

The Mysterious Ekron Goddess Revisited

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In 1996 archaeologists found a limestone block bearing an inscription to a goddess (Figure 1) in a temple chamber at a 7th century B.C.E. site that Naveh¹ had identified as Tel Miqne–Ekron, or simply Ekron, 35 kilometers southwest of Jerusalem. The Bible states that the site was originally inhabited by the Tribe of Judah, but was later transferred to the Tribe of Dan (Josh. 15:45–46; Judg. 19:43; 1:18). However, archaeological and textual evidence found at the site and elsewhere in the region revealed that the tell was founded somewhere between the 15th and 14th centuries B.C.E. by indigenous Canaanites, and taken over in the 12th century by the Philistines, after their attacks on Egypt were repelled by Ramses III.

In the 10th century, Ekron was subjugated to Israel’s United Monarchy under King David, but between the 10th and 8th centuries, the city came first under Egyptian control and later under Assyrian control. By the mid-8th century, Ekron was again under Hebrew control, but later in the same century, it was re-conquered by the Assyrians under Sennacherib, who subsequently converted it into a Neo-Assyrian city-state that the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar destroyed ca. 600 B.C.E.²

According to the excavation leaders Gitin, Dothan, and Naveh, the inscription, written from right to left in a style reminiscent of tenth century B.C.E. Phoenician inscriptions from Byblos, records the temple’s dedication by Ekron’s ruler Ikausu in a West Semitic dialect resembling Phoenician and Old Byblian, apparently spoken at Ekron and perhaps other Levantine Philistine city states.³ Comprised of some seemingly Hebrew letters, some seemingly Phoenician letters, and some letters that seem to have been unique to Ekron, these authors transliterated the inscription as follows:

1. The temple (which) he built, 'kys son of Padi, son of
2. Ysd, son of Ada, son of Ya'ir, ruler of Ekron,
3. for Pt[g]yh his lady, May she bless him, and
4. prot[ec]t him, and prolong his days, and bless
5. his []and.

Gitin, Dothan, and Naveh went on to state that the questionable letter (indicated by the bracket in line 3 above) in the name of this goddess is undoubtedly an ancient form of the Hebrew letter *gimmel*. Yet this letter would be a remarkably small *gimmel*, and no Semitic goddess named Ptgyh has ever been identified.

Nevertheless, Gitin, Dothan, and Naveh concluded that *Ptgyh* was “surely” a previously unknown Philistine and Indo-European deity based on: (1) the presence

1. J. Naveh, “Khirbet al-Muqanna-Ekron,” *IEJ* 8 (1958), 87–100, 165–70.

2. S. Gitin and T. Dothan, “The Rise and Fall of Ekron of The Philistines,” *BA* (1987), 197–222.

3. S. Gitin, T. Dothan, and J. Naveh, “A Royal Dedicatory Inscription from Ekron,” *IEJ* 47 (1997), 1–16.



Fig. 1. Photo of a block from Ekron bearing an inscription to an unknown goddess. Photo and drawing below courtesy of Professor S. Gitin and the Tel Miqne–Ekron Excavation Project.

of terminal *-yh* in two feminine personal names in a Philistine name list found in the excavation of Tel Jemmeh; (2) the belief that Ikausu is a form of the Greek name Anchises, Achean or both; and (3) the generally accepted belief that the Philistines were known biblically as the Caphtorim, who presumably migrated from Crete and other parts of what is now Greece to the Levant in the late second millennium B.C.E.

In contrast, Demsky originally hypothesized that the engraver may have aborted the questionable letter because of “an imperfection in the stone, or some outside distraction, or perhaps a hesitation regarding the spelling of a foreign word.”⁴ According to Demsky, if this were the case, “it [the questionable letter] might be seen as the start of an unintended letter that should be ignored or the beginning of an intended letter that remained to be completed.”

If the letter was unintended, Demsky maintained that the name of this goddess should be interpreted as *Ptyh*—possibly a Canaanite reference to the Pythia of Apollo’s Delphic temple, for Ekron, too, was known to be an oracular city associated specifically with the Canaanite deity Baal-zebug. In fact, according to 2 Kgs. 1:6, the prophet Elijah denounced Israel’s King Ahaziah for having sent an emissary to Ekron to ask Baal-zebug’s oracle there for insight into the king’s illness.

After inspecting the questionable letter closely, however, Demsky concluded that it “is no more than a wedge shaped chip in the porous stone,” and that Yardeni

4. A. Demsky, “Discovering a Goddess: A New Look at the Ekron Inscription Identifies ‘Mysterious Deity,’” *BAR* 24/5 (1998), 53–58; idem, “The Name of The Goddess of Ekron: A New Reading,” *JANES* 25 (1997), 1–5.

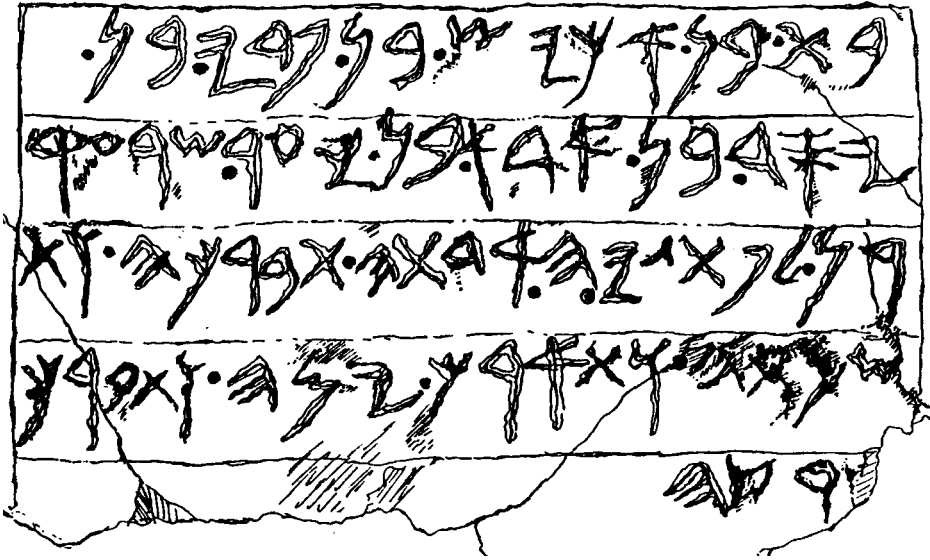


Fig. 2. Drawing of Ekron inscription by Ada Yardeni.

had drawn the letter's left line "too concave" (Figure 2). In addition, Demsky concluded that what Gitin, Dothan, and Naveh had interpreted and Yardeni had drawn as the letter's right line was nothing but an unintended "spur," rather than a real line. On the other hand, after comparing the questionable letter to the inscription's *nuns*, Demsky went on to hypothesize that the name of this deity is *Pmyh*, presumably representing the Greek word *potni* or *potnia* for "mistress" or "lady," in agreement with what Demsky identified as the archaic Greek practice of denoting various deities in Linear B sometimes simply as "Mistress" or "Lady," and sometimes more specifically as "Mistress or Lady So and So."

Although many scholars seem to have preferred Demsky's conclusions to the those of Gitin, Dothan, and Naveh, Schäffer-Lichtenberger⁵ argued that, among other problems with Demsky's hypothesis: (1) "there is no known example of *potnia* hitherto as a name"; (2) all the *nuns* begin at the top of lines, but the questionable letter begins six mm. below the line; (3) the letter's left line was indeed curved, as Gitin, Dothan, and Naveh had claimed; and (4) the space available below the questionable letter would not have allowed the scribe to chisel the tail of a *nun* or, for that matter, a *resh*—in opposition to Görge's⁶ suggestion that the letter may have been a *resh* in *Ptryh*, a variant of *Pidray*, Baal's daughter's name, which will be discussed below.

To explain the presence of the two word-dividers associated with the problematic name, Schäffer-Lichtenberger argued that the divider to the left of and below the

5. C. Schäffer-Lichtenberger, "The Goddess of Ekron and the Religious-Cultural Background of the Philistines," *IEJ* 50 (2000), 82–91.

6. M. Görge, "Die Göttin der Ekron-Inschrift," *BN* 93 (1998), 9–10.

name's terminal *he* indicates that the scribe forgot to drill that divider before he inscribed the next word's initial *aleph*, since word dividers that appear after other terminal *he*'s are slightly above and to the left of those letters. Accordingly, Schäffer-Lichtenberger argued that the scribe apparently decided to drill a second word divider at the base of the *yod* preceding the *he* to emphasize the first word-divider.

It is difficult to see how this second divider would have emphasized, rather than obfuscated, the other's significance in a way that ancient Ekronites, but not modern Semitists, would have understood. Moreover, Schäffer-Lichtenberger's speculation lacks merit because the scribe clearly had more than enough room to drill a divider just above and to the left of the name's terminal *he* even after he had drilled the following *aleph*. Consequently, the presence of the two dividers is still explained better by Demsky's suggestion that the scribe prematurely inscribed a word-divider after the *yod*, because he had problems spelling the questionable name, for reasons that will become more apparent below.

Scientific method requires that before any theory be accepted, other theories must be tested to see if one or more can explain the evidence in a more, or at least equally reasonable, economical, and, ideally, more instructive way. With this in mind, I used Photoflair's Retinex image processing software,⁷ developed by engineers at the National Aeronautics and Space Agency for enhancing satellite images, to enhance images of the questionable letter in photos of the inscription.⁸ As the photos below show, this software's ability to vary the contrast and brightness of highly magnified images revealed every one of the stone's pits and prominences far better than could any hand-held magnifying glass, resulting in images that resemble satellite images of a planet's topography.

More specifically, Figure 3 clearly shows that the questionable letter's left line is indeed as curved as Gitin, Dothan, and Naveh had originally claimed and Yardeni had shown (Figure 2), and not straight as Demsky claimed. Moreover, the letter's right line reveals that it was unquestionably an intended line, rather than the unintended spur that Demsky suggested.



Fig. 3. Digitally enhanced image of the questionable letter showing that the left line is slightly curved.

Comparing the questionable letter to the heads of the inscription's *reshes*, it could then be observed that the letter occupies a vertical position relative to its baseline that is identical, or nearly so, to the heads of the inscription's *reshes* relative to their baselines. Moreover, comparing the head of this *resh* to the heads of *reshes* in other inscriptions, it could be observed that chiseling such a head occasionally caused the stone within it to break and fall away, as Figure 4 clearly shows.

7. Photoflair is a trademark of TruView Imaging's Retinex image processing software.

8. I am grateful to Professor Gitin and the Tel Miqne-Ekron Excavation Project for supplying and allowing me to use Z. Radovan's photos and Ada Yardeni's drawing of the inscription.

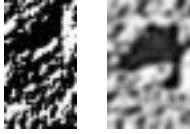


Fig. 4. Left: Questionable letter in Ekron inscription. Right: Punic inscription⁹ showing a *resh* with the head broken out, in the same way as the head of the questionable letter seems to have been.

Indeed, comparing these highly magnified images of the questionable letter to similarly enhanced images of the inscription's other *reshes*, it seems very possible that the letter could have even been a completed *resh*, for images, like those in Figure 5, strongly suggest that a line strikingly resembling the tail of a *resh* extends vertically downward from the vertical line constituting the right side of the questionable letter's broken head.

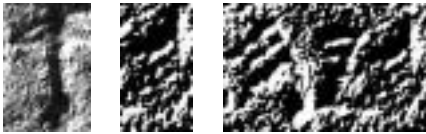


Fig. 5. Left: The *resh* five letters from the left on line 2 of the inscription highly magnified; Center: The questionable letter showing what appears to be the remnant of a tail extending vertically downward from the letter's head, just as the tail of the *resh* on the left does. Right: Comparing the tail of the questionable letter to that of the following *he* reveals that the former is even more pronounced than the latter.

In fact, comparing this tail to the tail of the following *he* reveals that the former is at least as pronounced as the latter (Figure 5, right). However, since the *he* could be definitively identified in other ways, the virtual absence of its tail was never an issue. That the questionable letter originally did have a tail can therefore explain why the scribe did not go back to correct the letter.

In view of the preceding evidence and analysis, the hypothesis that the questionable letter is a *resh* is certainly no less founded than the hypotheses that the letter was supposed to be a *nun*—especially since the *nun* hypothesis rests on the premises that (1) the letter lacks its upper, as well as its lower, portion, and (2) Levantine Semites were worshiping a Greek deity. Hence, the *resh* hypothesis is more economical, and logically more acceptable than the *nun* hypothesis.

As already mentioned, Shäefer-Lichtenberg argued that the *resh* hypothesis is not viable because the engraver did not have enough room to inscribe the tail of a *resh* below the questionable letter. On the contrary, it is clear from the above photos, just as it was from the original photos and Yardeni's drawing, that the space under the questionable letter is more than adequate to bear the tail of a *resh* or, for that matter, a number of other letters.

The *resh* hypothesis is also more supportable, instructive, and ultimately important than the other hypotheses because the resulting name is a highly attested Semitic and, more broadly, Afro-Asiatic word that more aptly fits the inscription's setting in agreement with Demsky's recognition that "the reading will be strengthened if it results in a recognizable term that more aptly fits the context." That is, *Ptryh* (פתריה) can be identified as a personified, feminine form of an anciently widespread Afro-Asiatic word for, among other things, seeing, beholding, explaining, calling and

9. See. e.g., *CIS* no. 13, line 3, 15th letter from the left.

interpreting, especially dreams, that appear as such in, for instance, Egyptian¹⁰; Nabataean, Jewish Aramaic, Phoenician, Punic, Neo-Punic¹¹; Akkadian¹²; and Hebrew¹³ words for seers and interpreters, and in Punic family names.¹⁴ The Hebrew word *ptr* was therefore used particularly with respect to a seer interpreting dreams and visions in Gen. 40:8, telling how the Hebrew seer Joseph interpreted the Pharaoh's dreams: "And Pharaoh said unto Joseph, I have dreamed a dream and [there is] none that can interpret (*ptr*) it: and I have heard say of thee, [that] thou canst understand a dream to interpret (*ptr*) it."

Accordingly, the reading *Ptryh* articulates perfectly with (1) the oracular nature of Ekron evident in 2 Kgs. 1:6; (2) Ekron's Levantine location; (3) the unequivocally Semitic character of the other words and names in the inscription, except perhaps for Ikausu; (4) the cultic nature of the temple; and (5) the enmity Yahwistic Hebrew priests apparently had for Ekron precisely because it was a Canaanite divinatory center. It is thus certainly more reasonable to believe that the name of this goddess was vocalized as *Petryah* or *Patryah*, rather than Greek *Petgia* or *Potnia* considering the paleographic, temporal, and geographic difficulties these Greek hypotheses pose. It should also be noted that *ptr* has a number of obvious relatives in Hebrew and a host of other Semitic languages. For example, its sibilated form *pšr* refers to, among other things, releasing people from curses, exorcisms, and sins in, for example, Hebrew, Aramaic and Akkadian, though Sperling¹⁵ maintains that Hebrew *ptr* is not related to Aramaic or Akkadian *pšr*.

Clearly related to *ptr* is also *ptr*, most notably in *Pethor* the birthplace of Balaam, the seer that Numbers 22–24 and Deut. 23:4 excoriate for leading Hebrews astray. Although scholars have often identified Pethor as Pitru,¹⁶ Yaure argued convincingly that this relationship is far more complex, because *Pethor* was originally:

. . . *pathorah*, a regular *nomen agentis* form of the verbal root *ptr* ("to interpret"). This Aramaic title, *pathorah* = "The Interpreter" (*sc.* of dreams and oracles), distinguished Balaam as a professional and reputed diviner, and had been taken over unaltered into the Hebrew narrative, and then was by later transcribers easily mistaken for a Hebrew locative, since both were written with identical letters. Accordingly, the original text of Num. 22:5 must have been some plain statement such as: "He sent messengers to Balaam ben Beor the *pathorah* to call him. . . ."¹⁷

Yaure went on to argue that Jerome must have recognized that *pathorah* was Balaam's epithet, for the Vulgate translates *pathorah* as *hariolus*, just as the Jerusalem Targum

10. R. O. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford, 1962); E. A. W. Budge, *An Egyptian Hieroglyphic Dictionary* (New York, 1960); J. Hoch, *Middle Egyptian Grammar* (Mississauga, 1997).

11. R. S. Tomback, *A Comparative Semitic Lexicon of the Phoenician and Punic Languages* (Missoula, Montana, 1978).

12. J. Black, A. George, and N. Postgate, eds., *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian* (Wiesbaden, 2000).

13. See, e.g., *BDB*; E. Klein and B. Sarel, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English* (Jerusalem [Haifa], 1987).

14. F. L. Benz, *Personal Names in the Phoenician and Punic Inscriptions* (Rome, 1972).

15. S. D. Sperling, *Studies in Late Hebrew Lexicography in Light of the Akkadian*. Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1973, 56–92.

16. See, e.g., W. F. Albright, "Some Important Recent Discoveries: Alphabetic Origins and the Idrimi Statue," *BASOR* 118 (1950), 15 n. 13.

17. L. Yaure, "Elymas-Nehalame-Pethor," *JBL* 79 (1960), 297–314, esp. 310–14.

states: “He sent messengers to Laban the Aramean who is Balaam; . . . his place of residence is Padan, which is Pethor, so-called after his name *pathor helmaia*.” By the same token, the Peshitta translates *pathora* as *pašora* “Interpreter,” because, as Yaure put it, “the Syriac translator of Numbers easily saw in the term in question a well known Aramaic expression and accordingly rendered it in his own cognate language with the related and idiomatic *pašora* (‘interpreter’). . . .”

Yaure’s analysis can also shed a great deal of light on the origins of our previously enigmatic Ekron goddess for, as already mentioned, Görge hypothesized that if the questionable letter is interpreted as a *resh*, Ptryh could very well be a previously unrecognized form of *Pidray*, the name of Baal’s daughter in Ugaritic mythology:

Stattdessen wäre auch ein *R* möglich, dessen oberer Teil in dem bescheidenen ‘Winkelhaken’ fragmentarisch erhalten, dessen Normalausführung aber—aus welchem Grund auch immer—nicht vollendet oder beeinträchtigt worden wäre. Wenn also eine Lesung PTRYH anstünde, könnte man etwa an die kananäische Göttin *Pidray* denken, die u.a. in einem hurritischen Sakralraum in Ugarit Verehrung genossen haben muß und ebenfalls erst jüngst thematisch behandelt wurde. Immerhin ist diese Göttin eine ausgesprochene Palastgöttin, die sich der Widmungsinschrift gut einfügen würde. Es bedarf keines weiteren Wortes, um auch diese Idee lediglich als weitere Anregung in die Diskussion einzubringen.¹⁸

That this could indeed be the case can be supported by recognizing that *pt* also has *pd* relatives in many Semitic words and names.¹⁹ In addition, the ancestors of Ikausu, to whom the Ekron temple was dedicated, bear names that appear in the literature of Ugarit where Baal reigned supreme with *Pidray*, *Tallay*, and *Arsay*. Accordingly, *Pidray*’s presence in Ekron fits the context even more aptly than even Görge may have imagined.

When Görge’s hypothesis is combined with the hypothesis that the engraver did not recognize the form *Ptryh* of *Pidray*, the resulting hypothesis can explain why the engraver placed a word divider after the *yod*: *Pidray* ends in *yod*. So, when he came to the following *he*, which may have been added to Hebraize the name, he had to add the *he* and another word divider. It is thus very possible that *Ptryh* was coined from *Pidray* under the influence of *ptr* to identify *Pidray* as Ekron’s tutelary goddess and divine seer, considering especially that (1) interpreters and seers have traditionally been referred to figuratively as people who “illuminate” or “shed light on” problems, and (2) *Pidray* was “the daughter of light.”²⁰ Görge’s hypothesis therefore melds quite well with the hypothesis that the Ekron goddess was *Pidray/Ptryh*, rather than some previously unknown Semitic, much less Greek, goddess.

18. See n. 6 above.

19. Compare, e.g., Ugaritic *ptm* vs. *pdm* and Ugaritic *p-d-d* vs. Hebrew *ptt*, in G. del Olmo Lete and J. Sanmartín, *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition* (Leiden, 2003), 663–64 and 687–88.

20. *Ibid.*, entry for *pdry*, 663.

