surface of the sherd or its burnish. Or it may have to do with the way in which the text weathered as it lay in the ground.

The text provides us with some minor insights into local Philistine history at the time. First, it confirms, with a text directly from Ashkelon, that Agga was the last ruler of the city before it was conquered by Nebuchadnezzar. Previously this was only known from ration tablets in Babylon. Now it is seen in a text from the site of Ashkelon itself. In addition, it provides us with the name of the king of Gaza in 604 BCE and his name was Hanno. This appears to be a reuse of a dynastic name there since a king of Gaza named Hanno is also known from Assyrian texts of the eighth century BCE. Thirdly, the text provides us with the name of the father of Agga and it was Achish. This is also known as the name of a king of Ekron in the seventh century BCE. This was not the same Achish as that king of Ekron, however, for the Achish of

this text is identified as “of Ashkelon”, which indicates that he was distinct from the Achish of Ekron. In addition, as father to Agga, he probably was also the king of Ashkelon who preceded Agga on the throne. Thus, this text provides us with three identifications of local rulers in Philistia in the late seventh century BCE. It is also the first time that the name of Ashkelon has shown up in a text from the site of that ancient city.

The major question about the text has to do with both Philistine and Israelite history. What was the king of Gaza doing with the head of Samson and why did he send it to Ashkelon. The latter question can be answered more directly. The king of Gaza who was in possession of the head of Samson up to that time evidently thought that he was in danger of losing it or it was in danger of being lost to someone, probably Nebuchanezzar II. Therefore, he sent it to Ashkelon, thinking that it would be more secure there. He was mistaken. Nebuchadnezzar conquered Ashkelon and the head of Samson was probably lost in the debris of the destruction.

The prior question about the head of Samson requires an examination of the biblical text to make some connections with other actions recorded there. Judg 16:23-30 tells the story of how Samson died in the temple of Dagon at Gaza. Thus, if his corpse was decapitated Gaza would have been the place where his head would have remained when his family came and took his body away (v. 31). This decapitation type of treatment shows up again when David killed Goliath. After knocking him down with his sling stone he took out Goliath’s sword and cut off his head (1 Sam 17:51). His head was then taken to Jerusalem (v. 54). Presumably his body was left behind on the battlefield and may have been claimed by the Philistines afterwards.

Later, when David was fleeing from Saul, he stopped at the tabernacle in Nob. There he asked the priest Ahimelek for food and he gave him the Bread of the Presence. Lacking weapons, David also asked for them from Ahimelek. He gave him the sword of Goliath which was wrapped up there in the tabernacle (1 Sam 21:9). The text does not mention the head of Goliath but it is possible that it was moved there.

The third case of decapitating a slain enemy involved Saul and his sons. After they were slain on the battlefield at Mt. Gilboa, the Philistines cut off Saul’s head, took his armor, which they put in the temple of Ashtoreth, and hung the bodies of Saul and his sons on the wall of Bethshean (1 Sam 31:9-10). The fate of Saul’s head is not further mentioned. It may have been put in the temple of Ashtoreth along with his weapons, or they may have taken it back to Philistia. The bodies of Saul and his sons were recovered from the wall of Bethshean by the men of Jabesh-Gilead and they buried them at Jabesh (v. 11).

Thus the Philistines cut off the head of Saul and probably treated it in a way different from what they did with his body. Now this new text from Ashkelon indicates that they did the same thing with the head of Samson. On the other side, David treated the head of Goliath in a similar way, different from whatever was done with his body. So

there are two parallels in the biblical text for what happened to the head of Samson, one Philistine and one Israelite.

It is interesting to note that all three of these individuals were great heroes, both physically and in what they accomplished. Samson's feats of strength are well known from Judg 13-15. Saul stood head and shoulders above the other Israelites. Goliath was even taller than Saul. So it was particularly these specimens of extraordinary size and strength that had their heads cut off and taken away to serve as trophies of victory over the enemy.

It is interesting to see from this new text that the head of Samson was still valued in that way. It was kept as an example of a defeated enemy and its whereabouts were still known some 500 years after the death of Samson at Gaza. Thus, the story of Samson was not only known in Israelite circles where it was preserved in the biblical text, but it was also known to the Philistines in Gaza where his head was kept and in Ashkelon where his head was transferred to. Unless they had some way of mummifying or preserving that head, it probably was his skull that was transferred to Ashkelon.