

# The Tell Afis Fragment and the Tel Dan Stele Physical, Philological, and Semantic Convergences — A Case for a Common Assembly

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## Abstract

This study arises from the observation of striking similarities between two Aramaic epigraphic documents: the Tel Dan Stele (Israel Museum, Jerusalem, KAI 310) and the Aramaic fragment from Tell Afis (TA.03.A.300, discovered in 2003 and published by Amadasi Guzzo in 2009). Both objects share the same basaltic material, a comparable degree of polishing, a similar glyphic style, and mention the same royal anthroponym — Hazael (HZ'L). Yet the Tel Dan Stele is unanimously recognized as shattered and incomplete: its three fragments (A, B1, B2) preserve only a portion of the original text, and the author's name — Hazael — does not appear anywhere in the extant material. Starting from this observation, we propose a systematic comparison at three levels — physical, philological, and semantic — in order to assess whether the Tell Afis fragment could constitute an additional piece of the same stele. The geographical distance between the two findspots (approximately 400 km) does not, in itself, constitute a disqualifying argument, as the motivation for the displacement remains unknown. We conclude that the convergence of indicators warrants instrumental petrographic analysis and a digital comparison of fracture profiles.

Keywords: Tel Dan Stele · Tell Afis · Hazael · Aramaic epigraphy · KAI 310 · Amadasi Guzzo · epigraphic fragments · comparative philology · Langlois RTI

## 1. Introduction and Background

The Tel Dan Stele is one of the most debated Aramaic inscriptions in the Near Eastern epigraphic corpus. Discovered in 1993 and 1994 at the site of Tel Dan (northern Israel) by Avraham Biran's team, it consists of three black basalt fragments (A, B1, B2) that reconstruct only a fraction of the original inscription. The object, shattered in antiquity, was apparently reused as building material in an eighth-century BCE wall. The preserved text — thirteen partial lines — refers to a military victory over the kings of Israel and the 'House of David', and is generally attributed to Hazael, king of Aram-Damascus. Central paradox: the name Hazael appears nowhere in the inscription.

The Aramaic fragment from Tell Afis (TA.03.A.300) was discovered in 2003 during excavations of the Mission of the Universities of Rome and Florence at Tell Afis (Idlib governorate, northern Syria), a site identified with ancient Hazrak (Hatarikka under the Neo-Assyrians), under the direction of Stefania Mazzoni. The fragment was reused in the pavement of the southern area of Temple AI on the acropolis (area A1). Published by Maria Giulia Amadasi Guzzo in the journal *Orientalia* in 2009 (inv. TA.03.A.300; drawing: Amadasi Guzzo and A. De Bonis), this basalt fragment measuring 24 cm (h.) × 7.8 cm (w.) ×

5.2 cm (th.), with letter heights ranging from 1.2 cm (zayin, l. 5') to 2.8 cm (aleph, l. 2'), bears seven partial lines of an Aramaic inscription in which line 5' contains the anthroponym HZ'L (Hazaël) and line 7' the lexeme MLK (king).

It is the simultaneous observation of several common characteristics that motivated the present study: same lithic material (basalt), same surface condition (polished), comparable glyphic style, and above all the mention of the same royal anthroponym in two corpora that structurally complement each other – one having the text without the author's name, the other having the name without the developed text.

## 2. Postulate and Methodological Framework

*If two epigraphic fragments share the same material, the same surface treatment, the same glyphic style and the same royal anthroponym, and if one structurally fills the documented lacunae of the other, the hypothesis of a common origin deserves to be systematically evaluated, independently of the geographical distance between their respective findspots.*

The comparison is conducted at three distinct levels, in increasing order of probative constraint:

- Physical and material level: material, surface condition, dimensions, fracture profiles
- Philological level: glyphic style, letter morphology, interlinear spacing
- Semantic level: complementarity of textual content, narrative coherence

## 3. The Aramaic Fragment from Tell Afis TA.03.A.300 – Primary Description

### 3.1 Archaeological Context of Discovery

*“A basalt stele fragment bearing an Aramaic inscription (inv. TA.03.A.300) was found during excavations of the Mission of the Universities of Rome and Florence at Tell Afis, corresponding to the ancient center of Ḥazrak. The fragment was reused in 2003 in the pavement of the southern area of Temple A1 on the acropolis (area A1). It measures 24 cm in height, 7.8 cm in width, and 5.2 cm in thickness; the letters range from 1.2 cm (zayin of line 5') to 2.8 cm (aleph of line 2').” – Amadasi Guzzo, *Orientalia* 78 (2009), p. 336.*

The site of Tell Afis corresponds to ancient Ḥazrak (Hatarikka under the Neo-Assyrians), capital of the kingdom of Hamath and Lu'ash, identified through the Zakkur stele (KAI 202) found at the same site in 1903 by Henri Pognon. The Mission of the Universities of Rome and Florence, under the direction of Stefania Mazzoni, conducted excavations there from 1986 to 2010. The discovery context – reuse in a temple pavement – is directly comparable to that of the Tel Dan fragments, which were also found in a secondary position within a construction wall.

### 3.2 Transcription and Analysis of the Seven Preserved Lines

The preserved inscription comprises seven partial lines, lacunary on both sides. We reproduce here Amadasi Guzzo's transcription with notation of illegible signs (?) and uncertain readings (1):

Lig ne	Transcription (Amadasi Guzzo)	Lecture	Commentaire
1'	] [	Single letter, undetermined context	Single letter, undetermined context
2'	] (?) <sup>1</sup> ' (?) [	Alef + illisibles	Aleph = 2.8 cm — maximum height. Heavily lacunary line.
3'	] Q <sup>1</sup> D/R [	Qof + Dalet ou Resh	Uncertain reading (1). Possible root QDR.
4'	] Š <sup>1</sup> L KL [	Tsade-Lamed + Kaf-Lamed	Uncertain reading. ŠL (protection?) + KL (all?).
5'	] <b>LHZ' L</b> [	<b>HZ' L = Hazael</b>	<b>KEY LINE</b> — Zayin = 1.2 cm (smallest letter). <sup>1</sup> = one sign with slightly uncertain reading. Attested royal anthroponym.
6'	] YHW(?) [	YHW — theonym/PN	(?) = illegible sign. Yahwistic theophoric element or beginning of anthroponym.
7'	] <b>MLK</b> [	<b>MLK = king</b>	<b>KEY LINE</b> — In combination with HZ' L (1.5'): Hazael king.

Table 1 — Transcription of fragment TA.03.A.300 after Amadasi Guzzo (2009). Orange lines = key elements for the hypothesis.

## 4. The Tel Dan Puzzle — An Open Reconstruction Problem

Before any comparison with Tell Afis, it is essential to recall that the internal reconstruction of the Tel Dan Stele is itself an unresolved problem. This fact, often minimized in the secondary literature, is central to our approach.

### 4.1 Biran and Naveh's Admission

The editors themselves admitted in 1995: “Fragments A and B cannot be joined in an obvious and unambiguous manner” (Biran & Naveh, IEJ 45, 1995, p. 11). This statement, buried in a footnote, is of considerable significance: it means that the lateral placement of B to the left of A — the basis of all subsequent reconstructions — is a working hypothesis, not a physical certainty.

### 4.2 Alternative Reconstructions

Several reconstructions of the relative placement of A and B coexist in the literature:

- Biran & Naveh (1993/1995): B to the left of A, lateral — standard reconstruction
- Schniedewind (1996): minor adjustments to the standard lateral placement
- Galil: B above A, vertical stacking
- Athas (2003): B well below A, vertical stacking — based on differing chisel angles between A and B1/B2
- Staszak (2009): B derives from the lower edge, A from the upper edge of the stele — two different scribes

### 4.3 Langlois's Conclusion (RTI, IEJ 74/2, 2024)

In 2024, Michael Langlois (University of Strasbourg) applied Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI) to all the fragments. His conclusions are unambiguous:

- Fragment A presents a bet (𐤁) formed of two straight strokes — scribe 1
- Fragments B1 and B2 present a curved bet — scribe 2
- *“The placement suggested by the editors must be abandoned: fragment B does not continue the lines begun by fragment A” (Langlois, IEJ 74/2, 2024)*

This conclusion reopens the entire spatial reconstruction. The Tel Dan puzzle now has three mobile pieces whose exact topographical relationships remain open. It is in this context that a fourth piece — the Tell Afis fragment — may be proposed as a candidate for integration.

## 5. Physical and Material Convergences

### 5.1 Comparative Table

Characteristic	Tel Dan Stele (A+B)	Fragment Tell Afis
Material	Black basalt	Basalt
Surface condition	Polished (inscribed face)	Polished (inscribed face)
Preserved dimensions	A : ~32×22×28 cm · B : ~20×25 cm	24×7,8×5 cm
Discovery context	Secondary reuse (wall)	Secondary reuse (temple debris)
Language / script	Old Aramaic / Phoenician alphabet	Old Aramaic / Phoenician alphabet
Anthroponym Hazael	Absent — <i>inferred only</i>	Attested HZ'L (l.5') + MLK (l.7')
Documented scribes	2 distinct scribes (Langlois 2024)	Not analyzed

Table 3 – Comparison of physical characteristics.

### 5.2 Fracture Profiles — Analytical Gap

The comparison of fracture profiles constitutes the decisive mechanical argument but is not yet available. If the fracture edges physically interlock and if the glyphs align on either side of the fracture, the proof of common membership is direct and sufficient — this is exactly the method used by Biran and Naveh to establish that B1 and B2 belong to the same object. At this stage, we work solely from published epigraphic drawings, whose precision is insufficient to conclude on mechanical interlocking. Furthermore, no geochemical provenance analysis of the Tel Dan basalt has been published to date — a remarkable gap in the literature.

## 6. Philological Convergences

### 6.1 Glyphic Style

A preliminary glyphic comparison based on published epigraphic drawings reveals a compatible letter morphology across the three corpora. In particular, the HE (𐤇) presents a three-horizontal-stroke form characteristic of ninth–eighth century BCE Aramaic in all three fragments, the LAMED (𐤋) shows the same swan-neck curve, and the interlinear spacing is

regular and comparable. These preliminary observations must be confirmed by RTI analysis or by a specialist epigraphist with access to the original photographs.

## 5.2 L'The Central Structural Anomaly: Absence of the Author's Name

In all comparable Aramaic royal victory inscriptions — Zakkur (KAI 202), Mesha (KAI 181), Kilamuwa (KAI 24), Bar-Rakib (KAI 216) — the king names himself in the incipit or subscript. The absence of the author's name in Tel Dan constitutes a major structural anomaly without precedent in the genre. Neither fragment A (scribe 1, upper edge) nor fragment B (scribe 2, lower edge) contains the name Hazael. This absence across both distinct scribes of the same stele is structurally impossible — unless the name appears on a fragment not yet associated with the corpus. The Tell Afis fragment is that candidate.

## 7. Philological and Semantic Reconstruction — Three Sources

The following table presents a line-by-line reconstruction of the hypothetical complete inscription, rigorously distinguishing the three sources by color and indicating the certainty level of each restitution.

Fragment A (blue)	Fragment B (green)	Tell Afis (orange) — hypothesis
Biran & Naveh 1993 · scribe 1 · upper edge	Biran & Naveh 1995 · scribe 2 · lower edge	Amadasi Guzzo 2009 · position to be determined

L.	Source	Aramaic Transliteration	English Translation	Certainty
<b>INCIPIT — Tell Afis Fragment TA.03.A.300 (Amadasi Guzzo 2009) — hypothetical position</b>				
I	Afis	]nk · HZ'L · mlk · 'rm[	<i>I, Hazael, king of Aram</i>	MEDIUM
II	Afis	[...] ]Q · D/R[ [...]	[...] {dynastic formula} [...]	WEAK
III	Afis	[...] ]YHW(?)[ [...]	[...] {theonym / anthroponym YHW-} [...]	WEAK
IV	Afis	[...] ]SL · KL[ [...]	[...] {undetermined} [...]	WEAK
<b>MAIN BODY — Fragment A (Biran &amp; Naveh 1993) — upper edge · scribe 1 · straight-stroke bet (Langlois RTI 2024)</b>				
1	Frag. A	[ ]mr · [ ] · wgzr[...]	[...] said [...] and cut [...]	STRONG (beginning)
2	Frag. A	[ ] · 'by · ysq[· lwh·bh]tlh·mh · b'[...]	<i>My father went up [against him, fought] in [...]</i>	STRONG (center)
3	Frag. A	wyškb · 'by · yhk · 'l[·'bhw]h · wy'l · mlky[yšr'l]	<i>My father lay down, went to his [ancestors]. King of Is[rael]</i>	STRONG
4	Frag. A	r'l · qdm · b'r q · 'by[·w]hmlk · hdd · '[ty 'nh]	<i>entered the land of my father. And Hadad made [me] king</i>	STRONG
5	Frag. A	'nh · wyhk · hdd · qdmy[·w]'pq · mn · šb'[t šby']	<i>me. And Hadad marched before me. I went forth from seven [campaigns]</i>	STRONG
6	Frag. A	y · mlky · w'qtl · ml[kn·šb]'n · sry · '[py·rkb]	<i>of my kingdom. I killed [seven]ty kings, [a thousand char]iots</i>	STRONG
7	Frag. A	kb · w'lp · prš · [qtl·'yt·yhw]rm · br · '[h'b mlk yšr'l]	<i>and a thousand horsemen. [I killed Jeho]ram son [of Ahab, king of Israel]</i>	STRONG/MEDIUM

8	<b>Frag. A</b>	mlk · yśr'l · wqtl[t·yt·'h̄z]yhw · br[·yhwrm·mlk]	king of Israel. And I kil[lēd Aha]ziah son [of Joram, king]	STRONG/MEDIUM
9	<b>Frag. A</b>	k · bytdwd · w'šm[·yt·qryt·hm·h̄rbt·w'hp k·'ythn]	of the House of David. And I laid waste [their cities with the sword...]	STRONG
10	<b>Frag. A</b>	yt · 'rq · hm · l[yšmn ...]	their land to [desolation...]	STRONG (beginning)
11	<b>Frag. A</b>	'h̄rn · wlh[...wyhw' · m]	the other. And for him [...and Jehu reigned]	MEDIUM
12	<b>Frag. A</b>	lk · 'l · yś[r'l... w'šm · [...]	king over Is[rael...] And I laid waste [...]	MEDIUM
13	<b>Frag. A</b>	mšr · '[l · kl h' rš]	tribute upon [all the land]	STRONG (beginning)
<b>LOWER EDGE – Fragment B / B1+B2 (Biran &amp; Naveh 1995) – scribe 2 · curved bet (Langlois RTI 2024) · lateral placement ABANDONED</b>				
β1	<b>Frag. B</b>	[...] mlky · [...]	[...] my kings [...]	MEDIUM
β2	<b>Frag. B</b>	[...] w'qtl · ml[kn...]	[...] and I killed the king[s...]	MEDIUM
β3	<b>Frag. B</b>	[...] 'sry · '[lpy...]	[...] a thousand [chariots...]	MEDIUM
β4	<b>Frag. B</b>	[...] yhw]rm · br[·'h' b...]	[...] Jo]ram son [of Ahab...]	MEDIUM
β5	<b>Frag. B</b>	[...] 'h̄z]yhw · br[·yhwrm...]	[...] Aha]ziah son [of Joram...]	MEDIUM
β6	<b>Frag. B</b>	[...] bytdwd · w'šm[...]	[...] House of David. And I laid waste [...]	STRONG
β7	<b>Frag. B</b>	[...] wyhw' · mlk[...]	[...] and Jehu reigned [over Israel...]	MEDIUM
<i>CLOSING FORMULA – total lacuna in all three corpora · restitution by analogy (Zakkur, Meshah) · certainty WEAK</i>				

Table 4 – Three-color philological reconstruction. [ ] = attested lacuna · { } = conjectural restitution · plain text = attested.

### 7.1 Reconstructed Continuous Text – English Translation

*I, Hazael, king of Aram [...dynastic formula...] My father went up against him and fought in [the land of Israel]. My father lay down and went to his ancestors. And the king of Israel had previously entered the land of my father. And Hadad made me king, and Hadad marched before me. I went forth from seven [campaigns] of my kingdom. I killed [seven]ty kings, [a thousand chariots] and a thousand horsemen. [I killed Jeho]ram son [of Ahab king of Israel,] and I killed [Aha]ziah son [of Joram king] of the House of David. And I laid waste [their cities with the sword,] their land to [desolation...] [— lacuna —] [...] and I killed the kings [...] a thousand [chariots...] Jo]ram son [of Ahab...] Aha]ziah son [of Joram...] House of David. And I laid waste [...] and Jehu reigned [over Israel...] [...closing formula / curse – total lacuna]*

## 8. Discussion and Limitations

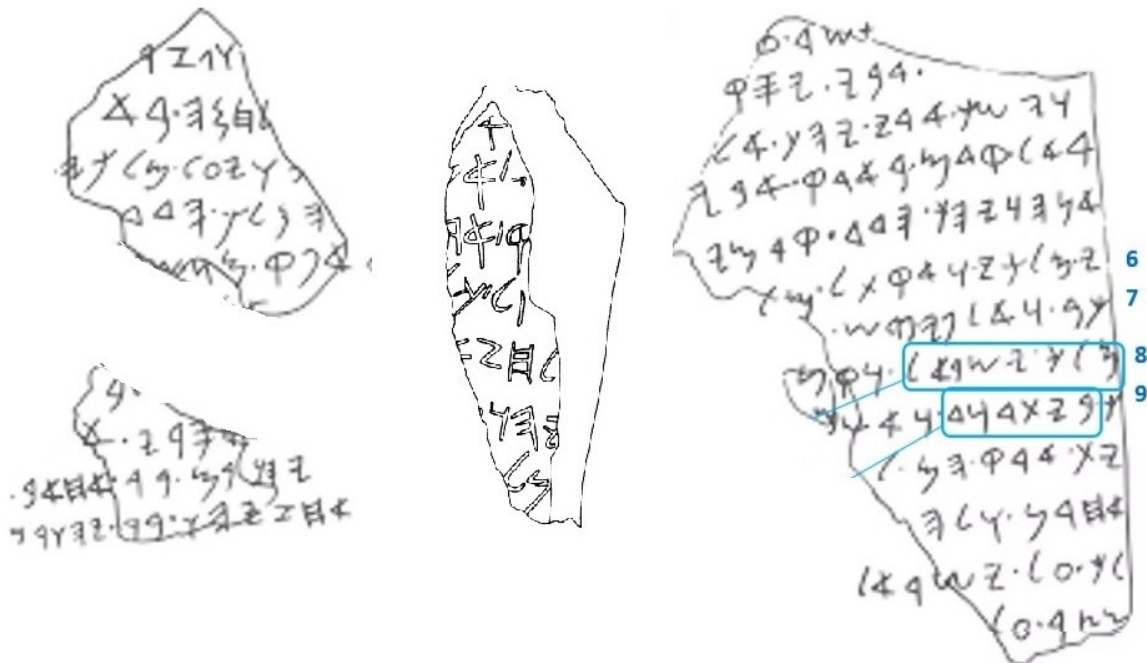
### 8.1 Arguments in Favor of the Hypothesis

- Same material (polished black basalt), same documentary genre (Aramaic royal victory stele)
- Compatible glyphic style (preliminary analysis based on published drawings)
- Direct semantic complementarity: Tell Afis provides HZ L+MLK, absent from both A and B
- Same discovery context (secondary position, reuse)
- The standard reconstruction (Biran & Naveh) has been abandoned by Langlois 2024 – the puzzle is fully reopened
- Three mobile pieces + one candidate fourth = a configuration consistent with a four-fragment stele in which the author's name is finally attested

### 8.2 Limitations and Objections

- Geographical distance of ~400 km between findspots – with no known explanation for this displacement.
- Absence of published comparative petrographic analysis (a gap to be filled)
- Available epigraphic drawings are insufficient to establish the mechanical interlocking of fracture profiles
- HZ'L est un HZ'L is an anthroponym attributed to several figures in the Aramaic corpus
- The Tell Afis fragment is held in Syria, the Tel Dan fragments in Jerusalem – physical comparison currently impossible for geopolitical reasons

#### 2D image of fragments to be refined:



## 9. Conclusions and Research Programme

The present study demonstrates that the convergences between the Aramaic fragment from Tell Afis (TA.03.A.300) and the Tel Dan Stele are sufficiently numerous and structurally significant to warrant a thorough scientific investigation. Langlois's (2024) questioning of the Biran & Naveh reconstruction, by fully reopening the spatial puzzle of Tel Dan, strengthens the legitimacy of this approach.

We propose the following research programme:

- Comparative petrographic analysis (XRF or ICP-MS) of the basalts from all three fragments to determine whether their geochemical composition is consistent with a common origin
- 3D digitization of fracture profiles and digital comparison of contours — RTI method or 3D scanning
- Detailed epigraphic analysis of glyphs from original photographs — bet morphology in particular (scribe 1, scribe 2, Tell Afis)
- Revision of the Tel Dan spatial reconstruction integrating the Tell Afis fragment as a fourth candidate piece, in continuity with Langlois's work

The question is not resolved. It deserves to be asked.

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