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Pavel Serafimov, Giancarlo Tomezzoli

# THE INSCRIPTION FROM TELL EL-DAB'A

## Abstract

In the paper it is discussed an inscription engraved in a matrix of a mould dating back to the period of pharaoh Nehesi and the beginning of the Hyksos period. The mould was found at Tell el-Dab'a in the Nile Delta, possible site of the ancient town of Avaris. All the characters of the inscription match characters of the later alphabet of Este, indicating that the inscription is Venetic. Taking into account the two possible reading directions the following possible translations are possible: **Two to achieve success bring!** or **This is in two pieces**. Thus, the inscription would represent in any case a warning or instruction to the artisan/s on how to prepare the mould. The inscription predates all the known Venetic and Etruscan inscriptions of at least 900 years and testifies the presence of Veneti in Egypt.

## Introduction

Mainly because of many portal stones with hieroglyphical inscriptions there discovered, the site of 'Ezbet Rushdi, Tell el-Dab'a, Quantir, about 15 sq. Km, on the east side of the Nile Delta, has attracted the attention of the archaeologists at least from the beginning of the last century. Many surveys and campaign of excavations were conducted on the site by different archaeologists and institutions: Naville E. 1885, Hamza M. 1928, Habachi Z. Z. 1937, 1942, Habachi L. 1941-1942, Adam S. 1951-1954, the Austrian Archaeological Institut (ÖAI) 1966-1969-1975, 1979-1989-2000, the Pelizaeus Museum - Hildesheim 1980-1988, the Ligabue Study and Research Center, Venice 1987 and others.

## The archaeological site

The large extension of the site has not permitted up to now a systematic excavation. However, said various surveys and excavations conducted in different places of the site have permitted, Bietak [1], Habachi [2], the reconstruction of a possible, provisional, evolution of the corresponding settlements.

The geological and stratigraphic surveys have ascertained that in the period corresponding to the XII - XVIII Dynasties (1800-1410 BC) a bifurcation (F1, F2) of the Pelusiac branch of the Nile and many sand mounds were present on the site, so that it represented an attractive place for settlement ensuring an easy access to the sea and protection against the floods of the Nile.

The most ancient portion of the settlement, at the beginning of the XII Dynasty, about 1800 BC, was probably located in the area of 'Ezbet Rushdi on the southern border

of said bifurcation. The excavations in this area have uncovered a temple, a palace and a portion of a town of the XII Dynasty. By the beginning of the XIII Dynasty, about 1750 BC, the town expanded to the south on adjacent mounds in the area of Tell el-Dab'a. The excavation F/I, in this area, permitted to uncover a palace of the XIII Dynasty enlarged in different periods and suddenly abandoned, and a cemetery probably of the Asiatic functionaries of the palace. Most of the male population of the town at this time was represented by Canaanites employed mainly as mercenaries. After the palace was abandoned, this part of the town continued to develop. Interesting findings of this period are several moulds (cf. [1], fig. 28) for producing copper artefacts. From the Strata GI-GIV, of the period of the XIII Dynasty, emerged artifacts witness the presence at Tell el-Dab'a of a Cypriot community. The expansion of the town continued toward east as witnessed by the excavations A/I – A/V. However, the discovery in excavations F/I and A/II that part of the town was converted in cemetery comprising tombs without offerings, sometimes simple pit-tombs, suggests that an epidemic took place in the town in the period 1740 – 1710 BC causing a partial abandon of the town. The tombs show that the male population, mercenaries or sailors, was mainly from the Near East, while the female population was mainly Egyptian.

In excavation A/II three temples of Egyptian style were uncovered, and in one of them, temple III, were found inscriptions of the pharaoh Nehesi, who ruled an independent kingdom in the Nile Delta during the XIV Dynasty. According to different inscriptions, at this time, probably, the town was already named Avaris. The presence of said temples together with Canaanite tombs let though that the inhabitants were mainly Canaanites but that they acquired Egyptian culture and funerary rites. The excavations A/II, A/V have shown that in the Hyksos period (1650 – 1550 BC), the eastern portion of the town was re-occupied, and, in the excavation A/II, the previous cemetery areas resulted covered by houses. Many new tombs of this period were integrated in the houses, a tradition indicating that a portion of the inhabitants preserved a Near East burial tradition. The study of the wares and potteries found in the town and in other sites has shown a distribution extended from the North Egypt, to the South and coastal Palestine, roughly indicating the extension of the Hyksos' kingdom. Excavations slightly south along the border of the bifurcation, near the actual 'Hezbet Helmi, uncovered a stronghold of the Hyksos period which contained a garden, probably the "garden of Apopis" referred to in the stele of Khamose.

The town was abandoned at the end of the Hyksos period, but the site of the Hyksos stronghold was re-occupied during the XVIII Dynasty by a royal citadel probably of the period of the pharaoh Ahmose. Inside the citadel were found potteries and rests of high quality frescoes and reliefs of Minoan style indicating the presence of Minoan artists in the citadel. Close to the citadel, in excavation H/I, was uncovered a settlement probably comprising workshops, and at excavation H/V, were uncovered rests of another royal building or temple. At about 100 m from the citadel, at excavations H/II, H/III were uncovered the rests of a large building of the XVIII Dynasty, containing many rests of Syrian and Cypriot amphorae and potteries. In said settlement and in said large building

were uncovered pumices originated from the explosion of the volcano of Santorin, probably collected well after the explosion.

The attention of the archaeologist to the area of Quantir was drawn by the discovery of statues, limestone bricks and tiles inscribed with the name of pharaoh Ramses II. At Plot 30, Hamza discovered a faience and glazing factory of the period of Ramses II and his son, and not far from the factory were discovered two kilns for firing the faience with moulds inscribed with the names of Seti I, Ramses II, Nefertari and several other pharaohs of the XVIII Dynasty. The fact that these moulds were intended for the production of palace decorations and the discovery of rests of two palaces attributed to Seti I and Ramses II, suggest that said pharaohs selected this area of the site for building their palaces. The uncovering of inscribed portions of doorways permitted to ascertain that many houses of high administrative and military officers, royal scribes and members of the royal family were built here. The discovery in the area of many stelae and different objects indicates that here also existed barracks, factories, magazines, wine vaults. Other stelae mentioning the gods Amun, Ptah and Ra indicate the possible presence in this area of the site of temples of said deities.

The opinion of the archaeologists on what represent the findings of Quantir is not unanimous, however, we share the opinion of Habachi [2] p. 73, that the concentration of artifacts inscribed with XVIII Dynasty pharaohs' names, the presence of at least two royal palaces and other artifacts indicating the presence of houses of high administrative and military functionaries and members of the royal family indicate that at Quantir was the site of the ancient town of Pi-Ramses. In addition, the presence on the same site, at Tell el-Dab'a of a big town flourishing during the period of the XII, XIII Dynasties, abandoned at the end of the Hyksos period and re-occupied at the period of the XVIII Dynasty indicate that here was the site of the ancient Avaris.

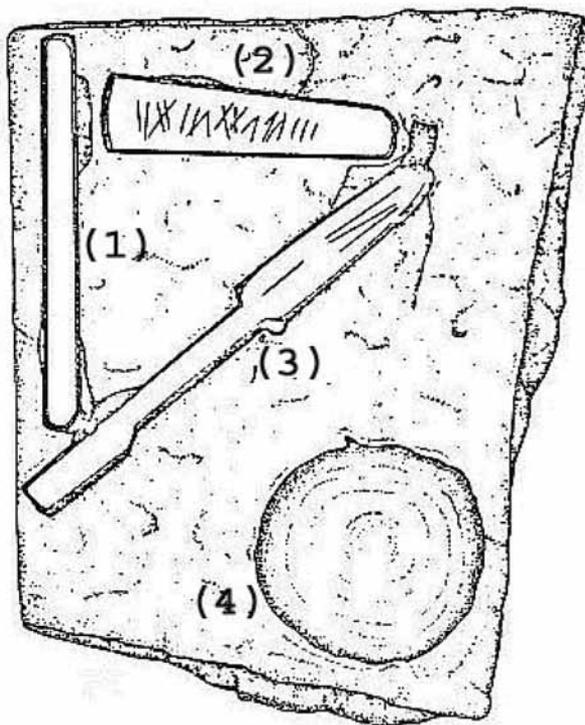
## The Mould

One of the moulds found at Tell el-Dab'a is shown by Bietak [1], fig. 28 and is described by G. Philip [3] pp. 171-176, as: 366. Reg. No.: 3110, length 23.6 cm, max br. 19.4 cm, consisting of an irregularly shaped limestone mould (cf. Fig. 1). It was found in the excavation F/I, square i/2l, Pl. 3, Stratum c-b/3, Planum 3 at Tell el-Dab'a equivalent to stratum F-G/1 in the overall sequence, lying upside-down in a corridor of the palace, between the walls and the columned portico.

Thus, according to the stratigraphy, the mould can be ascribed at the period of about 1740 – 1680 BC, i.e. between the pharaoh Nehesi period and the beginning of the Hyksos period, see [1] fig. 3. The mould has a smooth face holding four matrices (1) – (4) (intended for producing metal tools for working wood and ingots). The first matrix (1) is 13.2 cm long, 1.1 cm breadth and 0.5 cm deep with rounded ends. The second matrix (2) is 9.6 cm long, 2.7 cm breadth and 0.7 cm deep having straight tapering sides. The third matrix (3) for the production of socketed spearhead is 17.0 cm long, 2.1 cm breadth max and 0.7 cm deep. The fourth matrix (4) is disc shaped of 7.6 cm in diameter. It is interesting to

mention, cf. [4] pp. 240-242 and fig. 126, the close similarity of the axe to be produced by matrix (2) with the axes 12-30 cm long of the I Dynasty.

*Fig. 1: layout of the mould and the matrices (1)-(4)*



Interesting is also the observation of G. Philip [3], p. 190 that “The fact that moulds such as Nos. 3108-3110 and 4228 were left unfinished except on the surface bearing the matrices, which had usually been smoothed, argues that this surface was deliberately prepared to ensure a tight fit for a lid”. However, “No lids have been identified at Tell el-Dab’a, although it is possible that fragments from limestone lids would not been recognized as such during excavation”.

Because the majority of the limestone moulds were found in a small group of squares within area F/I, in layers immediately above the XIII Dynasty palace, and because the crucible remains Nos. 3115, 3115a, 3115b, 3116, and a tuyere 3115c was recovered from the same squares, G. Philip [3] p. 204, concludes that here existed a sort of “institutional workshop”.

Surprisingly, G. Philip [3] did not comment the signs (cf. Figs. 1, 2) in matrices (2) and (3).

## The inscription on the mould

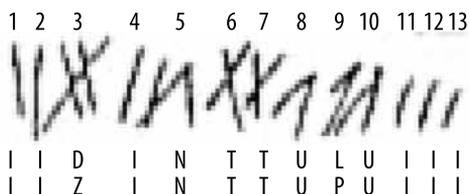
As can be seen, matrix (2) holds signs that can be easily recognized as characters of an inscription (cf. Fig. 2), while the signs on matrix (3), although recognizable as possible characters, as far as can be understood, do not appear to indicate an inscription.

An analysis conducted on the basis of [5] p 501, Table of Alphabets, of [6] p. 4, 34, 60, 79, 218, 226, 256, 280 (Old Phrygian Alphabets from M-, W-, B-, G-, C-, P-, T- sites), of [7], Tableau des Signes and of [8] (Phoenicians, Aramean, Palmirean, Nabatean, Nestorian, Jacobit, Mandaean alphabets) shows that all the characters of the inscription match corresponding characters of the Venetic Este alphabet. The 3<sup>rd</sup> character matches perfectly the corresponding one of the Este alphabet while the Magré, Lepontic and Etruscan alphabets have a corresponding character with opposed inclination of the two parallel strokes. The 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> characters have no corresponding matches in the Bolzano, Magré, Sondrio and Etruscan alphabets. The 3<sup>rd</sup> character has no match in all the alphabets of the Table of Alphabets of [5] (Bolzano, Sondrio, Gallic, Novilara, East Italic, Messapic, Sicel), in the Phrygian Alphabets of [6] and in all the various alphabets of [8]. Several other characters: 8, 9, 10 of the inscription have no matches in the last alphabets of [5] and [8]. Therefore, with high probability, the inscription is Venetic.

Concerning the 3<sup>rd</sup> character of the inscription, [5] p. 501, Table of Alphabets, assumes it to have phonetic value Z although it is signalled (= d ?), that it could instead represent the phonetic value D, [6] Tableau des Signes, assumes for said character the phonetic value D.

Concerning the 5<sup>th</sup> character of the inscription, it appears to represent the Venetic character N although the possible reading UI or IU cannot be excluded.

According to [5] p. 501, Table of Alphabets, the 9<sup>th</sup> character has phonetic value is L, because the phonetic value P is represented by a different character, i.e. there is no ambiguity P/L on the 9<sup>th</sup> character. According to [6], Tableau des Signes, a possible ambiguity P/L could exist because the first 1<sup>st</sup> character for L would match the 2<sup>nd</sup> for P.



*Fig. 2: layout and spelling of the inscription*

Of particular interest is the problem concerning the direction of reading of the inscription, i.e. right to left or left to right. In principle, the orientation of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> characters indicate a reading direction of the inscription from right to left as usual in the later known Venetic inscriptions, both archaic (500-475 BC), and ancient (475-300 BC) and recent (300-150 BC). However, for such a very archaic inscription (about 1740 – 1680 BC) and because of possible local different use, such a reading direction could be put in question. In any case, in the following analysis, both the reading directions, i.e. right to

left or left to right, will be taken into account. The inscription is written in continuo, i.e. without separation between the words, as usual in the Venetic inscriptions, and does not show signs of punctuation. The correspondence between the characters of the inscription and the characters of the later alphabet of Este is shown in Fig. 2, which takes into account the ambiguities P/L and Z/D.

Taking into account the above mentioned possible ambiguities and the two possible reading directions, the following spellings of the inscription are theoretically possible:

- |                    |    |                     |                  |
|--------------------|----|---------------------|------------------|
| 1) IIIULUTTNIDII   | or | 2) IIIULUTTNIZII    | (right to left); |
| 3) IIIUPUTTNIDII   | or | 4) IIIUPUTTNIZII    | (right to left); |
| 5) IIZINTTULUIII   | or | 6) IIZINTTUPUIII    | (left to right); |
| 7) IIDINTTULUIII   | or | 8) IIDINTTUPUIII    | (left to right); |
| 9) IIIULUTTUIIDII  | or | 10) IIIULUTTUIIIZII | (right to left); |
| 11) IIIUPUTTUIIDII | or | 12) IIIUPUTTUIIIZII | (right to left); |
| 13) IIZIIUTTULUIII | or | 14) IIZIIUTTUPUIII  | (left to right); |
| 15) IIDIIUTTULUIII | or | 16) IIDINTTUPUIII   | (left to right); |

However, only the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> spellings appear to be meaningful - see later.

The two T next to each other in the middle of the inscription suggest a division at this point, so that the inscription could be read as: II IULUT TNIDII (right to left) or II ZINT TULUI II (left to right) – see later.

Because of the high number of characters I, it seems little probable that the inscription could represent a personal name (name + patronymic), i.e. that of the artisan, owner or user, of the mould. The possible hypothesis that the inscription could represent a relief message on the axe produced by the matrix (2) seems not well supported. In fact, the choice of matrix (2) for holding the inscription was dictated by its flat surface with respect to the rest of the surface and matrix (4) and its horizontal extension and suitable breadth with respect to the matrices (1) and (3).

Thus, according to the right to left reading direction, the inscription could be translated in English as: **Two to achieve success bring!** In fact:

II numeral adjective – **two**.

IULUT appears to be a verbal noun, probably related to O. Ch. Sl. verb ОУЛУЧИТИ in English – to obtain, to gain, to achieve.

TNIZII it could be an ancient form of Imperative of the Gen. Sl. verb NESTI – to bring, i.e. bring! Or DONESI – bring, DUNISI – bring! ( Bgl. Dial. Plovdiv region).

Thus the inscription represents a warning or instruction to the artisan/s on how to prepare the mould. Other loose translations would be: to achieve success, the pieces must be two; to achieve success you must bring the two pieces of the mould together.

According to the left to right reading direction, the inscription could be translated in English as: **This is in two pieces**. In fact:

**II** appears to be a demonstrative pronoun, similar to the Old Ch. Sl. **I** - **this**.

**ZINT** appears to be a verbal form related to the Latin **SUNT** and Old. Ch. Sl. **SONTI** - **they are**. We need to mention that in some Slavic languages/dialects the **O** could become **I** as for example Gen. Sl. **BOG** – God is **BIG** in Ukrainian language and in the Old Bulgarian inscriptions, so **ZINT** can be just a dialectal variant of **SONTI**.

**TULUI** – **TULUI** appears to be related to O. Ch. Sl. word **ТОУЛЪ** – quiver, here in the sense: hollow object- mould. It could be related also to the Etruscan **TUL(AR)** – border stone, here in the sense of **part, region**; the ending **UI** corresponds to the plural of the Blg. Name **DEL, DJAL** – part – **DJALOVE, DJALOVI** – parts.

**II** numeral adjective – **two**.

Also in this case, the inscription represents a warning or instruction to the artisan/s on how to prepare the mould.

It is clear that only one of the proposed translations is the correct one, but in both the cases, the inscription conforms to the above observation by G. Philip [3] p. 190, i.e. a technical indication for the artisan/s of said “institutional workshop” that the mould should be used with its lid. Some moulds from the Bronze Age did have three, or even more parts, so that the indication of the exact amount of pieces for forming the mould was necessary.

## Conclusion

The presence of said inscription in the mould, assuming it as real and not an artefact of an expert forger, permits to formulate several conclusions.

The inscription witnesses that Veneti were present not only in the Egypt Aegean region, as documented earlier by the ethnonym **E-NE-TI-JO** on Linear B tablet [9] p. 543, and by the discovery [10] p. 125, of remarkable parallels between Venetic and Eteo-Cretan languages, but also, as many other peoples, in Egypt itself. The Veneti artisans working with the moulds probably were forming a community like those of said Asiatic functionaries, Canaanites mercenaries and sailors, Cypriots, and Minoan artists. We hope that further excavations will confirm this.

The inscription proves that the Veneti were acquainted with the writings well before the period admitted in the past and at least a millennium earlier than the Phoenician script. This fact should not be considered as surprising because also the Glagolitic script, defined as originating in 9<sup>th</sup> century AD, because of the great amount of phonetic and form matches in common with Linear A and Linear B, appears cf. [11] pp. 99-117, to be much older.

The inscription predates all the known Venetic and Etruscan inscriptions (8th – 2nd century BC) by at least 900 years, so that the hypothesis of Lejeune [7] page 25, para. a), that the Venetic alphabet was mutated by the Etruscan writing appears no longer sustainable.

The fact, that no earlier Venetic inscription has been found in regions known as settled by the Veneti can be explained by admitting that the Veneti, as well as other ancient

peoples, wrote mainly on perishable materials like wood or animal skins, which did not survive. Herodotus testified that goat hides were so often used for writing material in the past that, even in his time, Ionians used to call the paper hide. Herodotus added also that this material was still widely used in non-Greek countries [12] V- 58. The inscription of Tell el-Dab'a survived because, exceptionally, but necessarily, it was written on the limestone of the mould.

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## Povzetek

### *Napis iz TELL EL-DABA*

Prispevek obravnava napis na vdolbini – kalupu za vlivanje iz dobe faraona Nehesija in začetka dobe Hykosov. Kalup so našli pri Tell el-Dab'i v delti Nila verjetno v predantičnem mestu Avaris. Vsi znaki napisa ustezajo venetskimi črkami Este, kar nakazuje, da je napis venetski. Ob upoštevanju branja v obeh smereh imamo dva verjetna prevoda: **Dvoje prinaša uspeh!** ali **Ta je v dveh delih!** Napis naj bi torej predstavljal navodilo izdelovalcu kako pripraviti kalup. Napis je starejši od vseh znanih venetskih in etruščanskih napisov najmanj za 900 let in pričra o prisotnosti Venetov v starem Egiptu.