

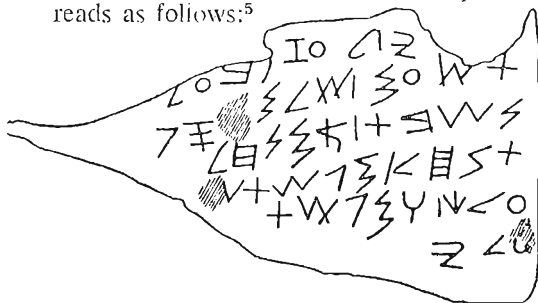
THE BYBLOS SPATULA, AN ANCIENT BRIBE OR PEACE OFFERING

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The Byblos Spatula, a curious triangular object, with its sides approximately twice as long as its single edge was first presented to the scholarly community by M. Dunand in 1938.¹ Since that time, the spatula has generated a wide variety of opinion with regard to its textual interpretation and its physical function. It will be the object of this paper to re-examine the line of interpretation previously pursued to see if there is an interpretation which will leave us on firmer ground.

The spatula was found in Byblos. Byblos is the Greek name given to the Phoenician city of Gebal. The town, located on the Mediterranean Sea north of modern Beirut, was noted in the Bronze Age for its exceptional ship-building activities. During the 10th century B.C., the city came under considerable influence from Egypt.² It is during this period that the spatula is generally dated.³ The spatula was found on the grounds of a temple to the "Baaltis" of Byblos. This particular temple was found to have received a considerable number of votive offerings from Egypt throughout the entire Bronze Age.⁴

With regard to the spatula itself, there are six lines of Phoenician characters inscribed upon it. The text of the spatula reads as follows:⁵



- (1) Line 1. y, Icz (??) cI.
- (2) Line 2. (t)sem, slm, (k)sp.
- (3) Line 3. nsbt, 'mnhl.
- (4) Line 4. tnhl, mpstk.
- (5) Line 5. clk, wmp(?)st.
- (6) Line 6. c(?)ly.

1. M. Dunand, *Bulletin du Musée de Beyrouth (BMB)* 2, 1938, 99-107.
2. Egyptian texts refer specifically to Byblos or Gebal often. Examples may be found in the "Journey of Wen-Amon to Phoenicia" and the Barkel Stele of Tutmose III.
3. W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, Baltimore, 1956, p. 111, 131.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
5. Representation of the spatula is taken from H. Donner-W. Rollig, *Kanaanäische und Aramäische Inschriften*, Weisbaden, 1964, V. III, p. 12. In line 2, Dunand reads a kaph in the area which the present illustration has blank.

Previous Attempts at Interpretation

Line 1. Scholars are generally agreed that despite the fragmentary condition of the first line, the text contains the name of an individual. The initial readable consonant is a yodh. It follows a broken section of the spatula and is either the ending of a hypokoristic name or the first person singular suffix. In the latter case, the broken section may have contained a title of respect. The remainder of the characters represent the name of the individual, unknown to us other than in this text, who is its recipient. To this date, there are no authors who wish to read the lamedh as a lamedh auctoris. The significance of the first line rests in the identification of at least one of the parties who has a definite concern in the content of the remaining text.

Line 2. The difficulty with the textual interpretations begins with this line. There is disagreement with the preferable reading of the consonants and the syntactical construction. While most scholars read the initial word, *ts^cm*, as the cardinal number 90, Albright disagrees in his early judgment on the spatula. He proposed that the first two words were an invocation or declaration of peace. His translation is, "Mayest thou enjoy (?) well-being (peace)."⁶ By attempting to read the first line 'in toto', Albright then saw the final word in the line as the beginning of the message following the ritualistic form of greeting. Albright differed again from the more commonly accepted reading of the text. He found the hollow verb, *sug*, in place of the more accepted *ksp*. He then read the command "Withdraw!" He believed that the spatula was some sort of magical text "in which a litigant ensures himself against being deprived of what is rightfully his."⁷

There are other interpretations which find greater degrees of support. Dunand, who found the spatula, suggested, "90 sicles d'argent nous abandonnons."⁸ This particular reading, however, does violence to the syntax. The 90 shekels and the silver find themselves separated by the verbal form, "we abandon". Torczyner agreed that the number ninety is correct and that the shekels are implied, but he also found himself incapable of dealing adequately with the *slm* in its present context. He reconstructed the first two lines in the following manner. "What is incumbent upon me (to pay) Azar-ba^cal is 90 shekels. Pay the silver (which) thou hast taken!"⁹ Torczyner's reconstruction is based upon a conjecture as to what the first word must have been. Still more closely consistent

6. W. F. Albright, BASOR 73, 1939, p. 12.

7. *Ibid.*

8. M. Dunand, BMB 2, 1938, pp. 99-107.

9. H. Torczyner, Leshonenu XIV, 1946, p. 165.

with the present state of the text is Dupont-Sommer. Not wishing to violently disrupt the present state of the text, he translates, "Quatre-vingt-dix (sicles) comme paiement en argent."¹⁰ Dupont-Sommer is reading a noun from the piel verbal form understood as a type of recompense. It still remains questionable whether payment is the correct interpretation for *slm*.

It appears to this author that the crucial line for the interpretation of the spatula occurs precisely here. Initially, the interpretation pointed to a statement of blessing followed by some specific demand requiring a particular act of the individual addressed in line 1. The later interpretations read a description of the matter which accompanies the message and the spatula, namely 90 shekels of silver. It is along this latter line of reasoning that the most precise results will occur. However, the crux of the interpretation rests in the positioning of the word *slm*. Were this word in the first position on the line, the former thought would have been the most beneficial. The reading would be relatively simple. *Slm* would then be a declaration of a blessing or peace upon the recipient. Yet if we are to assume that the reading is to be made in context, then the line of reasoning followed by Dupont-Sommer is in order. It is apparent that the two words 90, *ts^cm*, and silver, *ksp*, could syntactically be juxtaposed. Since they are separated by the *slm*, it is possible that the *slm* has a distinct and close relationship to the silver in a descriptive sense. With Dupont-Sommer, this author sees that we are involved in a transaction involving a large amount of money. However, as to the final interpretation of the line, we shall reserve judgment until the remainder of the text is clear. For the moment, we shall leave the line with the understanding that 90 shekels of silver are changing hands and that the spatula is in some way a lasting remembrance of this event.

Line 3. If the second line provoked diversity of opinion, the third line opens the ranges of possibility even further. The interpretation centers around the reading of the initial word, *nsbt*. The understanding of this word was the focal point in Albright's two separate theses regarding the spatula. He initially believed the spatula had to do with a ceremony of reconciliation. To this end, he read, "Let us make an end."¹¹ Some four years later, Albright was continuing to base his understanding of the text upon the translation of this word. Citing the text in Proverbs 18:18, *midyanim yašbit haggoral ubēn azumim yaprid*, Albright believed that the spatula was used in the casting of the lot. Reading a hiphil

10. A. Dupont-Somer, *Archiv Orientalní*, 1949, p. 161.

11. W. F. Albright, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

cohortative, from *sbt* -cease, desist, he offered the translation, "Let us settle!"¹² While both translations are clearly acceptable, Albright is still left with a somewhat disjointed rendition of the text.

A preferable reading of the text would be based upon the Aramaic root *nsb*. In such a case, we find a simple verbal form in the second person singular referring to the completion of a certain act. The first word would then be translated, "You have received." This translation is clearly preferable on the ground that it describes the completion of the line of thought in line 2. The presence of the spatula remains as a continuing sign that the 90 shekels has been received by the addressed individual. The thought now proceeds to the statement of the conditions under which this silver has been sent.

The Remainder of Line 3-Line 6.

The remainder of the spatula is clear in its intent and meaning. Despite Torczyner's extensive attempt to read the spatula as a commercial text dealing with the harvest of flax,¹³ the judgment of scholars is fairly well in agreement concerning the remaining text. We encounter the recitation of a stipulation expressed in a conditional clause. In the classic form utilizing the conditional *'m* together with the infinite absolute of the verb, we may read, "If you do indeed take possession, thy property shall be thine and my property shall be mine."

Hence the entire spatula would read as follows:

1. ---y to Oz---al
2. 90 (shekels) as a of silver
3. you have received. If you do indeed
4. take possession, thy property
5. shall be thine, and my property
6. shall be mine.

Interpretation of the Spatula.

The question still remains, just what does the spatula mean. Obermann, on the basis of the kind of statement in Judges 11:24, believed that we were dealing with a political document.¹⁴ That text reads, "Will you not possess what Chemosh your god gives you to possess? And all that the Lord our God has dispossessed before us we will possess."

12. W. F. Albright, *BASOR* 90, 1943, p. 36, and *JAOS* 67, p. 158.

13. H. Torczyner, *op. cit.*, pp. 158-165.

14. J. Obermann, *JBL* 58, 1939, p. 229ff.

The payment of silver is then to be understood as money exacted under some form of contribution. His argument is well marshalled and supported by the evidence of the times. Documents of particular significance were placed for safe-keeping in the temples near the gods. We may assume that the spatula recorded a transaction designed to cover an extended period of time. The use of bronze instead of a sherd insured its remaining intact for a protracted period of time. That it was placed in the temple of the "Baaltis" also points to the goddess' functioning as a confirming witness to the fulfillment of the expressed conditions. The only problem which remains is to identify the precise nature of the contribution or payment which is expressed.

The crux of the interpretation still rests in the juxtaposition of the words *slm* and *ksp*. It is clear that the payment is to be understood in a specific and technical sense. The silver is not merely silver, but silver understood in terms of its over-riding quality of falling into the category of *slm*. *Slm* therefore is a noun in the construct state, defining precisely the nature and function of the payment. *Slm ksp* must be understood as a "terminus technicus" for a particular transaction of silver.

A distinct possibility for interpreting this "terminus technicus" comes from certain texts of the middle Assyrian period. Herein we find *slm* used with the connotations of a bribe or offering for a specific purpose. "*Sulmānu* is well known in the meaning of 'gift, present.'¹⁵ The offering of a *šulmānu* was designed to gain a particular advantage in the middle Assyrian texts in certain lawsuits. The *šulmānu* may have hurried your case to be decided, or indeed even caused a certain number of cases to be turned into judgments in favor of the giver.¹⁶ The *šulmānu* was clearly "calculated to gain special consideration or influence in important circles on behalf of the donor."¹⁷ Finkelstein gives us a paraphrase of the middle Assyrian *šulmānu* arrangement which bears a striking similarity to our text. He cites, "'Payment, to be made by O to B. This payment is a gratuity. When O's affair (in court) has been attended to by B, O shall pay B the gratuity and cancel his tablet,' or, 'When B

15. J. Finkelstein, JAOS 72, 1952, p. 77. Cf. also W. von Soden, LTBA, V, II, No. 2i, p. 276, and 3iv:11-13.

16. Finkelstein, however, finds no evidence in the middle Assyrian texts that a judgment was ever altered because of a *šulmānu*. He believes that the *šulmānu* was offered in order that a particular case would be heard. Hence the poor who could not afford or offer a *šulmānu* would thereby be discriminated against.

17. Finkelstein, *Ibid.*, p. 78.

has attended to O's affair (in court), he shall receive his gratuity.'"¹⁸

Further support for such an understanding and use of *slm* is found in Isaiah 1:23. "Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves. Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts." The Hebrew word for gifts here is *šalmonim*. Such an understanding of the *slm* in our text is now possible. The silver is *slm* silver; that is, it is designed to obtain a particular benefit to the donor. In short, the Byblos Spatula is the record of a bribe or prescribed offering. The acceptance of the *slm ksp*, the bribe silver, insures the right of one individual to his property which now can not be taken, legally or otherwise, by the party accepting the amount specified.

Our spatula now appears to be a most relevant text. It speaks to the problem of the offering of the bribe, a consistent problem throughout the area. What is further interesting about our text is the large sum of money involved. Such a quantity of money would most likely have been paid by a vassal to an overlord. It is possible that the spatula represents a bribe or gift to a new king to refrain from expanding his territories. Such an interpretation would also allow us to explain the location where the object was found and why it was recorded on such durable materials. Whether the object is a duplicate of the original or is the original itself is not clear. It remains a matter of indecision whether the overlord is he who placed the spatula in the temple of Byblos or the vassal who made a duplicate to insure his protection by his goddess. Suffice to say, that among the remnants of man, yet another has achieved a type of immortality through the offering of a bribe.

18. Finkelstein, *Ibid.*, p. 80.