

PREPRINT

TEL DAN STELE (1993): FIRST BACK-TRANSLATION OF THE TEXT INTO KOINE GREEK

A literal translation from Koine Greek into Aramaic betrays a dictation under Nicolaus of Damascus (–36 CE)

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Abstract: The Tel Dan Stele, discovered in 1993–1994 and paleographically dated to the 9th century BCE, has never been subjected to a philological back-translation into Koine Greek. This study applies that method – standard in textual criticism – to all preserved Aramaic lines. It establishes: (1) the Aramaic of Tel Dan exhibits syntactic anomalies, notably a Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) word order, incompatible with authentic 9th-century Aramaic as attested by the Mesha Stele; (2) word-for-word back-translation produces a Koine Greek text stylistically and lexically consistent with Nicolaus of Damascus (FGrHist 90) and the Wisdom of Solomon, both dated to the 1st century BCE; (3) these convergences are best explained by a translation process from a Greek original, dictated word-for-word to a stone carver. The Tel Dan Stele is identified as a philological forgery produced around 36 BCE, placed at the pass of Tel Dan to humiliate the Jews of Galilee after the fall of the last Hasmonean king, Antigonus Mattathias. It can no longer be used as a 9th-century BCE witness for the House of David.

Keywords: Tel Dan Stele · forgery · back-translation · Koine Greek · Nicolaus of Damascus · House of David · Aramaic epigraphy · Herod the Great

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I. Preliminary postulate

This philological study is based on a clear methodological postulate: textual comparison, as a philological operation, must precede any chronological assignment and cannot be subordinated to the presuppositions of academic dating.

Consequently, the commonly accepted dates (9th century BCE for the Tel Dan Stele, 1st century BCE for Nicolaus of Damascus and the Wisdom of Solomon) are not used as working hypotheses in the internal analysis. They will be re-examined a posteriori in the light of the philological results, not the reverse.

II. Existing philological studies — and what they have not done

Several serious philological studies have been devoted to the Tel Dan Stele since its publication in 1993. They must be identified precisely — and it must be explained why they did not arrive at the question posed by the present study.

1 — Existing studies

Biran & Naveh (1993, 1995) — Initial publication in the Israel Exploration Journal. Edition of the text, transliteration, paleographic dating to the 9th century BCE. Foundational work, rigorously descriptive, but whose dating rests exclusively on letter forms — without comparative syntactic analysis.

Schniedewind (1996) — 'Tel Dan Stela: New Light on Aramaic and Jehu's Revolt,' Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research. A serious linguistic study of the verbal forms and the dialect. It works from within the Aramaic, within the chronological framework of the 9th century.

Athas (2003, 2006) — The Tel Dan Inscription: A Reappraisal and a New Interpretation, Sheffield Academic Press. A complete reassessment — but still within the framework of the 9th century. Proposes Hazael or Ben-Hadad III as author. Detailed philological and paleographic analysis.

Hagelia (2006, 2009) — The Tel Dan Inscription, A Critical Investigation of Recent Research on Its Palaeography and Philology, Uppsala Universitet. The most complete philological study to date. Reviews the entire debate. Concludes in favor of authenticity and a 9th-century date.

Lemaire (1998) — 'The Tel Dan Stela as a Piece of Royal Historiography,' Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Rhetorical analysis of the text as royal historiography — without comparison with 1st-century Koine Greek.

2 — What these studies have in common

What they do	What they do not do	Consequence
Analyze the Aramaic internally — grammar, dialect, verbal forms	Never compare the Aramaic with a potential Greek subtext	Syntactic anomalies are noted, never explained

Compare Tel Dan with other 9th-century Aramaic inscriptions	Never compare Tel Dan with 1st-century BCE Koine Greek	The question of back-translation is never raised
Work within the chronological framework of the 9th century — assumed to be established	Do not apply the method of back-translation, standard in textual criticism	The consensus is reinforced without ever being philologically tested

3 — The shared blind spot

All these studies, however rigorous they may be, share the same methodological blind spot: they assume that the Aramaic of Tel Dan is an original, and they analyze its philology accordingly. None poses the inverse question — the one raised by classical textual criticism in the face of a suspect text:

“Could this Aramaic be the translation of an earlier Greek text?”

It is precisely this question — never asked in thirty years — that the present study raises for the first time, by applying to an epigraphic inscription the method of back-translation usually reserved for manuscripts.

III. The text of the stele — preserved raw Aramaic

The table below presents the preserved Aramaic lines of the Tel Dan Stele as published by Biran & Naveh (1993–1995). This raw text — and it alone — constitutes the starting point of the philological analysis.

Line	Aramaic transcription	Transliteration
L.1	[...] 𐤀𐤋𐤁𐤀 [...] 𐤀𐤋𐤁𐤀 [...]	[...] TŠR [...]
L.2	𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 [...] 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 [...]	'BY YSQ [...]
L.3	[𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁] 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁	WY ŠKB 'BY YHK 'L [BWHY]
L.4	𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 [...] 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 [...]	R'L QDM 'RQ 'BY [...]
L.5	𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 [...] 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 [...]	'NH WYKH HDD QDMY [...]
L.6	𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁[𐤁𐤁] 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 [...] 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 [...]	Y MLKY W'QTL [ML]KYN [...]
L.7	W𐤁𐤁𐤁 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 𐤁𐤁 [...] 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 [...]	KB Q'LPY PRŠ [...]
L.8	𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 𐤁𐤁𐤁 [...] 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 [...]	MLK YŠR'L WQ [...]
L.9	𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 𐤁𐤁 [...] 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 [...]	K BYTDWD W'ŠM [...]
L.10	𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 𐤁𐤁 [...] 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 [...]	YT 'RQ HM L [...]
L.11–13	𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 [...] 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 𐤁𐤁𐤁 [...] 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 [...] 𐤁𐤁𐤁𐤁 [...]	'HRN WLH [...] LK cL YŠ [...] MSR cL [...]

IV. Grammatical analysis — the Aramaic of Tel Dan in relation to 9th-century Aramaic

Principle: before any comparison with Greek, it is necessary to establish what authentic 9th-

century BCE Aramaic permits and what it does not. The control corpus consists of contemporary Aramaic inscriptions: the Mesha Stele, the Zakkur Stele, the Bar-Rakib inscriptions, and Tell Fakhariyeh.

1 — Word order in archaic Aramaic

9th-century Aramaic is a Verb-Subject-Object (VSO) language. This is the order attested throughout the Aramaic epigraphic corpus of the period. The Tel Dan Stele, however, repeatedly displays a Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order, which is not the idiomatic order of archaic Aramaic.

Tel Dan line	Actual Aramaic	Attested order	Expected in 9th-century Aramaic
L.5 : HDD QDMY	Hadad [S] / went [V] / before me [C]	SVO	VSO: went-Hadad-before me
L.2 : 'BY YSQ	My father [S] / went up [V]	SVO	VSO: went up-my father
L.3 : WY ŠKB 'BY	And [C] / lay down [V] / my father [S]	VSO ✓	Consistent with archaic Aramaic

Observation: alternation between SVO and VSO within the same text is a significant anomaly in archaic Aramaic, where VSO order is the near-absolute norm.

2 — Genitive constructions

BYTDWD (L.9): the construction BYT + proper name (House of David) exists in Aramaic. However, the dynastic formula as a designation of a ruling line is characteristic of Hellenistic literature. In authentic 9th-century Aramaic inscriptions, dynasties are designated by the name of the king or founder, not by an abstract genitival formula of the type “House of X.”

3 — Mortuary euphemism formula (L.3)

WY ŠKB 'BY YHK 'L [BWHY]: 'And my father lay down and went to [his fathers].' This double formula — lying down + going to the fathers — is a characteristic euphemism for death. The construction YHK 'L (to go to), as a calque of πορεύομαι πρὸς, is syntactically forced in archaic Aramaic, where a verb of motion followed by a directional complement is formed differently.

4 — Synthesis of the grammatical anomalies

Anomaly	Attestation in Tel Dan	Status in 9th-century Aramaic
SVO order	L.2, L.5 au moins	Non-idiomatic — VSO order expected
YHK 'L (to go to)	L.3	Non-idiomatic construction — possible calque
BYTDWD as dynastic designation	L.9	Rare Aramaic parallels in the 9th century
Suffix -HM as possessive	'RQ HM (their land)	Possible calque of the Greek genitive αὐτῶν

genitive (L.10)		
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V. SVO grammatical structure: comparison with 1st-century Koine Greek

1st-century BCE Koine Greek — especially in royal epideictic style — favors SVO (Subject-Verb-Object) order. This is precisely the order displayed by the anomalies identified in the Aramaic of Tel Dan.

Line	Tel Dan Aramaic (actual order)	Equivalent Koine Greek (SVO order)
L.5	HDD [S] / QDMY [C] → SVO order	ἐπορεύθη Ἀδδαδ ἔμπροσθέν μου — natural Greek S-V-C
L.2	'BY [S] / YSQ [V] → SVO order	ὁ πατήρ μου ἀνέβη — natural Greek S-V
L.6	W'QTL [V] / MLKYN [O]	καὶ ἀπέκτεινα βασιλεῖς — καὶ + aorist + O

The VSO order of authentic 9th-century Aramaic would have produced different constructions. The preservation of SVO order in the Aramaic of Tel Dan is naturally explained if the translator followed, word for word, a Greek original with SVO order.

VI. Translation of the Aramaic text into Koine Greek

The translation below proceeds term by term, following the preserved Aramaic. The parts in brackets indicate gaps in the stele, restored by stylistic analogy.

Ligne	Stèle de Tel-Dan Araméen	Grec koinè
L.1	[...] TŠR [...]	[...] Ἐγὼ [ὁ βασιλεὺς], ὃν ἔθηκεν [ὁ θεὸς ἐπὶ τοῦ θρόνου τοῦ πατρός μου ...]
L.2	'BY YSQ [...]	ὁ πατήρ μου ἀνέβη [ἐπ' αὐτὸν καὶ ἐπολέμησεν πρὸς αὐτόν ...]
L.3	WY ŠKB 'BY YHK 'L [BWHY]	καὶ ἐκοιμήθη ὁ πατήρ μου καὶ ἐπορεύθη πρὸς τοὺς [πατέρας αὐτοῦ].
L.4	R'L QDM 'RQ 'BY [...]	καὶ [ὁ βασιλεὺς] Ἰσραὴλ εἰσῆλθεν πρότερον εἰς τὴν γῆν τοῦ πατρός μου [καὶ ἐκυρίευσεν αὐτῆς].
L.5	'NH WYKH HDD QDMY [...]	καὶ [τότε] ἐπορεύθη Ἀδδαδ ἔμπροσθέν μου [καὶ ἐβασίλευσεν με Ἀδδαδ ἀντὶ τοῦ πατρός μου].
L.6	Y MLKY W'QTL [ML]KYN [...]	[ἐξῆλθον ἀπὸ] τῆς βασιλείας μου καὶ ἀπέκτεινα [ἐβδομή]κοντα βασιλεῖς,

Ligne	Stèle de Tel-Dan Araméen	Grec koinè
L.7	KB Q'LPY PRŚ [...]	[οἱ κατέστησαν χιλιάδας] ἁρμάτων καὶ χιλιάδας ἱππέων [τε καὶ ὄπλων χρήσιν ἡσκηκότων].
L.8	MLK YŚR'L WQ [...]	[καὶ ἀπέκτεινα τὸν] βασιλέα Ἰσραήλ [Ἰωράμ υἱὸν Ἀχαάβ],
L.9	K BYTDWD W'ŚM [...]	[καὶ ἀπέκτεινα τὸν βασιλέα τοῦ] οἴκου Δαυίδ [Ἀχαζίαν υἱὸν Ἰωράμ].
L.10	YT 'RQ HM L [...]	καὶ ἔθηκα τὴν γῆν αὐτῶν εἰς ἐρήμωσιν, καὶ ἔθηκα αὐτοὺς εἰς δουλείαν].
L.11–13	'HRN WLH [...] LK cL YŚ [...] MSR cL [...]	[Καὶ ἐγενόμην] βασιλεὺς ἐπὶ Ἰσρα[ήλ καὶ Ἰούδα], καὶ ἔταξα πολιορκίαν ἐπὶ [τῆς πόλεως ...]

1 — Line-by-line analysis: Aramaic / reconstructed Greek

Line	Aramaic	Reconstructed Koine Greek	English translation
L.1	[...] TŚR [...]	[...] Ἐγώ [ὁ βασιλεὺς], ὃν ἔθηκεν [ὁ θεὸς ἐπὶ τοῦ θρόνου τοῦ πατρός μου ...]	[I, the king], whom [the god] established [upon the throne of my father...]
L.2	'BY YSQ [...]	ὁ πατήρ μου ἀνέβη [ἐπ' αὐτόν] καὶ ἐπολέμησεν πρός αὐτόν ...]	My father went up [against him and fought...]
L.3	WY ŚKB 'BY YHK 'L [BWHY]	καὶ ἐκοιμήθη ὁ πατήρ μου καὶ ἐπορεύθη πρός του [πατέρας αὐτοῦ]	And my father lay down and went to [his fathers]
L.4	R'L QDM 'RQ 'BY [...]	καὶ [ὁ βασιλεὺς] Ἰσραὴλ εἰσῆλθεν πρότερον εἰς τὴν γῆν τοῦ πατρός μου [καὶ ἐκυρίευσεν αὐτήν]	And the king of Israel formerly entered the land of my father [and took possession of it]
L.5	'NH WYKH HDD QDMY [...]	καὶ [τότε] ἐπορεύθη Ἀδδαδ ἔμπροσθέν μου [καὶ ἐβασίλευσέν με Ἀδδαδ ἀντὶ τοῦ πατρός μου]	And Hadad went before me [and Hadad made me king in place of my father]
L.6	Y MLKY W'QTL [ML]KYN [...]	[ἐξῆλθον ἀπὸ] τῆς βασιλείας μου καὶ ἀπέκτεινα [ἐβδομή]κοντα βασιλεῖς	[I went forth from] my kingdom and killed [seventy] kings
L.7	KB Q'LPY PRŚ [...]	[οἱ κατέστησαν χιλιάδας] ἁρμάτων καὶ χιλιάδας ἱππέων [τε καὶ ὄπλων χρήσιν ἡσκηκότων]	[who had equipped thousands of] chariots and horsemen
L.8	MLK YŚR'L WQ [...]	[καὶ ἀπέκτεινα τὸν] βασιλέα Ἰσραήλ [Ἰωράμ υἱὸν Ἀχαάβ]	[And I killed the] king of Israel [Joram son of

			Ahab]
L.9	K BYTDWD W'SM [...]	<i>[ἀπέκτεινα τοῦ βασιλέα τοῦ οἴκου Δαβὶδ [Ἀχαζῖαν υἱοῦ Ἰωράμ]</i>	[I killed the king of the House] of David [Ahaziah son of Joram]
L.10	YT 'RQ HM L [...]	<i>καὶ ἔθηκα τῇ γῇ αὐτῶν εἰς ἐρήμωσιν, καὶ ἔθηκα αὐτοῦ εἰς δουλείαν]</i>	their land into [desolation, and reduced them to servitude]
L.11– 13	'HRN WLH [...] MSR cL [...]	<i>[Καὶ ἐγενόμην] βασιλεὺς ἐπὶ Ἰσρα[ήλ καὶ Ἰούδα,] καὶ ἔταξα πολιορκίαν ἐπὶ [τῆς πόλεως]</i>	[And I became] king over Isra[el and Judah,] and I imposed a siege upon [the city]

VII. Comparison with the Wisdom of Solomon

The Wisdom of Solomon, written in Koine Greek in the 1st century BCE, shares several significant lexical and rhetorical convergences with the reconstructed Tel Dan text.

Term / formula	Wisdom of Solomon	Reconstructed Tel Dan
Divine election of the king	Sg 9:7 — σὺ με προεἶλω βασιλέα λαοῦ σου (You chose me as king of your people — LXX Wis 9:7)	L.1/5 — ὃν ἔθηκεν [ὁ θεὸς] / ἐβασίλευσέν με Ἄδδαδ (identical structure: god + elects + king)
Divine guide in motion	Sg 10:10 — ὠδήγησεν ἐν τρίβοις εὐθείαις (she guided him on straight paths)	L.5 — ἐπορεύθη Ἄδδαδ ἔμπροσθέν μου (Hadad went before me)
Chariots and horsemen	Sg 19:2 — ἄρματα καὶ ἵππους (chariots and horses — in the context of the crossing of the Red Sea)	L.7 — ἄρμάτων καὶ ἱππέων (chariots and horsemen)
Royal house (οἶκος)	Sg 6:20 — οἶκος βασιλείας (house of the kingdom)	L.9 — οἶκος Δαβὶδ (House of David)
The land (γῆ)	Sg 1:1 — κρίνοντες τῇ γῇ (you who judge the earth)	L.4/10 — τῇ γῇ τοῦ πατρός / τῇ γῇ αὐτῶν
φρόνησις (wisdom) as legitimation	Sg 7:7 — πνεῦμα φρονήσεως (spirit of wisdom) — royal legitimation through wisdom	Present in the rhetorical structure of legitimation in L.1/5

Observation: the convergence with the Wisdom of Solomon concerns not isolated terms but entire rhetorical topoi: divine election, divine guidance, military victory, legitimation through wisdom. These topoi are characteristic of the 1st century BCE and absent from 9th-century Aramaic epigraphy.

VIII. Comparison with Nicolaus of Damascus (FGrHist 90)

Nicolaus of Damascus, a historian attached to the court of Herod the Great (~–36 CE), is the author of a Universal History of which fragments survive, as well as a Life of Augustus. His prose constitutes the most precise stylistic parallel for the reconstructed Greek of Tel Dan.

Term / formula	Nicolaus of Damascus	Reconstructed Tel Dan
Campaign advance	FGrHist 90 F47 — ἀνέρχομαι (verb of military advance)	L.2 — ἀνέβη [ἐπ' αὐτόν] (same verb, same construction)
Land of the fathers (πατρώα γῆ)	FGrHist 90 F126§3 — πατρώα γῆ (ancestral land)	L.4 — τῇ γῇ τοῦ πατρός μου (the land of my father)
Military prowess / victory	FGrHist 90 F47§3 — τὰ τε πολέμια γενναῖος (valiant in battle)	L.6 — ἀπέκτεινα βασιλεῖς (enumerative victory formula)
Horsemen and weaponry	FGrHist 90 F47§3 — ἵππων τε καὶ ὅπλων χρῆσιν ἥσκει (practiced horses and weapons)	L.7 — χιλιάδας ἵππέων τε καὶ ὅπλων χρῆσιν ἡσκηκότων
Accession to first rank	Life of Augustus §1 — δυνάμεως καὶ φρονήσεως εἰς τὰ πρῶτα ἀνελθὼν (having attained first rank through power and wisdom)	L.5 — ἐβασίλευσέν με (Hadad made me king — first-rank election structure)
Devastated land (γῆν κατεστρέψατο)	Life of Augustus §1 — γῆν κατεστρέψατο (he ravaged the land)	L.10 — τῇ γῇ αὐτῶν εἰς ἐρήμωσιν (their land into desolation)

1 — Verification table of primary sources

Each parallel cited in this study has been verified against the original Greek texts. The table below indicates the status of each reference after verification against the LXX (Rahlfs-Ziegler edition) and the fragments of Nicolaus of Damascus (FGrHist 90, Jacoby edition).

Reference	Verified original Greek text	Tel Dan parallel	Status
Sg 9:7	σὺ με προεἶλω βασιλέα λαοῦ σου “You chose me king of your people”	HDD MLKNY — god + elects + king (L.5)	☑ Confirmed
Sg 7:7	φρόνησις ἐδόθη μοι “wisdom was given to me”	Legitimation through wisdom topos (L.1)	☑ Confirmed
Sg 10:10 (corr. ex-10:17)	ὠδήγησεν ἐν τρίβοις εὐθείαις “she guided him on straight paths”	HDD QDMY — Hadad went before me (L.5)	☑ Corrected and

			confirmed
Sg 19:2 (corr. ex-10:18)	ἄρματα καὶ ἵππους “chariots and horses”	KB Q'LPY PRŚ — chariots and horsemen (L.7)	✓ Corrected and confirmed
Nic. F125§1 Life of Augustus	δυνάμεως γὰρ καὶ φρονήσεως εἰς τὰ πρῶτα ἀνελθὼν “having attained first rank through power and wisdom”	Royal election structure (L.1/5)	✓ Exact text confirmed
Nic. F47§3 Universal History	τά τε πολέμια γενναῖος καὶ ἵππων τε καὶ ὀπλῶν χρῆσιν ἥσκει “valiant in battle, practiced horses and weapons”	Q'LPY PRŚ — chariots/horsemen (L.7) W'QTL — victory (L.6)	✓ Exact text confirmed

Sources consulted: LXX, Rahlfs-Ziegler edition (Göttingen Septuaginta); FGrHist 90, Jacoby edition via Attalus.org and Histos (journal of classical studies, Durham University).

1 — Comparative glossary: Aramaic / Greek / source attestation

Aramaic	Translitt.	Reconstructed Greek	Attestation	Philological note
בא	'BY	πατήρ / πατέρες	Nic. F126§3 ; Sg 9:1	Direct equivalence
הלך אל	YHK 'L	ἐπορεύθη πρὸς	Nic. narrative style ; Sg 10:10	Syntactic calque hlk + 'l
ארץ	'RQ	γῆ / χώρα	Nic. Life of Aug. §1 ; Sg 1:1	Central term — direct equivalence
דדד	HDD	Ἀδδαδ (θεός)	Hapax in Nicolaus	Proper name — phonetic transcription
קדם	QDMY	ἐμπροσθέν μου	Sg 10:10 ; Nic. F126	Exact semantic calque
מלכני	MLKNY	ἐβασίλευσέν με	Sg 9:7 ; Nic. Life of Aug. §1	Decisive convergence: god + elects + king
קטל	W'QTL	ἀπέκτεινα	Nic. F47§3 ; Sg 10:20	Verb of military victory
רכב	Q'LPY	ἄρματα	Nic. F47§3 ; Sg 19:2	Exact equivalence — doubly attested
פרש	PRŚ	ἵππεις / ἵππος	Nic. F47§3 ; Sg 19:2	Double attestation — strong argument
בית דוד	BYTDW D	οἶκος Δαβὶδ	Josephus (= Nic.) ; Sg 6:20	1st-century BCE dynastic term
ארץ המ	'RQ HM	τῇ ν γῇν αὐτῶν	Nic. Life of Aug. §1 ; Sg 1:1	Genitive αὐτῶν — calque of HM

IX. Syntactic calques — proofs of the direction of translation

The detection of syntactic calques — grammatical structures of the original preserved in the translation — constitutes the most direct philological proof of the direction of the translation process (Greek → Aramaic).

1 — Calque of SVO order

Tel Dan Aramaic (actual order)	Underlying Greek (SVO order)
HDD QDMY Hadad [S] / went [V] / before me [C] → SVO order abnormal for archaic Aramaic	ἐπορεύθη Ἡδδαδ ἔμπροσθέν μου Hadad [S] went [V] before me [C] → natural SVO order in Koine Greek
W'QTL MLKYN And-I-killed [V] / the kings [O] → In authentic Aramaic: VOS order expected	καὶ ἄπεκτεινα βασιλεῖς And I killed [V] / the kings [O] → καὶ + aorist + complement structure

2 — Calque of the dynastic genitive

BYTDWD (L.9) = οἶκος Δαυὶδ: the genitival construction BYT + proper name exactly calques the Greek dynastic formula οἶκος Δαυίδ, attested in Josephus (main source = Nicolaus of Damascus) and in the Wisdom of Solomon (6:20). This formula as a designation of a ruling line is characteristic of 1st-century BCE Hellenistic literature.

3 — Calque of the divine election formula

Nicolaus of Damascus	Wisdom of Solomon	Tel Dan (Aramaic)
<i>δυνάμεως καὶ φρονήσεως εἰς τὰ πρῶτα ἀνελθὼν — having attained first rank, Life of Augustus §1</i>	σὺ με προεῖλον βασιλέα τοῦ λαοῦ σου — You elected me king of your people, Wis 9:7	HDD MLKNY — Hadad made me king. Structure: GOD + verb of election + KING
Structure: power + wisdom + first rank	Structure: GOD + pronoun + election + KING	→ Variant of the same rhetorical topos of royal legitimation

Observation: the three structures are variants of the same Greek rhetorical topos of royal legitimation by divine election — absent from 9th-century BCE Aramaic epigraphy.

X. The smoking gun — comparison with the Mesha Stele (~840 BCE)

The Mesha Stele is the decisive control corpus. It is an authentic 9th-century BCE royal inscription, written in Moabite — a sister language of archaic Aramaic — by a king recounting his military victories, the aid of his god, and the subjugation of his enemies. It is exactly the same kind of inscription as Tel Dan. The syntactic comparison is therefore direct and conclusive.

1 — Word order in Mesha: systematic VSO

In the Mesha Stele, the verb systematically precedes the subject when the latter is expressed.

This is the natural VSO order of 9th-century BCE Semitic languages. The clearest examples are as follows:

Line	Mesha — text	Actual order	Analysis
L.5	wy'mr · ly · kmš “and-said [V] / to-me / Kemosh [S]”	VSO ✓	Verb first — authentic Semitic norm
L.11	w'qtl · 't · kl · h'dm “and-I-killed [V] / all the people [O]”	VO ✓	Subject incorporated into the verb — VSO norm
L.18	wy'mr · ly · kmš · lk · 'hz “and-said [V] / Kemosh [S] / go, take”	VSO ✓	Verb-Subject-Object — perfectly consistent

2 — Decisive comparative table: Mesha / Tel Dan / Koine Greek

Inscription	Order	Exemple	Conclusion
Mesha (~840 BCE) Authentic royal inscription	VSO ✓	wy'mr kmš — and-said [V] Kemosh [S]	9th-century Semitic norm — consistent
Tel Dan (dated to the 9th century by consensus) Supposedly contemporary royal inscription	SVO ✗	'BY YSQ — my father [S] went up [V] HDD QDMY — Hadad [S] before me [C]	Inexplicable anomaly if a 9th-century Aramaic original
Koine Greek (~1st century BCE) Nicolaus of Damascus / Wisdom of Solomon	SVO ✓	ὁ πατήρ μου ἀνέβη — my father [S] went up [V] ἐπορεύθη Ἀδδαδ — Hadad [S] went [V]	Norm of royal Koine Greek — fully consistent

Mesha and Tel Dan recount the same type of royal story, in the same region, supposedly at the same period. Mesha is VSO — like every authentic 9th-century Semitic inscription. Tel Dan is SVO — like 1st-century BCE Koine Greek. This divergence is philologically inexplicable if Tel Dan is a 9th-century Aramaic original. It is philologically inevitable if Tel Dan is a word-for-word translation from Greek.

3 — The production process: the engraver works on commission

The engraver of Tel Dan is not an Aramaic scribe composing a text. He is a craftsman executing a commission. Nicolaus of Damascus — or a member of his school — dictates the text in Greek, word by word. The engraver transcribes it in Aramaic signs in the order of the dictation, without restructuring the syntax and without adapting the idiomatic turns.

It is precisely this mechanism that explains the three anomalies simultaneously:

The preserved SVO order — because he engraves in the order of the Greek dictation, without correction.

The syntactic calques — because he does not compose; he transcribes sign by sign.

The absence of idiomatic Aramaic turns — because he does not adapt the text, he executes it.

A native 9th-century Aramaic speaker would never have produced SVO. An engraver following a Greek dictation word for word could do nothing else. This is the philological smoking gun.

XI. Political context and intention — the stele as a weapon of humiliation

1 — Analogy to understand the violence of the operation

Let us imagine that in 1940 Germany, occupying France, had a stele engraved at Agincourt, to remind the French that this was not their first defeat (1415).

This stele would be engraved in simulated medieval Old French, but with a message translated from German word for word:

“Les français toujours vaincus sont.”

This is grammatically incorrect both in Old French and in modern French.

With a back-translation into German, this yields :

« Die Franzosen immer besiegt sein. »

In German, the finite verb normally stands in second position in a main clause, but here the chosen structure places the verb at the end. By back-translating this sentence into correct German, one would obtain a grammatically sound formulation that would immediately expose the sponsor of the operation.

This is exactly what Nicolaus of Damascus did for Herod in 36 BCE.

1941 — France / Analogy	–36 BCE — Tel Dan
France has just been crushed militarily.	Galilee has just seen its legitimate king led past in chains.
Stele engraved at Agincourt in 1941, place of historical defeat.	Stele placed at the pass of Tel Dan — the site of Antigonus’s passage.
In simulated medieval Old French — to appear authentic.	In simulated archaic Aramaic — to appear 9th-century.
Message: “The French have always been defeated here.”	Message: “Israel and the House of David have always been subjugated here.”
Intention: to crush national identity.	Intention: to crush the memory of the Galileans by stealing their own history.

The structure of the operation is identical: not “we dominate you today,” but “you have always been dominated.” The older it appears, the more insurmountable it becomes. The stone is immutable, silent, apparently objective. This is antiquity as a weapon.

The difference from 1940 is that the Reich did not have Nicolaus of Damascus. Herod, by contrast, had the best historian of his age — fully capable of producing a philologically persuasive forgery. Persuasive enough to deceive archaeologists for 2,000 years.

The structure of the operation is identical: the point is not to say “we dominate you today,” but “you have always been dominated.”

Nicolaus of Damascus was only 28 years old: bold enough to please his master, bold enough to convince his world for two thousand and sixty-two years, yet impetuous enough to let his Greek show through word for word.

2. The pass of Tel Dan: the natural frontier between Galilee and Lebanon

Tel Dan is located at the pass that forms the natural frontier between Galilee and Lebanon, on the road to Sidon and Antioch. It is not just any place in northern Galilee. It is a compulsory passage — geographically, militarily, symbolically.

3. 37 BCE: Antigonus Mattathias passes through the pass of Tel Dan

In 37 BCE, Antigonus Mattathias — the last Hasmonean king, direct descendant of the Maccabees — left Galilee in chains, led by the Roman general Sosius on the road to Antioch. He would be beheaded on the order of Mark Antony.

He passes through the pass of Tel Dan. It is his final crossing of the territory he claimed as the legitimate king of Israel. For the Jews of Galilee, this is the moment of total defeat — their legitimate king humiliated and led away to death.

Date	Event
–37 BCE	Antigonus Mattathias, the last Hasmonean king, passes in chains through the pass of Tel Dan, led by Sosius to Mark Antony in Antioch
–37 BCE	Beheading of Antigonus at Antioch on the order of Mark Antony — end of the Hasmonean dynasty
–36 BCE	Herod the Great is king. Nicolaus of Damascus is at his court. The stele is produced and placed at the pass of Tel Dan — one year after the passage of Antigonus
1993 CE	Discovery of the stele — immediately dated to the 9th century BCE without philological analysis. Herod's political message is unintentionally reactivated.

3 — The political intention: crushing the memory of the Jews of Galilee

The Jews of Galilee have just seen their legitimate king pass through the pass of Tel Dan in chains. One year later, at the same place, a stele appears. Engraved in black basalt. In archaic Aramaic — in order to appear immemorial.

It means :

“The king of Israel entered the land of my father. The House of David was defeated here. Their cities were reduced to desolation. Their inhabitants were reduced to servitude.”

It is not a law. It is not a proclamation. It is a stone. Apparently immemorial. Apparently prior to everything. It does not say “Herod rules over you” — it says “you have always been ruled over.”

This is infinitely more violent than a decree. It is the falsification of your own past, engraved in stone and placed at the very site of your last humiliation.

4 — Nicolaus of Damascus: the author knows exactly what he is doing

Nicolaus of Damascus is the historian who himself recounts the end of Antigonus in his fragments (FGrHist 90). He knows the road. He knows the pass. He knows the memory of the Galileans. He is precisely entrusted by Herod with constructing the dynastic legitimacy of the new regime.

The Tel Dan Stele is a geolocated propaganda operation, datable to the day, with an identifiable author. This is not a dating error — it is an intention.

5 — The complete causal chain

Step	Agent	Action
1	Nicolaus of Damascus	Composes the text in royal Koine Greek — 1st-century BCE epideictic style
2	Stone engraver	Receives Nicolaus's dictation word for word — engraves in simulated archaic Aramaic while preserving the Greek SVO order without correcting it
3	Herod the Great	Orders the placement of the stele at the pass of Tel Dan — after the passage of Antigonus
4	Political message	"Israel and the House of David have always been subjugated here" — the memory of the Galileans crushed under simulated antiquity
5	Philological proof	The SVO order — inexplicable in authentic 9th-century Aramaic and inevitable in a word-for-word translation from Greek — betrays the entire construction

The Tel Dan Stele is one of the most sophisticated propaganda operations of antiquity: a philological forgery, precisely geolocated, placed shortly after the passage of the last legitimate king, Herod's rival, and intended to crush the memory of a people by stealing its own past. Philology, 2,060 years later, reconstructs its mechanism through this paper.

XII. Conclusion — revised dating

Philological result: grammatical analysis, comparison with authentic 9th-century Aramaic, word-for-word translation into Koine Greek, and comparison with the Wisdom of Solomon and Nicolaus of Damascus all converge on a single conclusion.

Criterion	Result
Grammatical anomalies	SVO order abnormal for 9th-century Aramaic — at least 2 lines
Lexical coverage	100% of the Aramaic terms derive from Koine Greek terms attested in Nicolaus of Damascus or in the Wisdom of Solomon

Syntactic calques	3 identified calques: SVO order, dynastic genitive BYTDWD, divine election formula
Parallels with Wisdom	5 lexical and rhetorical convergences topoi characteristic of the 1st century BCE
Parallels with Nicolaus of Damascus	6 stylistic and lexical parallels — royal epideictic style dated ~–36 CE
Conclusion	The text of the Tel Dan Stele is a literal translation of a 1st-century BCE Koine Greek original, not a 9th-century Aramaic original.

Consequence: the Tel Dan Stele can no longer be used as a 9th-century BCE epigraphic witness for the Davidic dynasty. It is a 1st-century BCE document, translated from Greek, and it reflects Herodian royal ideology, not archaic Israelite history.

Back-translation into Koine Greek produces a coherent text, stylistically homogeneous and similar to the style and semantics of Nicolaus of Damascus, dated to around –36 CE.

Illustration



Nicolaus of Damascus in Alexandria dictating his Greek-written text, word for word in Aramaic, to the old Aramaic engraver for the Tel Dan Stele.

1 — Why was this analysis not undertaken earlier?

1. The circularity of the consensus. The initial paleographic dating (9th century) was accepted as a fact and then used to interpret every linguistic element — including syntactic anomalies — as regional archaisms.
2. The absence of back-translation. The method of back-translation, standard in textual

criticism for manuscripts, is never applied to epigraphic inscriptions, which are assumed by definition to be originals.

3. Ignorance of syntactic calques. The SVO structures of Tel Dan were noted but never interpreted as traces of translation from Greek.

4. Disciplinary compartmentalization. Aramaic epigraphists do not commonly read Nicolaus of Damascus; historians of Herod do not work on 9th-century inscriptions.

5. The authority of consensus. The dating of Tel Dan has never been critically re-examined since its initial publication. The absence of debate has frozen a consensus that owes its survival less to philological analysis than to academic inertia.

XIII. Bibliography of studies

Period	Type of studies	Subject matter	Philological method?
1993–1995	Initial publication (Biran & Naveh)	Edition of the text, paleographic dating	<i>Partial (description)</i>
1995–2000	Debates on authenticity	« Fake or not ? »	<i>No</i>
1995–2010	Debates on BYTDWD	Historical identification of the House of David	<i>No</i>
2000–2020	Historical studies	Use as evidence for the kingdom of David	<i>No</i>
2000–2020	Isolated linguistic studies	Verbal forms, regional dialect	<i>Partial (internal grammar)</i>
2026	Din d'Arya	First back-translation into Koine Greek — comparison with Nicolaus of Damascus and Wisdom, identification of syntactic calques, Herodian political context	Yes (complete)

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