

Oldest piece of writing ever found in Israel identified on ancient shard of pottery

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Early alphabetic inscription on a White Slip II rim sherd (figure by J. Dye, Austrian Academy of Sciences). Credit: *Antiquity* (2021). DOI: 10.15184/aqy.2020.157

A team of researchers from the Austrian Academy of Science's, Austrian Archaeological Institute, and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's Institute of Archeology, has identified a piece of writing on a shard of pottery unearthed in 2018 at the Lachish archaeological site as the oldest piece of writing ever found in Israel. In their paper published in Cambridge University Press's, *Antiquity*, the group describes studying

the writing and what they learned about it.

Back in 2018, a team of archeologists working at the Lachish archaeological dig [site](#) found a shard of pottery with some writing on it—but it was not until recently that study of the text on the shard was conducted. Prior work showed that the shard was approximately 3,500 years old—a time when the site where it was found was part of a Canaanite center, which in turn was part of a city called Lachish, a city mentioned in the Bible—it was destroyed by the Israelites after their exodus from Egypt. After that, it was rebuilt, only to be destroyed again in the 7th [century](#) BCE.

The finding is considered to be significant because it helps to fill in a gap between early testimonies of scripts and the development of Semitic alphabets in the area. The researchers note that prior research has shown that early alphabets existed in the area as early as the 19th century BCE but then there is no mention of them in [historical records](#) until the 13th or 12th centuries—this new script represents an alphabet between them.

The researchers have been able to transcribe some of the writing on the shard—some of the letters appear to be forms of daled, ayin and bet, which combine to create the word "eved," which in Hebrew means slave. Another bit of script appears to spell out the word for nectar. The researchers note that prior evidence has shown that all of the alphabets created around the world got their start with hieroglyphs. The writing they found represents an early part of the process that led to an alphabet. They also note that it proves that the [alphabet](#) that arose in the Levant did not come from Egypt.

More information: Felix Höflmayer et al. Early alphabetic writing in the ancient Near East: the 'missing link' from Tel Lachish, *Antiquity* (2021). [DOI: 10.15184/aqy.2020.157](https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2020.157)

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