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Chapter One

Rabbinic Tales of Roman Origin
Rabbinic Tales of Roman Origin

By: Sarit Kattan Gribetz

What stories do we tell about our own origins? What tales do we recount about the origins of others? What happens when our narratives – those about ourselves, and those about others – merge?

Around the year 27 BCE, Livy began composing his history of Rome, *Ab Urbe Condita*. Because of the work’s great length, only some sections of the text have survived, among them Book 1, in which Livy recounts the stories of Rome’s origins.

Livy opens with Aeneas fleeing Troy and founding Lavinium in Latium. He then recounts the birth of Romulus and Remus to Rhea Silvia, a Vestal virgin; Romulus’ murder of his twin brother and his subsequent founding of Rome at the Palatine Hill; the institution of the city’s laws and governing structures; and the rape of the Sabine women.

Livy’s account includes the appointment of Numa as the next king of Rome, the

![Republican Fasti Antiates Maiores, 84-46 BCE; Palazzo Massimo Alle Terme, ed. Adriano La Regin, 1998. (University of Chicago)]
consecration of the Temple of Janus and Rome’s priestly offices, Numa’s calendrical reforms, and so on. Livy tells these stories of origin in part to demonstrate Rome’s greatness – he writes in his prologue that his recollections of Rome’s past are “a source of satisfaction to celebrate to the best of my ability the history of the greatest nation on earth.”

The first-century poet Ovid, too, wrote of Roman origins. Rather than composing a chronological prose history starting in the distant past and proceeding to more recent times, though, Ovid anchored moments of early Roman history to dates in the annually recurring Roman year. His work on the Roman calendar, titled Fasti (“festivals”), is organized by month and day. Each date commemorates a different moment in the founding and development of Rome.

Ovid’s Fasti begins with an ode to Janus, after whom the month of January is named. We read of Janus’ two heads, one looking back into the past while the other peers ahead to the future, and this description recalls the important role that Janus and his temple played in Rome’s early history. The month of March commemorates the god Mars, his rape of Rhea Silvia, followed by her conception of Romulus and Remus, “her belly plumped with celestial weight.”

The month in which we currently find ourselves, April, occupies an important place in Ovid’s work, too. It was on April 21 that, in antiquity, the festival of the Parilia took place, commemorating the day of Rome’s foundation as a city (which Ovid calls Rome’s birthday) as well as recalling the region’s pastoral past. Ovid begins his account of the day with an ode to the god Pales, the patron of sheep and shepherds – “Night is gone, dawn lifts. The Parilia calls me, not vainly… Gentle Pales, favor my song of pastoral rites, if I honor your deeds with my service” – and he concludes by invoking Rome’s origins and it subsequently unparalleled power: “A city rises (who could then have believed

The month of April from Vatican Library cod. Barberini lat. 2154, likely produced originally in the Codex-Calendar of 354 or a related work from that century. (Wikimedia Commons)
Livy and Ovid were not the only Romans who wrote about the origins of the empire in which they lived. The Jewish rabbis of late antiquity – also inhabitants of the Roman Empire – told their own tales about Roman origins. Just as Ovid embedded his history of Rome into a calendrical framework, the rabbis whose voices are recorded in the Palestinian Talmud also used a list of Roman festivals to tell their own version of Roman history.

The rabbinic tractate Avodah Zarah, devoted to regulating social and financial interactions between Jews and gentiles, includes a list of Roman festivals. The list, which incorporates public and private festivals, appears in the Mishnah to clarify the days on which Jews were forbidden from engaging in business transactions with their gentile neighbors (m. Avod. Zar. 1:3). We might view this list, however, also as a rabbinic version of an abbreviated Roman calendar, and, in its interpretation in the Palestinian Talmud (y. Avodah Zarah 1.2, 39c), as the impetus for recording rabbinic stories about Rome.

A fourth-century mosaic from Hamat Tiberias depicts the sun god, Helios, adorning the floor of a synagogue in the Galilee. Photo by Sarit Kattan Gribetz.
For example, in his explanation of the Kalends of January, the Roman New Year, Rav explains that, when the first human, Adam, realized that the days began growing longer after the winter solstice, Adam exclaimed: “恧תא, meaning καλὸν dies, how beautiful is the day!” Adam declares, in a combination of Greek and Latin, that the increased sunlight following the winter solstice is miraculous, and that is why, according to this rabbinic narrative, the Romans call the first day of January the “Kalends.” In this rabbinic story, it is not Numa, a figure from Roman history, but rather Adam, a figure from the Jewish Bible, who established January as the start of the Roman year.

In the Palestinian Talmud, the festival of Kratesis, too, is said to commemorate a series of events in which biblical figures, rather than Roman kings, get credit for the origins of Rome. We learn that King Solomon’s marriage to an Egyptian princess caused the angel Michael to stick a reed into the sea, pulling up muddy alluvium out of which the city of Rome was founded. Thereafter, Jeroboam’s sin of erecting two golden calves for his people to worship, and subsequent sins of idolatry committed by later Israelite kings, precipitated the birth of Remus and Romulus and the later inauguration of Numa as king of Rome.

In the Roman coin below, issued during Emperor Antoninus Pious’ reign in the mid-second century CE, a personified Tiber holds a reed into the river, celebrating Rome’s watery origins. The Palestinian Talmud’s story inverts this Roman myth when it describes the angel Michael placing a reed into the sea. The narrative thus claims that Rome emerged from the sea as divine punishment for King Solomon’s descent into idolatry, rather than out of an act of generosity from Rome’s gods. In doing so, however, it also credits – or blames – the Jews for the foundation of the city of Rome and the expansion of its empire.

Ancient rabbis, as did Livy and Ovid, thus used these stories to construct and cultivate
their own identities – as Romans, as rabbis, or as both – through engagement with Rome’s distant past.

One of the most fascinating dimensions of these stories is their merging of Roman and rabbinic history. In the rabbinic texts, the Roman New Year, and perhaps the Roman solar calendar more generally, was founded not – as Ovid posited – by the Roman kings Romulus and Numa, but rather by the biblical hero Adam, who observed the sun like an astronomer. The festival marking Rome’s expansion into eastern territories does not only commemorate Rome’s defeat of the Seleucids in 190 BCE nor Augustus’ victory at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE, but also recalls the sins of Israelite kings, whose idolatrous practices are presented as the true causes for Rome’s founding.

In his prologue, Livy explains that “The special and salutary benefit of the study of history is to behold evidence of every sort of behavior set forth on a splendid memorial; from it you may select for yourself and for your country what to emulate, from it what to avoid, whether basely begun or basely concluded.” The rabbinic stories function in a similar fashion. They present their ancient Jewish audiences with a version of history meant to suggest how, as rabbinic Jews, they ought to act, and the behaviors they must avoid as they live within a Roman world.

Through telling these stories, rabbis made a place for themselves in Roman history and within the Roman calendar, simultaneously resisting Roman imperial rule while participating in Roman discourses about the empire’s origins. These rabbinic narratives thus articulate a unique Roman-rabbinic identity, which claims that Jews were central to Rome’s founding, but bemoans rather than celebrates Rome’s power.

Sarit Kattan Gribetz is Assistant Professor of Theology at Fordham University.

For Further Reading:


Peter Schäfer, “Jews and Gentiles in Yerushalmi Avodah Zarah,” in The Talmud


Chapter Two

Hebrew as the Language behind the World’s First Alphabet?
By: Douglas Petrovich

What is the language behind the world’s first alphabet? For over 150 years, scholars have studied the world’s first alphabetic script, the second millennium BCE Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions, found at Serabit el-Khadim in the southern reaches of the Sinai Peninsula. While surprisingly few scholars have invested themselves into the narrow field of the proto-consonantal script, virtually all of them have agreed that this previously undeciphered script is Semitic. But which Semitic language remains unresolved.

Over 100 years ago, the great Egyptologist Sir Alan Gardiner convinced the majority of scholars that this script consisted of a number of Middle Egyptian hieroglyphs, that is alphabetic pictographs that represented consonants, using an acrophonic system. Let me illustrate how this works. If English had no script, and we were to create one for it using acrophony, we could draw a picture of a feather, so that whenever an English speaker sees it, he/she would pronounce the f sound. The pronunciation of the n letter could be made by drawing a nose, and so on.

If we were to draw a feather and a nose together, this would spell any word that uses a combination of those...
consonants in succession, such as ‘fan,’ ‘fin,’ or ‘fun.’ The difficulty that comes with the world’s oldest alphabet is that no vowels were included, and that the text was written in continuous script, meaning that there was no break between words, and no punctuation. Thus, the sentence ‘Lend me your ears!’ would have been written LNDMYRS. Only one $r$ would appear for the $r$ in ‘your’ and the $r$ in ‘ears,’ because they refused to write the same consonant twice in succession if no differing consonant intervened.
Over recent decades, some of the letters of the original pictographic alphabet have been recognized universally as making a certain consonantal sound, such as the drawing of a house to represent the letter \( b \), since the word for ‘house’ – \textit{bayit} - begins with \( b \) in virtually all Western Semitic languages. Other letters have remained in dispute, such as the fish-pictograph, which some scholars have identified as the letter \( d \), and others have called the letter \( s \).

I have come to believe that Hebrew is the language behind the proto-consonantal script. I came to this understanding by weighing the options systematically and allowing the context of various inscriptions to determine which option is correct. How I came to know that the inscriptions were written in Hebrew is completely accidental. As I was studying the archaeology of the Levant in the Iron Age, I fell into evidence for Israelite presence in Egypt during the middle of the 15th century BCE, the time when—according to biblical history—the Israelite exodus from Egypt supposedly took place.

I then followed a long archaeological trail that led to the identification of what I believe are Semitic Israelites who were living at an important site in Egypt, at the time when biblical chronology indicates that Jacob would have moved his family to Egypt (1876 BCE). This trail included the identification of several biblical figures of that generation, as inscribed on Middle Egyptian inscriptions of the 19th century BCE, which will be detailed in my second book. One of these individuals actually composed a number of inscribed stelae at Serabit el-Khadim, the site of many annual mining expeditions to extract turquoise.
At the bottom of these stelae, he often drew himself seated on a donkey, with his Egyptian attendant to the left and a Semitic child of varying heights, which changed from year to year on the stelae, to the right. Above one drawing, he inscribed his own name and official office. Above another drawing, he named the others. Above the drawing on one of the last of the stelae that he inscribed (Sinai 115), he added a mostly hieroglyphic caption that includes one Canaanite syllabic (or ‘syllable’) and one proto-consonantal letter.

This is the oldest attested proto-consonantal letter in the world, dating to Year 18 of King Amenemhat III (ca. 1842 BCE). The oldest inscription completely inscribed in the proto-consonantal script (Sinai 377)—which derives from Wadi Nasb, the nearby water source for mining expeditions to Serabit—dates to only two years later. According to my reading, the caption on Sinai 115 reads, “Six Levantines, Hebrews of Bethel, the beloved.”

This reading of Sinai 115’s caption thus confirms that the engraver whom I previously had identified as a biblical figure from the 19th century BCE is Hebrew. The reference to Bethel is not surprising, because, according to biblical history, that site was the hometown of Jacob when Joseph was taken into captivity, and when Jacob relocated his family to Egypt. Sinai 115 also moves back into time by hundreds of years the oldest attested reference to the Israelite/Hebrew people.

Left: Sinai 375a photograph. Right: Sinai 375a drawing.
Of the 15 proto-consonantal inscriptions that were full enough for me to translate, five were composed during Egypt’s Middle Kingdom, while the other ten were composed during the New Kingdom. Interestingly, the Middle Kingdom inscriptions are almost completely optimistic and positive in their tone, while the New Kingdom inscriptions are almost completely pessimistic and negative in their tone. The number of original alphabetic letters is 22, which conflicts with the long-held conjecture that originally there were 27 letters, probably the result of incorrect extrapolation back from Ugaritic, a Semitic language with more than 22 consonants.

These findings are discussed in my book, *The World’s Oldest Alphabet: Hebrew as the Language of the Proto-Consonantal Script* (Carta: Jerusalem, 2016). According to my new readings, three of the proto-consonantal Hebrew inscriptions contain references to biblical figures: Asenath (Sinai 376), Ahisamach (Sinai 375a), and Moses (Sinai 361). Each of these names is used of only one individual in the entire Hebrew Bible, unlike more commonly used names, such as Joshua.

Asenath is the wife of Joseph (Gen 41:45), and Sinai 376 probably refers to her posthumously, since she was born over 130 years before it was composed, and because it refers to the ‘house of the vineyard of Asenath’ honorifically. Ahisamach is the father of Oholiab (Exod 31:6), who was one of the two men reportedly assigned to construct the Israelite tabernacle. Sinai 375a designates Ahisamach with the office of Overseer of Minerals (?), probably signifying that he was responsible for the mineralogical work related to the acquisition of turquoise.
Moses, who needs little or no explanation, is the man attributed with having led the Israelites out of Egyptian captivity (Exodus 12). The Hebrew author of Sinai 361 complained that their bound servitude had lingered, then stated that Moses—whose name appears in the emphatic position—then provoked astonishment, and that this was a year of astonishment, due to Baalath (the female consort of the storm-god deity, and who in Egypt was identified with Hathor).

The thesis of my book challenges many longstanding theoretical constructs that have been created in the fields of biblical and ancient Near Eastern historical studies, such as the Documentary Hypothesis and its derivatives. The thesis also argues against models of Israelite origins suggesting that they migrated from Transjordan, or arose from among pastoralists already present in Canaan’s western highlands.

Despite the strong opposition that already has come against the claims in my book, I felt responsible to publish these findings, fully expecting that over the coming decades, time will prove them able to withstand the rigors of scholarly criticism.

*Douglas Petrovich teaches in the history department at Wilfred Laurier University.*
Chapter Three

A Response to Douglas Petrovich’s “Hebrew as the Language behind the World’s First Alphabet?”
A Response to Douglas Petrovich’s “Hebrew and the Language behind the World’s First Alphabet?”

By: Alan Millard

In his piece for *ANE Today*, Douglas Petrovich claims some of the thirty or so inscriptions engraved on stone monuments around the Egyptian turquoise mines at Serābīṭ el-Khâdim in western Sinai mention biblical figures. The following comments refer only to what he has written there.

In 1916 the Egyptologist Alan Gardiner deduced the signs belonged to an early form of the alphabet. The letters, he said, were ‘clearly modeled on Egyptian hieroglyphs’ (not ‘consisted of a number of middle Egyptian hieroglyphs’), each used acrophonically, as Petrovich explains. It is essential to be aware that almost every one of these Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions is broken or damaged, making the identification of signs and any attempt at translation tentative at best.

The summary Petrovich gives of his work offers little that can support his assertions. He declares that he came to believe that Hebrew is the language ‘behind the proto-consonantal script ... by weighing the options systematically and allowing the context of various inscriptions to determine which option is correct’, without further explanation.
A glance at his Figure 6 shows how dubious his process is. In that text, Sinai 375a, the writing seems to run from the right edge of the stone around the top and down the left side, with some letters below the first few. Petrovich finds the biblical name Ahisamach by reading the first three letters from right to left, then the three below them. Other letters stand in a vertical column with a couple of hieroglyphs among them. The arrangement is odd! No words are cited to prove the texts are in Hebrew. In fact, Hebrew and Canaanite written in consonantal script may be indistinguishable.

Inscribing the stele Sinai 115, we are told, the official responsible ‘added a mostly hieroglyphic caption that includes one Canaanite syllabic (or ‘syllable’) and one proto-consonantal letter’, which means the text contained three forms of writing mixed together! The term ‘Canaanite syllabic letter’ is contradictory, for the sign would either be a syllable, such as ba, gu, or a letter, such as b, g. The terms ‘proto-consonantal script’ and ‘proto-consonantal letter’ are also meaningless, for a consonant is not a letter but a sound; a ‘proto-consonant’ would be, if anything, the origin of a consonant.

One statement is ill-informed: ‘The number of original alphabetic letters is 22, which conflict with the long-held conjecture that originally there were 27 letters, probably the result of incorrect extrapolation back from Ugaritic, a Semitic language with more than 22 consonants’. This displays ignorance of the study of Semitic languages from the 19th century onwards. That Hebrew
reduced the number of consonants written was demonstrated through analysis of all then-known Semitic languages well before Ugaritic was discovered. The discovery of Ugaritic and further study of Babylonian dialects and Egyptian writings of West Semitic names supports it.

Petrovitch’s blog does not offer any grounds for accepting his ideas. Many scholars have written about the Proto-Sinaitic inscriptions, some examining the originals themselves, none agreeing completely on their decipherment, for anyone to present such astonishing claims for his research to the general public in a book as Petrovitch has done, seems irresponsible. His work should be submitted to rigorous scholarly examination first, lest it prove as misleading as some other attempts to read the Proto-Sinaitic texts. If it meets approval, then is the time to publicize it.

It is no pleasure to write a negative review; many years of reading ancient inscriptions inculcates a skepticism about translations presented as facts which carry far-reaching implications – the initial announcements about the tablets from Ebla in which Biblical places were allegedly found - are a warning example.

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Chapter Four

Potent Potable of the Past: Beer and Brewing in Mesopotamia
In ancient Mesopotamia, people knew how to appreciate a good beer. They appreciated their beer often and often in large quantities. They sang songs and wrote poetry about beer. Sometimes they got drunk and threw caution to the wind.

Beer was a gift from the gods, a marker of civilization, a dietary staple, a social lubricant, and a ritual necessity. It was produced on a massive scale and was consumed on a daily basis by people across the socio-economic spectrum. It was indeed “liquid bread,” a fundamental source of sustenance. But what gave beer its distinctive power and appeal was its inebriating effects.
Beer in Mesopotamia

The earliest solid evidence for beer in Mesopotamia dates to the later part of the fourth millennium BCE (the Uruk period). Our first glimpses of Mesopotamian beer, therefore, appear during the period of rapid and radical change that produced the world’s first cities and states and the world’s first writing. Indeed, in the earliest “proto-cuneiform” documents, beer was already being produced and distributed in large quantities.

Excavations at the Uruk-period site of Godin Tepe in western Iran have also uncovered traces of calcium oxalate or “beerstone” within ceramic vessels. As things currently stand, though, we know next to nothing about the prehistory of beer in the region, that is, about the origins and development of beer during preceding periods. Given the scale and sophistication of brewing activity during the Uruk period, we can expect that future work will push beer’s backstory thousands of years further into the past.

Brewing beer in Mesopotamia

What exactly was Mesopotamian beer? Known as kaš in Sumerian or šikaru in Akkadian, it was a barley-based fermented beverage, typically brewed using two key ingredients: malted barley and a special kind of barley bread (or a looser barley product) called bappir. Many beers also included emmer wheat, date syrup, and other flavorings, but there is no evidence for the use of hops. Although the beers were sometimes referred to as “filtered” or “strained,” most probably included a significant amount of solid matter. Cuneiform documents refer to a number of different types of beer. In the earliest documents (c. 3000 BCE), nine different types are mentioned but are difficult to translate. During the Early Dynastic period (c. 2500 BCE), at least five types were recognized: golden, dark, sweet dark, red, and strained. By the Ur III period (c. 2100 BCE), beer was being categorized primarily in terms of its quality or strength: ordinary, good, and very good – or, perhaps, ordinary, strong, and very strong.

Beer appears on thousands of cuneiform tablets, most produced by scribes working for powerful palace and temple institutions. Most of these tablets are economic documents, including delivery orders, receipts, monthly accounts, production estimates, and ration lists. Through the eyes of the institutional administrator,
however, brewing was a black box. The details of the process mattered little, as long as inputs and outputs could be measured, monitored, and recorded. Only rarely do administrative texts have anything explicit to say about how the beer was actually made. They do, however, provide invaluable information about brewing ingredients, the organization of production, and the distribution of beer to consumers. The best description of the brewing process itself can be found in a literary document, the famous Hymn to Ninkasi, goddess of beer. Although it is definitely not a set of instructions for the brewing of beer, this poem or song appears to include a step-by-step, if enigmatic, description of the brewing process.

Archaeologists have uncovered few physical traces of large-scale, institutional breweries in Mesopotamia. The best candidate is a building excavated at the site of Tell al-Hiba (ancient Lagash) in southern Iraq, dating to the Early Dynastic III period (c. 2600–2350 BCE). This building included a variety of vats, fireplaces, and ovens and, fortuitously, a cuneiform tablet that mentions the é-lunga (Sumerian for “brewery”). Thanks to scattered references in the written record, we know that beer was also
brewed on the household level, and recent excavations at Tell Bazi in north-central Syria have provided vivid confirmation. Among approximately 50 houses excavated at the site, dating to the Late Bronze Age (c. 1400–1200 BCE), many included a standardized set of brewing vessels containing residue evidence for beer. The excavators argue that nearly every household was producing its own beer or, in some cases, wine.

There have been a number of efforts to recreate Mesopotamian beer. In the late 1980s, for example, the University of Chicago’s Oriental Institute teamed up with Anchor Brewing Company to brew a beer called “Ninkasi,” inspired by the Hymn to Ninkasi but brewed using modern equipment. More recently, the excavators of Tell Bazi have used replica ceramic vessels to recreate the beers once brewed at the site. Since 2012, we have also been involved in a collaborative brewing effort, joining the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago with Great Lakes Brewing Company in Cleveland, Ohio. Drawing on written and archaeological evidence, we have done our best to employ authentic ingredients, equipment, and techniques – resulting in a beer that we call “Enkibru,” always tasted alongside “Gilgamash,” a companion beer brewed with the same ingredients but modern brewing equipment.
Drinking beer in Mesopotamia

Beer was consumed in a wide variety of contexts in Mesopotamia — at feasts, festivals, and ritual ceremonies, for example, but also at home, on the job, and in neighborhood taverns. It was often consumed from a communal vessel through long, reed straws, as shown in numerous artistic depictions; another common image shows a woman drinking beer from a vessel through a straw during sex. The ubiquitous “banquet scenes” that show seated individuals drinking from cups also suggest that beer (or, alternatively, wine) may sometimes have been consumed from cups.

What kind of effects did beer produce? There is significant disagreement about the alcohol content of Mesopotamian beer. Some argue that this “beer” was not really beer at all but a low alcohol (or alcohol-free) barley beverage analogous to modern kvass, a fermented drink made from rye bread. While it is possible that the Sumerian and Akkadian terms that we translate as “beer” encompassed a broader semantic range than our own term, we see no reason to ignore the fact that in Mesopotamian literature the consumption of beer often led to intoxication. Beer made people happy; it lightened their mood; it muddled their senses; and sometimes it made them angry and belligerent.
As in many (perhaps most) other societies, both past and present, beer occupied an ambiguous position in the Mesopotamian social world. It was consumed and enjoyed by many people on a regular basis, but there was also a fine line between enjoyment and overindulgence, between acceptable and unacceptable levels of inebriation. The tavern, in particular, provided a distinct space within which this line (and others) could be crossed. The very existence of this conflicted stance toward beer and its potential effects provides some indication of the power of beer and its unique capacity to transform individual people, groups of people, places, and occasions. Over the past few decades, numerous studies have highlighted this dynamic dimension of alcoholic beverages, placing them at the center of social, political, and economic life in societies widely separated in space and time. It is time to follow suit and give beer its proper place in ancient Mesopotamia – treating it as an active and potentially transformative force, whose potency was fundamentally grounded in its inebriating effects.

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For further reading:


Alex Joffe is the editor of the Ancient Near East Today. The publication features contributions from diverse academics, a forum featuring debates of current developments from the field, and links to news and resources. The ANE Today covers the entire Near East, and each issue presents discussions ranging from the state of biblical archaeology to archaeology after the Arab Spring.

Cynthia Rufo is ASOR’s Archivist and Website Manager.
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