

Archaeological Evidence of Solomon and Sheba?

Scholar identifies South Arabian inscription in Jerusalem

Nathan Steinmeyer

The story of King Solomon and the [Queen of Sheba](#) is one of the more intriguing accounts found within the narrative of Solomon's reign (1 Kings 10). Yet the lack of clear archaeological or historical evidence for early trade or political connections between ancient Judah and South Arabia has led many scholars to question the account's reliability. Now, a study published in the [Jerusalem Journal of Archaeology](#) suggests that a small inscription from the excavations at Jerusalem's Ophel may provide just such proof.



A connection between Solomon and Sheba? Is this seven-letter inscription evidence of a possible trade network? *Courtesy Daniel Vainstub; all rights reserved © Dr. Eilat Mazar.*

Solomon and Sheba: A New Proposal

Discovered in 2012 during excavations at the Ophel by the late [Eilat Mazar](#), the small inscription, which includes just seven letters, has puzzled scholars for years. While most have assumed the inscription is written in Canaanite, Daniel Vainstub of Ben-Gurion University now believes it is written in an Ancient South Arabian script known as Sabaic, the language of the ancient kingdom of Saba (biblical Sheba) in the area of modern Yemen.



View of the Ophel excavation area as seen from the Mount of Olives. *Courtesy Nathan Steinmeyer.*

Dated to the tenth century BCE—the time of the biblical King Solomon—the inscription could provide evidence of trade connections between ancient South Arabia and Jerusalem during this early period. According to Vainstub, the inscription contains three full or partially preserved words: []šy ldn 5. (Vainstub believes the South Arabian letter *ḥ* was used to designate the number 5.) Intriguingly, the second word, which Vainstub reads as *ladanum*, is a type of resin possibly to be identified with *onycha*, one of the ingredients used to create incense burned at the tabernacle (Exodus 30:34).



Vainstub holding the inscription. *Courtesy Daniel Vainstub.*

The inscription was engraved below on a large Judahite-style storage jar. Although only fragments of the jar were preserved, the profile suggests it originally held around 30 gallons, or 5 *ephahs*, the standard volume measure in ancient Judah. According to Vainstub, this suggests that the number 5 within the inscription indicates the amount of resin that was held by the jar.

Given that the Sabaic inscription was made before the jar was fired, it was likely written by a native Sabaean, possibly even someone living in Jerusalem. As posited by Vainstub, this suggests “that a Sabaean functionary entrusted with aromatic components of incense was active in Jerusalem by the time of King Solomon.”

Solomon and Sheba: The Linguistic and Epigraphic Debate

Not everyone is convinced by Vainstub’s reading or interpretation, however. “Which is more likely, that we have in this Jerusalem inscription the Canaanite script, which is well attested in the Levantine world, or that we have a tenth-century early Arabian script?” cautioned Christopher Rollston, Professor of Northwest Semitic Languages and Literatures at George Washington University, in a communication with *Bible History Daily*. “I would suggest that even if we believe that this inscription refers to some aromatic, it still makes the most sense simply to say that it was a Canaanite inscription about an aromatic spice. After all, the Levantine world was certainly interested in incense, and this piece of pottery is a locally made pot!”

Vainstub, however, is undeterred by such criticism. “In my opinion, the inscription cannot be considered Canaanite,” told *Bible History Daily*. “For ten years, researchers intended unsuccessfully to read it as a coherent text in Canaanite.” As Vainstub points out, several letters are quite difficult to understand as Canaanite, while one letter (the *h* which designates the number 5) can “by no means fit any Canaanite letter, but fits exactly the Ancient South Arabian *h*.”

Other questions regarding Vainstrub’s reading remain. One problem is the close similarity between the Sabaic and Canaanite scripts and the fact that the Ancient South Arabian script of the first millennium BCE was born of the earlier Canaanite script. Thus, while Vainstrub’s interpretation is possible, there is little way for epigraphers to know for certain.

Solomon and Sheba: Ancient Trade

But if Vainstub's interpretation is correct, the small inscription—discovered just 300 yards from the presumed location of Solomon's Temple—could offer important evidence of early trade connections between Judah and South Arabia and, therefore, the historicity of the biblical story of Solomon and Sheba.



Proposed reconstruction of the trade route. *Courtesy Daniel Vainstub.*

Over the past decades, archaeological and textual evidence from the Sabaean kingdom has provided a great deal of new information about the ancient Yemeni civilization. According to the [press release](#) from the Hebrew University:

During the 10th century BCE, the Kingdom of Sheba thrived as a result of the cultivation and marketing of perfume and incense plants, with Ma'rib as its capital. They developed advanced irrigation methods for the fields growing the plants used to make perfumes and incense. Their language was a South Semitic one. King Solomon is described in the Bible as controlling the trade routes in the Negev, which Sabaean camel caravans carrying perfumes and incense plants passed through on their way to Mediterranean ports for export.

If such a trade network existed by the tenth century, control over this trade could have been one of the main reasons for Pharaoh Sheshonq's ([biblical Shishak's](#)) campaign into the southern Levant during the reign of Solomon's son and successor, Rehoboam.

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