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FOR RELEASE December 1, 1970

The discovery of eight manuscripts several centuries older than the Dead Sea Scrolls was announced today by Mr. Yaquob Owais, director of the Department of Antiquities of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, jointly with Dr. William H. Brownlee of Claremont Graduate School and Dr. George E. Mendenhall of the University of Michigan.

The documents have yielded a previously unknown writing system in a language which is undeciphered and unidentified. Five are written in ink on leather, and three are incised with a sharp instrument on a crude parchment. The writing system which seems to be alphabetic consists of over 40 signs, and cannot be a Semitic language, despite the similarity of many of the signs to ancient Phoenician and Hebrew, the scholars said. This is their report:

The relationships of the newly found documents, to judge from the writing system, point toward the poorly known languages of Southern Anatolia, Caria, Lycia, and Lydian, on the one hand, but there are also distinct similarities to inscriptions which have been found in Crete, Sicily, and Italy. The relation to the most archaic Etruscan is particularly striking, and therefore the writings are also closely related to the most archaic Greek.

The new documents were purchased for the Department of Antiquities of Jordan by Dr. Brownlee, CGS professor of religion, at Jerusalem in June, 1966, from a Jordanian citizen who believed them to have come from an ancient site in the district of Hebron. The documents were tightly rolled and extremely dry, dirty, and brittle; it took four or five days of intensive humidification before Dr. Brownlee was able to unroll them and prepare them for infra-red photography.

The similarity of the writing to ancient Carian and Etruscan was first recognized by Dr. George E. Mendenhall, then director of the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem. Having been taken into partnership by Dr. Brownlee for their study, he has now nearly completed a computer tabulation of the distribution and context of each character of the alphabet as a first step toward the analysis of the language and eventual decipherment. The computer work was carried out by Mr. Stanley Mendenhall.



In the absence of any knowledge of the archaeological context of the finds, any dating can only be tentative. However, on the basis of similarities of the writing system to inscriptions from other regions which seem definitely related, it is difficult to date them later than the seventh century B.C., and they could well be a century or two earlier. Since it is known that Carian mercenary soldiers from southern Anatolia were serving in various parts of the Eastern Mediterranean in the 7th century B.C., it is conceivable that the documents stem from this people. Yet there are contrasts to the Carian inscriptions from nearby Egypt. These suggest rather that we may have an indigenous writing system, recently borrowed from the Phoenician and adapted to a foreign language with a radically different phonetic structure.

The people which meets the requirements is the Philistines, and it is entirely possible that after several generations of archaeological work, we finally have recovered some documents of the Philistine language. The similarity of the writing system to certain archaic inscriptions from Crete would support this identification, since the Old Testament prophet Amos derived the Philistines from Caphtor, the ancient name for Crete. At present nothing can be said about the content of the documents, though there is a strong probability that they are funerary inscriptions of some sort. The documents have a strong formulaic flavor, with a number of repetitions of the same sequences of signs. Lycian and Etruscan inscriptions known also deal with funerary and burial concerns more than any other subject matter.

Ancient manuscripts are nothing new to Dr. Brownlee, who was associated with the first discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, while a fellow at the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem Palestine in 1947-48. Dr. Mendenhall excavated the oldest known North Arabic inscriptions in a cistern just north of Amman in 1966, and is also preparing to publish a decipherment of a group of very ancient Syllabic inscriptions from Byblos which date probably to about 2000 B.C., and are in a language which has definite connections with old South Arabic as well as with later Phoenician.

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