

Study: Literacy in Ancient Israel Was 'Far More Widespread than Previously Known'

The Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences published [a study](#) on Monday revealing that literacy among ancient Israeli soldiers was much higher than previously believed.

The study was based on 16 inscriptions on pottery fragments (known as ostracons) unearthed near the Dead Sea in an excavation from the Judahite desert fortress of Arad. The inscriptions are dated ca. 600 BCE—the eve of Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of Jerusalem.

The analysis, which used new methods for image processing and document analysis, as well as machine learning algorithms, found evidence indicating that “in this remote fort literacy had spread throughout the military hierarchy, down to the quartermaster and probably even below that rank.”

It's a literacy far beyond what scholars previously believed, and researchers said the writing of the soldiers was surprisingly impressive.

“There is an understanding of the power of literacy. And they wrote well, with hardly any mistakes,” Prof. Israel Finkelstein of the Department of Archaeology at Tel Aviv University, a project leader of the study, [told the New York Times](#).

In the abstract of the study, researchers said the research “implies that an educational infrastructure that could support the composition of literary texts in Judah already existed before the destruction of the first Temple.”

Why does any of this matter, you might ask?

Well, for years scholars have debated when the books of the Pentateuch (or Torah) were compiled. Many scholars have long insisted that Israeli scribes during the period of the destruction of the first Temple and the subsequent exile to Babylon (586 B.C.), would have lacked the know-how and infrastructure to perform such a vast undertaking.

The research of the Tel Aviv team, however, suggests that during this period “