

Engraving of the Tel Dan Stele

A Historical and Archaeological Impossibility of a -9th Century BCE Dating

DOI : 10.5281/zenodo.20073387

Author: _____ Din d'Arya

Affiliation _____ Celtic School

ORCID: _____ 0009-0004-9915-5893

Version: _____ 1.0

Date: _____ 7 May 2026

Abstract

The Tel Dan Stele is attributed by scholarly consensus to Hazael of Damascus (r. c. 842–796 BCE). This study identifies two independent sets of anomalies that weaken this dating. First, a historical anomaly: no victory stele in the contemporaneous Near Eastern epigraphic corpus displays a forty-year gap between the event commemorated and the engraving, yet this is precisely what the consensus palaeographic dating implies. Second, an archaeological anomaly: the fragments were found in secondary context, the final excavation report has never been published, and an academic study published in Tel Aviv 35 (Arie, 2008) re-dated the principal stratum by approximately one century. These divergences, internal to the consensus itself, justify reopening the dating dossier.

Keywords : Tel Dan Stele · Hazael · Aramaic epigraphy · palaeographic dating · stratigraphy · Iron Age II · chronological anomaly · epigraphic genre · external contextualization · redating

Social Link

<https://orcid.org/0009-0004-9915-5893>

<https://dindarya-arch.github.io/>

<https://hcommons.org/members/dindarya/>

https://x.com/din_d74407

<https://cv.hal.science/din-d039-arya>

Previous Publications by the Author on the Tel Dan Stele — Context

The present preprint belongs to a corpus of four studies published in 2026:

- Main prepublication (DOI 10.5281/zenodo.19220248) — Redating of the stele to the summer of 37 BCE as a Roman boundary marker of humiliation linked to Mattathias Antigonus II, on the basis of contextual, geographical, and historical analysis.
- Critique of Demsky (1995) (DOI 10.5281/zenodo.19598054) — Demonstration that Demsky's palaeographic study produced an 800-year chronological displacement through a selective reading of graphic parallels.
- Psalms of Solomon (DOI 10.5281/zenodo.19883514) — Identification of 17 thematic and lexical correspondences between the stele and the Psalms of Solomon, placing both documents within the bilingual Herodian milieu of the first century BCE.
- Retro-translation into Koine Greek (DOI 10.5281/zenodo.19682362) — First word-for-word retro-translation of the text into Koine Greek, revealing structural affinities with the Septuagint and the works of Nicolaus of Damascus.

The present preprint offers two new and independent sets of arguments — historical and archaeological — which strengthen this corpus without repeating the previously known arguments.

I. The Problem: Forty Years of Silence

In its present fragmentary state, the Tel Dan Stele contains the following claim in lines 6–9: the narrator — identified by the consensus with Hazael of Damascus — states that he killed Joram son of Ahab, king of Israel, and Ahaziah son of Joram, king of the House of David.

Tel Dan, lines 6–9 (Lemaire translation): “I killed two powerful kings who had harnessed two thousand chariots and two thousand horsemen. [I killed Jo]ram son of Ahab, king of Israel, and I killed [Aha]ziah son of [Joram, king] of the House of David.”

These events are dated by the consensus to 841 BCE, as confirmed by 2 Kings 9:24–27 and by the Annals of Shalmaneser III, which place Hazael on the throne of Damascus at that time.

The problem is as follows: if Hazael took the throne around 842 and killed these kings in 841, when did he engrave this stele? The epigraphic consensus, based on palaeography, places the stele in the latter part of his reign, that is, between c. 830 and 800 BCE. This implies a forty-year gap between the event commemorated and the engraving.

Central question: is there any documented precedent, in the entire Near Eastern epigraphic corpus, for a king engraving a victory stele forty years after the event commemorated, concerning kings who had been dead for four decades?

The answer is no. This is the historical anomaly that we call the Hazael Glitch.

II. Historical Chronology of Hazael's Reign

The following table reconstructs the chronology of Hazael's reign from the available primary sources: the Annals of Shalmaneser III and the inscription of Adad-Nirari III.

Date	Event	Primary source	Hazael's status
c. 842 BCE	Hazael usurps the throne of Damascus — death of Ben-Hadad II.	2 Kings 8:7–15; Annals of Shalmaneser III (year 18)	ACCESSION
841 BCE	Joram of Israel and Ahaziah of Judah are killed. Jehu takes power in Samaria.	2 Kings 9:24–27	VICTORY
841–838 BCE	Shalmaneser III attacks Damascus twice (years 18 and 21), without decisive success. Hazael resists.	Annals of Shalmaneser III	RESISTANCE
c. 838–820 BCE	Hazael dominates Israel and Judah. He takes Gath and extorts Jerusalem; Joash gives him the Temple treasure.	2 Kings 10:32–33; 12:17–18	APOGEE
c. 805 BCE	Adad-Nirari III of Assyria attacks Damascus; Ben-Hadad, son of Hazael, submits.	Inscription of Adad-Nirari III	DECLINE
c. 800–796 BCE	Death of Hazael. Ben-Hadad III succeeds him.	2 Kings 13:24	DEATH
After 796 BCE	Joash of Israel defeats Ben-Hadad III three times and recovers the cities lost by his father.	2 Kings 13:25	DEFEAT (posthumous)

Three observations follow from this table:

First observation. Hazael is never defeated during his lifetime. The Assyrian annals of Shalmaneser III attest that he resisted two attacks, in 841 and 838, without losing Damascus. He dies at the height of his regional power, having dominated Israel and Judah for forty years.

Second observation. The defeat of Aram-Damascus occurs after his death, under his son Ben-Hadad III, who is defeated three times by Joash of Israel. Hazael himself does not experience defeat.

Third observation. The victories of 841 over Joram and Ahaziah are the first victories of his reign: the most glorious, the most recent, and precisely the kind of victories a king engraves immediately. Waiting forty years to commemorate them has no precedent in Near Eastern epigraphic practice.

III. Control Corpus: Aramaic and Assyrian Epigraphic Practice

To assess the chronological anomaly of Tel Dan, it is necessary to compare it with documented practice across the contemporaneous epigraphic corpus. The following table examines the interval between the event commemorated and the engraving for the principal Aramaic and Assyrian victory stela.

Stele	Interval between event and engraving	Coherence
Mesha Stele (Moab, c. 840)	Immediate — Mesha engraves his victories in the years that follow.	✓ COHERENT
Zakkur Stele (Hamath, c. 800)	Immediate — the inscription commemorates a recent victory.	✓ COHERENT
Kilamuwa Stele (Sam'al, c. 825)	Immediate — the king celebrates his own contemporary achievements.	✓ COHERENT
Stelae of Shalmaneser III (841)	Immediate — engraved in the year of the campaign.	✓ COHERENT
Tel Dan (attributed to Hazael)	Forty years after the events (841 → c. 800), concerning kings long dead, by a king whose reign is entering decline.	✗ ANOMALOUS

The result is unambiguous: throughout the available control corpus, victory stela are engraved within years — and sometimes months — of the event commemorated. No example of a forty-year delay is attested. Tel Dan therefore constitutes an unprecedented anomaly within the genre.

IV. Analysis of the Anomaly

4.1. Why Does a King Engrave a Victory Stele?

The function of a victory stele in the ancient Near East is threefold: to legitimate the king's power by demonstrating divine favour; to intimidate subjected populations through the reminder of military power; and to inscribe the supremacy of the ruling dynasty in collective memory.

These three functions are tied to the political present. They lose their force with time. A king who engraves a stele forty years after his victory over kings long dead, while their successors have in the meantime resisted or counter-attacked, does not produce legitimation; he produces nostalgia. That is not the genre.

4.2. The Paradox of the Late Victory

Attributing the stele to the end of Hazael's reign (c. 820–800) creates an additional paradox. At that time Hazael is certainly still dominant, but Adad-Nirari III of Assyria is beginning to exert increasing pressure on Damascus. The window of absolute domination lies behind him.

If Hazael engraved a stele at that moment, why would he commemorate events from 841 rather than his far more recent and significant victories: the capture of Gath, the ransom of Jerusalem, and the domination of the entire territory east of the Jordan? These victories are documented in 2 Kings 10:32–33 and 12:17–18; they are far more impressive and far more recent. The question must be posed in its full force: why does Hazael omit Gath (2 Kings 12:17) and the ransom of the Jerusalem Temple — the gold of all the royal and Temple treasuries of YHWH (2 Kings 12:18), his most spectacular diplomatic victory — in order to celebrate only the death of Joram and Ahaziah, two kings killed forty

years earlier through the intermediary of Jehu? A rational king engraves his most recent and most important victories, not his first victories from forty years earlier over kings long forgotten.

4.3. The Argument for Immediate Engraving (841)

One might object that the stele was engraved immediately after 841, at the very beginning of Hazael's accession to the throne, and that palaeography dates it later by mistake. But this objection turns the argument against itself.

If the stele was engraved in 841, it would be one of the very first epigraphic productions of Hazael's reign, which makes the narrative sophistication and stylistic mastery it displays all the more improbable. A king who has just usurped the throne of Damascus, and who is still at war with Shalmaneser III, does not immediately possess a scriptorium capable of producing an inscription of this quality.

Moreover, if the stele was engraved in 841, the palaeography that dates it later becomes an argument against authenticity, because it would date the script to a period different from the composition claimed by the text.

4.4. The Only Coherent Scenario

There is only one scenario that explains all these anomalies without internal contradiction: the stele was not composed by Hazael. It was composed after the end of Aramaean domination over Israel and Judah, that is, after 796 BCE at the earliest, by an author who knew the events of 841 as ancient history and mobilized them for contemporary political purposes.

In this scenario, the forty-year gap is no longer an anomaly. It is the expected feature of a text that presents itself as historical while being composed well after the events. This is precisely the profile of an epigraphic forgery.

V. The Incoherence of the Archaeological Context

The Stratigraphy of Tel Dan Is Unpublished, Contradictory, and Now Contested by Academic Archaeology Itself

Preliminary note. This pillar is palaeography-independent. It relies neither on comparative philology, nor on intertextuality, nor on syntactic analysis. It rests exclusively on data published by the excavators themselves and on an academic study published in Tel Aviv 35 (2008) by Eran Arie. Its conclusion is that the palaeographic dating of the Tel Dan Stele rests on a stratigraphy whose final report has never been published, whose discovery context changed between the preliminary publications, and whose main stratum has been down-dated by approximately one century by academic archaeology.

5.1. Discovery Context: Secondary Use and Unpublished Stratigraphy

The Tel Dan Stele was not found in its primary context of erection. The three fragments were discovered reused as building material in a secondary structure in the Hussot, an extra-mural area northeast of the main gate. This means that the stele had been broken, moved, and reused before being buried. Its archaeological context is not that of its composition; it is that of its reuse.

This point is not disputed. Wikipedia states it explicitly. Demsky (2007), one of the epigraphers who contributed to the consensus palaeographic dating, himself writes: "Texts found in an archaeological site but not in a secure archaeological context present certain problems of exact dating." The Tel Dan Stele is precisely such a text.

The consequence is direct: the palaeographic dating of the stele cannot be anchored in a secure stratigraphy. One can date the script, but one cannot date the deposit in its original context, since that context had been destroyed before discovery.

5.2. Thirty Seasons of Excavation, No Final Report Published

The site of Tel Dan was excavated for more than thirty seasons, from 1966 to 1999, under the direction of Avraham Biran (Hebrew Union College). Biran published a series of preliminary reports (1982, 1993, 1994, 1996, 1999, 2002). No final report for Iron Age II has ever been published.

Eran Arie states this explicitly in his reassessment study (Tel Aviv 35, 2008): “Although the tell has been excavated for over 30 seasons [...] the final reports of the Iron II stratigraphy and finds have not been published.” Arie also specifies that he attempted to access the unpublished Tel Dan data, without success.

The palaeographic consensus on the Tel Dan Stele is therefore based on preliminary reports from a site whose full data have never been subjected to standard academic scrutiny. This is a major methodological anomaly.

5.3. Biran’s Publications Contradict One Another on the Discovery Context

Arie identifies a direct contradiction between Biran’s publications regarding the precise location of the stele fragments. In the 1993 and 1999 publications, the fragments could be understood as incorporated into the walls of Structure A in the Hussot. In the 2002 publication, it appears clearly that the fragments were located in a higher phase, above Structure A, in what Arie calls the “unnamed stage.”

Arie draws the following conclusion in a footnote: “Earlier studies on the archaeological context of the stele are now outdated.” This judgement comes from an academic archaeologist working on the published Tel Dan data, not from an external critic.

In other words, the precise location of the fragments in the site stratigraphy changed between the preliminary publications. Studies that ground the palaeographic dating in the archaeological context rely on data now recognized as incorrect by academic archaeology itself.

5.4. Stratum IVA Re-dated by One Century by Arie (2008)

The dating of Stratum IVA, the principal stratum associated with the period of Hazael, constitutes the archaeological pillar of the consensus. Biran dated it to the beginning of Iron IIa, approximately 900–850 BCE, associating it first with the reign of Jeroboam I and then with destruction by Ben-Hadad I. The association of the stele with Hazael rests on this dating.

Arie (2008) challenges this dating radically. His ceramic analysis of Stratum IVA shows that the assemblage mainly contains types characteristic of Iron IIb, approximately one century later than Biran claimed. He concludes that Stratum IVA must be re-dated to the late ninth or early eighth century. He further suggests that Tel Dan was either abandoned or a small rural site during Iron IIa.

The implication is direct: if Tel Dan was a small rural site, or even abandoned, during Iron IIa, it could not have been the place of deposition for a major Aramaean victory stele during the reign of Hazael. The archaeological anchoring of the palaeographic dating collapses.

5.5. Synthesis: The Circularity of the Consensus Reasoning

The reasoning of the consensus can be schematized as follows: (1) palaeography dates the stele to the ninth century BCE; (2) the stratigraphy confirms a ninth-century BCE level at Tel Dan; (3) Hazael is the only dominant Aramaean king of that period; therefore (4) Hazael composed the stele.

Pillar V shows that each link in this chain is compromised: (1) palaeography is calibrated on a stratigraphy whose final report does not exist; (2) the site stratigraphy was published in contradictory form; (3) Stratum IVA has been re-dated by one century by academic archaeology; and (4) the stele was found in secondary context, outside its original place of erection.

It is not an external thesis hostile to the consensus that creates this problem. It is established by the data published by Biran himself and by Arie's analysis (2008) in Tel Aviv, the archaeology journal of Tel Aviv University.

A scientifically grounded dating consensus must rest on the independent convergence of its pillars. Yet the three pillars of the dating of Tel Dan — palaeographic, historical, and archaeological — produce results that do not converge: palaeography dates the stele to a period in which the history of the genre excludes such a composition, while archaeology has since contested the stratigraphy on which palaeography was anchored. The absence of independent convergence is a methodological criterion of fragility, independently of any substitute thesis.

VI. The Other Analytical Pillars

The “Hazel Glitch” is an autonomous historical argument. It does not depend on any philological, palaeographic, or intertextual analysis. It rests exclusively on the chronology established by the primary sources (2 Kings, Assyrian Annals) and on documented practice within the Near Eastern epigraphic genre.

Its conclusion — that the stele cannot have been composed by Hazael under the conditions claimed — converges with four other analytical pillars developed in earlier preprints:

Pillar I — SVO anomalies. The Subject-Verb-Object syntactic order of the stele is incompatible with authentic Old Aramaic and compatible with Koine Greek. (DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19220248)

Pillar II — Greek retro-translation. A word-for-word retro-translation reveals a Greek source. (DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19220248)

Pillar III — The lexeme φρόνησις. A specific Aristotelian lexeme shared by the Wisdom of Solomon and Nicolaus of Damascus betrays a Peripatetic author of the first century BCE. (DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19220248)

Pillar IV — Comparative philology. Seventeen convergent thematic occurrences with the Psalms of Solomon (c. 63–30 BCE) indicate that the engraving of the stele is posterior to them. (DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19598054)

Pillar V — The Tel Dan Stele: The historical and archaeological impossibility of a ninth-century BCE dating.

The forty-year chronological anomaly is incompatible with the documented epigraphic practice of the victory-stele genre, and the archaeological context is incompatible with this dating.

Five independent pillars. Five series of anomalies.

Conclusion

Historical argument:

The present preprint asked a single question, verifiable from primary sources: does a king engrave a victory stele forty years after the facts, concerning enemies long dead, while omitting his much more glorious and more recent victories? For the entire documented Near Eastern epigraphic corpus, the answer is no. This is the “Hazaël Glitch”: an unprecedented historical anomaly internal to the consensus itself.

Archaeological argument:

To this historical argument must be added a convergent archaeological element. Eran Arie’s study (Tel Aviv 35, 2008) establishes three points from the data published by Biran himself: the final report on the stratigraphy of Tel Dan was never published after thirty seasons of excavation; the discovery context of the fragments changed between preliminary publications, rendering earlier studies of that context obsolete according to Arie himself; and Stratum IVA, the archaeological pillar of the consensus, must be re-dated to Iron IIb, approximately one century later than Biran claimed.

* * *

These two arguments are independent of one another. They depend neither on comparative philology, nor on syntactic analysis, nor on intertextuality. They rest exclusively on the logic of the epigraphic genre, on the chronology established by the primary sources, and on an archaeological reassessment published in a reference academic journal.

Their convergence does not by itself demonstrate composition in the first century BCE; that demonstration belongs to the five other analytical pillars developed in the earlier preprints. It establishes something more limited and more solid: the historical and archaeological basis on which the conventional ninth-century dating rests is internally compromised by the data of the consensus itself.

These internal divergences within the archaeological corpus significantly weaken the stratigraphic basis on which the conventional dating rests. They justify, at minimum, reopening the dating dossier — a step that the philological and historical arguments developed in the preceding pillars now make necessary.

Bibliographical References

- Arie, Eran. “Reconsidering the Iron Age II Strata at Tel Dan: Archaeological and Historical Implications.” *Tel Aviv* 35 (2008): 6–64.
- Biran, Avraham. *Biblical Dan*. Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1994.
- Biran, A. & Naveh, J. “An Aramaic Stele Fragment from Tel Dan.” *IEJ* 43 (1993): 81–98.
- Biran, A. & Naveh, J. “The Tel Dan Inscription: A New Fragment.” *IEJ* 45 (1995): 1–18.
- d’Arya, Din. “The Tel Dan Stele as a Philological Forgery of the First Century BCE.” Zenodo, DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19220248, 2026.
- d’Arya, Din. “Complement to Demsky (1995).” Zenodo, DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19598054, 2026.
- Demsky, Aaron. “Reading Northwest Semitic Inscriptions.” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 70/2 (2007).
- Gibson, J. C. L. *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions*, vol. 2. Oxford: Clarendon, 1975.
- Lemaire, A. “The Tel Dan Stele as a Piece of Royal Historiography.” *JSOT* 81 (1998): 3–14.
- Pitard, W. T. “Hazaël.” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- Schniedewind, W. M. “Tel Dan Stela: New Light on Aramaic and Jehu’s Revolt.” *BASOR* 302 (1996): 75–90.
- Shalmaneser III. *Black Obelisk and Kurkh Monolith Annals*. In: Luckenbill, D. D. *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, vol. 1. Chicago, 1926.

* * *

Treatment of Objections

A. Hazael Engraves the Stele for His Son, as a Political Testament

Objection: An ageing king may engrave a retrospective stele summarizing his reign, intended to legitimate his successor. The forty-year gap would be explained by this end-of-reign context.

Response: No victory stele in the ancient Near Eastern corpus presents this model. Retrospective royal inscriptions from the end of a reign are known, but they cover the whole reign, not a single isolated event from forty years earlier. Moreover, if Hazael engraved the stele to legitimate Ben-Hadad, he should mention the most recent victories: the ransom of Jerusalem and the domination of the Jordan, which are far more impressive than the death of two kings in 841. The choice of these two precise victories, to the exclusion of all the others, cannot be explained within the context of an authentic political testament.

B. The Stele Celebrates the Installation of the Tel Dan Sanctuary

Objection: Hazael may have erected the stele when he took control of the Tel Dan sanctuary, an event that may have occurred later than 841.

Response: This hypothesis displaces the problem without resolving it. If Hazael took Tel Dan later in his reign, around c. 820–810, why does the stele commemorate events from 841 rather than the capture of Tel Dan itself? Stelae erected upon the capture of a place celebrate that event, not earlier victories unrelated to the place.

C. The Forty-Year Gap Belongs to Our Reconstruction, Not to the Text

Objection: The precise dating of the events of 841 is uncertain. The actual gap might have been shorter.

Response: The objection is philologically defensible at the margins, but not in substance. Even allowing for a ten-year margin of error, the minimum gap between the victory over Joram and Ahaziah and the palaeographic dating of the stele remains twenty to thirty years. No victory stele in the control corpus presents a comparable delay. The anomaly is robust against reasonable chronological uncertainties.