

TAITA, KING OF PALISTIN: CA. 950–900 BCE?

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Taita—Maximum Range ca. 1100–900 BCE

The articles by Hawkins, Kohlmeyer, and Harrison in NEA 72/4 are centered on Taita, the Luwian-writing king of Palistin in western Syria, probably of Sea Peoples' or outright Philistine stock (Hawkins 2009: 171). It is certain that Taita reigned after the collapse of the Hittite empire in the early twelfth century and before the political fragmentation of western Syria in the late tenth–early ninth centuries (Hawkins 2009: 170). Most of the evidence published so far—¹⁴C measurements, stratigraphy, pottery typology, and the style of the reliefs and Luwian hieroglyphs—appears by and large unable to refine this broad dating.¹ Hawkins was at first for dating Taita to the eleventh century,² but now prefers somewhere between the eleventh and the tenth centuries.³ In the following lines I seek to underscore the advantages from a historical point of view of the latest possible dating within the 1100–900 time-span.

A Scenario for Pinpointing Taita to ca. 950–900 BCE

Since first learning about Taita in 2004, it seemed to me that his kingdom and Luwian writing cannot be understood as a stand-alone phenomenon. Nor would linking Taita's realm to the beginning of the 'Dark Age' in the twelfth century make much sense.⁴ At least, because he is not mentioned by Tiglath-Pileser I, Taita may be dated with reasonable certainty to after ca. 1075 BCE. Yet opting for the rest of the eleventh century would leave him out of any known context in western Syria, as noted—a sudden flicker of Luwian writing between two segments of documentary darkness. A setting towards the end of the 'Dark Age', i.e. towards the end of the tenth century, as long as it is not excluded by new evidence, appears to fit the historical picture best (Sass 2005: 183). Twelfth-century Sea Peoples' migrants in western Syria would have evolved by the tenth century into a regional power. Lacking their own manifestations of statehood and monumentality, they borrowed them (script included) from the closest model—apparently Carchemish and Melid.

¹ The three ¹⁴C measurements from the Aleppo temple—1110–1100 and 1090–1000 at 68.2%, and 1130–970 at 95.4%—that Kohlmeyer (2008: note 12; 2009: 198) invoked as supporting an eleventh-century dating, are taken from wooden beams, the least reliable of all plant remains in view of the 'old wood effect,' and may serve as no more than a *terminus post quem*. On the dating of the Ta'yinat levels, I follow Hawkins (2009: 170) that it is still "largely a matter of guesswork, lacking in firmly established points." Luwian palaeography "signals a date somewhere between the eleventh and tenth century" (Hawkins 2009: 171). On dating Taita's reliefs see note 6.

² In public lectures; see also personal communication quoted in Kohlmeyer (2004; 2005: 61; 2008: 124; 2009: 198); Lawler (2009: 23); and Harrison (2009a: 173).

³ See Hawkins (2009: 171 and *passim*). Once he wrote "ca. 1100–1000 B.C.E." (2009: 172), perhaps a proofing error?

⁴ Before the tenth century, Carchemish and Melid are the only confirmed polities in southern Anatolia and northern Syria with none in western Syria [for a summary, see Sass (2005: 90–92)]. Setting Taita in the twelfth century, assuming moreover "direct ancestral links to the royal [Hittite] dynasty" [thus Harrison (2009a: 171; 2009b: 187)], is doubtful in view of Taita's apparent Philistine roots, besides the ensuing 300-year gap that would separate him from the next Luwian-writing kings in western Syria.

This scenario makes Taita's realm a forerunner, possibly the direct predecessor, of the kingdoms Patin, Arpad, and Hamath, founded shortly before or after 900 BCE.⁵

Restoration of the Aleppo Temple

Consequently, could Kohlmeyer's two Iron Age restorations of the Aleppo temple (2009: 200–1), first under Taita, then at about 900 BCE, actually be one and the same? If I understand the published data correctly, the Taita reliefs and those reliably dated by Kohlmeyer to ca. 900 BCE (i.e. the 'pedestal wall') are found in similar architectural-stratigraphical contexts and are sharing numerous characteristics.⁶ Does Kohlmeyer's notion of two renovations rest largely, or exclusively, on Hawkins' erstwhile eleventh-century dating of Taita?⁷ If Taita is moved down to the late tenth century, the single restoration would have taken place not long before the kingdom of Bit Agusi/Arpad was founded.⁸ The cause of the fire that destroyed the still unfinished temple is not known; it could have been related to this political change, but there are obviously other hypothetical explanations.

Aleppo and Ain Dara

The link between Aleppo and Ain Dara in the early Iron Age is now well established and well dated, and the notion of earlier, Empire-period sculptures at both sites is a distinct possibility (Kohlmeyer 2008; see also Sass 2005: 92, 183, who dates them to the Empire period and/or tenth century). The similarities between the monuments from the two neighboring sites are so marked that the assumption of a common Iron Age sponsor seems better-founded than any hypothetical alternative.

Taita on His Ancient Near Eastern Background

If accepted, the late-tenth-century dating of Taita would make him a contemporary of Shoshenq I or Osorkon I in Egypt and of Suhi II or Katuwa in Carchemish, lending an appropriate setting to the mention of Carchemish and of the Egyptian horse trade in the second Aleppo inscription.⁹ Taita would also have been coeval with one or more of Assurnasirpal's predecessors in Assyria; yet, although most of these Assyrian kings have turned their interest westwards, Palistin is not mentioned in their inscriptions; nor for that matter is Carchemish. The question of how all this

⁵ Labarnu, king of Patin, and Agusi, king of Arpad, are mentioned by Assurnasirpal; Irhuleni king of Hamath is referred to by Shalmaneser III. Luwian writing is documented in Patin and Hama.

⁶ "The shape of the [Taita] block... is comparable to the later reliefs of the 'pedestal' wall" and "The style of the inserted [Taita] relief... is comparable with the later figures of the pedestal wall" (Kohlmeyer 2009: 197). "The basalt reliefs on the renovated pedestal wall encompass a variety of styles, but were surely executed at the same time, during this final stage in the temple's life. It is clear that different artists, some traditional and others more progressive, were involved... To date this last renovation phase, we have to look at the work of the most progressive of these artists... [with] strong similarities to the Karkamish... reliefs, dated to... Suhi and Katuwa... around 900 B.C.E." (Kohlmeyer 2009: 201–2).

⁷ On ¹⁴C data, see note 1.

⁸ At one point, Hawkins too may have contemplated a similar situation: "Now we would have to envisage... hieroglyphic *Palistin*- shifting to cuneiform *pat(t)in*- with the added proviso that the two forms might be nearly contemporary" (2009: 172).

⁹ Cf. Lawler (2009: 24) and Kohlmeyer (2009: 199), who both quote J. D. Hawkins, personal communication.

links up with the history and archaeology of the southern Levant, obviously of great interest, is beyond the scope of the present note.

Within the 1100–900 BCE range, the historical logic (as long as it is not modified by future discoveries) seems to pinpoint Taita to the second half of the tenth century, perhaps closer to its end.

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