A FRESH LOOK AT THE MEKAL STELE

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Abstract: *This article discusses the Mekal stele, a New Kingdom funerary stele from Beth-Shean (northern Palestine) depicting a certain Amenemopet and his son Paraemheb worshipping a god named "Mekal, god of Beth-Shean". Mekal is a most mysterious god, as he still lacks secure identification in other Egyptian and Levantine sources. This article offers a new edition of the stele, and a fresh discussion of the iconographic type of Mekal in relation to other Egyptian depictions of Asiatic gods, such as Baal-Seth and Reshef. It then offers a critical review of the main past attempts at identifying epigraphic and onomastic parallels to Mekal, and also discusses the dating of the stele, formerly set in Dynasty 18, but now provable to belong in Dynasty 19. It finally argues for the presence of a second funerary stele of Amenemopet in Beth-Shean, before offering a cautious conclusion regarding the god's identity.*

Keywords: *Mekal, Beth-Shean, Reshef, Baal, Seth, Canaanite religion*

Introduction

The Mekal stele (PM VII, 377, Fig. 1) is a New Kingdom Egyptian funerary stele found in 1928 in Beth-Shean (northern Palestine), during excavations of the University of Pennsylvania Museum, directed by Alan Rowe. The stele depicts an Egyptian architect (*ḳd*) named Amenemopet worshipping a divinity called "Mekal, god of Beth-Shean". It is made of limestone and measures 27.8 cm (height) × 19.8 cm (width). Formerly on display at the Rockefeller Museum, Jerusalem (inventory number 995), it is currently housed at the Israel Museum (inventory number IAA S-982). The ste-

le, broken in Antiquity, has been reassembled from several fragments and is now almost complete. The central part of the stele is however heavily damaged, possibly intentionally, and is no longer readable. Most of the text is, however, preserved and contains a classical $ḥtp(t)$-di-$nswt$ offering formula. The stele is organised in two horizontal registers of roughly equal size. In the upper register, the god, sitting on the left side, faces two standing figures with their right hands raised in adoration. A hieroglyphic text identifying the divinity and the two figures lies above the scene. The lower register contains the offering formula on the left side, and two badly damaged figures on the right side, one of them kneeling, the other one standing behind him. The stele has been the subject of several publications, the most notable of which are the detailed study by Vincent[2] and a monograph by Thompson.[3] Facsimiles of the stele appeared in the works of Rowe,[4] Eggler,[5] Müller-Karpe[6] and Schroer.[7] Translations of the stele have been published by Mallon[8] (French), Stadelmann[9] (German) and Rowe.[10] To the best of our knowledge, however, no detailed study of the Mekal stele has appeared since the publication of Thompson's work almost fifty years ago, and a fresh look at the stele, taking advantage of more recent insights and offering a critical look at previous work, thus seems to be called for. This paper proposes (1) a new edition of the stele's inscription, (2) a detailed description of the stele's iconography, highlighting the relation between Mekal and two other important Canaanite deities, (3) a critical survey of former research related to the mysterious identity of Mekal, (4) a detailed discussion of the dating of the stele – formerly set in Dynasty 18

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[2] Vincent 1928.
[3] Thompson 1970.
[4] Rowe 1940, frontispiece.
[5] Eggler 2006.
[6] Müller-Karpe 1980, Tafel 125. This facsimile lacks the lower right fragment of the stele.
[7] Schroer 2011, 360–361, fig. 932. This facsimile features only the upper register of the stele.
[8] Mallon 1928, 124–130.
[9] Stadelmann 1967, 62–63.
[10] Rowe 1930, 15.

Fig. 1 The Mekal stele (photograph by Elie Posner, courtesy of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem).

but now datable to Dynasty 19, (5) a discussion of the relation of our stele to another stele from Beth-Shean, usually attributed to a later stratum, but more probably contemporary to the Mekal stele and referring to the same Amenemopet.

1. Text

Above the god

mkr nṯr ⌜ʿȝ⌝ *<nb> bȝti-šȝr*

Mekal[a], the ⌜great[b]⌝ god, <lord of> Beth-Shean[c].

Above the deceased

ir n ḳd ⌜*imn-m-ipt*⌝ *mȝʿ-ḫrw in sȝ.f pȝ-rʿ-m-ḥb*

Made for the architect ⌜Amenemopet[d]⌝, justified, by[e] his son Paraemheb[f].

Lower register

(*1*) *ḥtp(t)-di-nswt* (*n*) *mkr nṯr* ⌜ʿȝ⌝ *di.f n.k* ⌜*nḫ wḏȝ snb* (2) *spd-ḥr ḥsw(t) mrwt rȝ wḏȝ(w) nmtt* (*r*) *st(.s)* (*r*) *pḥt.k imȝḫ* (3) ⌜*m ḥtp n kȝ n ḥsj*⌝ *nṯr.f ḳd imn-m-ipt mȝʿ-*[*ḫrw* (4) *in sȝ.f pȝ-rʿ-m-ḥb*]

(1) Royal offering for Mekal, the great god, that he might grant you life, power, health, (2) sharp vision[g,h], honor, love, a discerning mouth[i], freedom of movement[j,k], until you have reached[l] the state of venerable (3) ⌜in peace⌝. ⌜For the *ka* of the honored⌝ of his god, the architect Amenemopet, jus[tified, (4) by his son Paraemheb[m].]

Epigraphic notes

(a) The reading of the god's name as "Mekal" is due to Rowe and already appeared in early preliminary reports.[11] It has now become the standard spelling of the name, and Rowe's vocalisation with vowels *e* and *a* seems to simply derive from the traditional Egyptological convention of reading an *e* vowel between two consonants and an *a* vowel for the *ȝ* sign. His transcription, as it appeared in 1936,[12] is indeed *mkȝr*, with a full *ȝ* sign. We note however that according to Egyptian spelling rules of Semitic names, the *ȝ* hieroglyph does not stand for a consonantal *alef*, but rather for a vowel[13] (attached to the *k* consonant in our case). This rule is followed by Leitz's *Lexikon*, where our god appears under the entry *mkr* (LGG III, 458), thus not integrating a consonantal *alef* in the god's name. Another question concerns the reading of the forearm sign (D36). Rowe's choice of not transcribing the D36 hieroglyph as an *ayn* is fully compliant with the standard "alphabetical" spelling of Asiatic names, where the *m* + D36 group usually stands for the sole Semitic consonant *m*, possibly followed by a vowel,[14] a practice also attested in the spelling of many standard Egyptian words, due to the use of the simple forearm D36 as a substitute for D37/D38 (forearm holding bread/pot[15]). The final group of hieroglyphs (*r* mouth + Z1 stroke) can render both Semitic *r* and *l* sounds, possibly followed by a vowel.[16] Rowe's choice of reading the final *r* sign as a Semitic *l* seems to have been motivated by his interpretation of the god's name as derived from the Semitic

[11]   Rowe 1928, 149.
[12]   Rowe 1936, 253.
[13]   Schenkel 1986, 115–117; Hoch 1994, 500.

[14]   Schenkel 1986, 115; Hoch 1994, 508.
[15]   Gardiner 1957, 454.
[16]   Schenkel 1986, 115; Hoch 1994, 435, 509.

root ʾkl, "eat".[17] We have opted for the economic and cautious transcription *mkr*, as in Leitz's *Lexikon*, thus excluding any consonantal *alef* or *ayn*, but still allowing an interpretation of either *l* or *r* for the final Semitic consonant.

(b) The last sign of the column is very damaged, being crossed by a deep crack in the stone. It appears at first glance like a straight horizontal line, with a diagonal stroke descending at its right side. Since the sign is situated slightly below the vertical separation lines, it is also not entirely sure a priori that it is a hieroglyph at all, and some facsimiles (Eggler, Schroer) indeed do not include it as part of the hieroglyphic text. Alan Rowe seems to have interpreted it as a *nb* sign, as shown by both his original translation "Mekal, the [great] god, the lord of Beth-shan"[18] and his later transcription *nṯr* <ꜥꜣ> *nb* *bꜣti-šꜣr*,[19] and the sign does indeed slightly resemble *nb* in some photographs.[20] However, my own inspection of the stele at the Israel Museum shows that the sign is too flat for *nb*,[21] but would nicely fit an ꜥꜣ sign, hence my rendering *nṯr* ꜥꜣ <*nb*> *bꜣti-šꜣr* rather than Rowe's *nṯr* <ꜥꜣ> *nb* *bꜣti-šꜣr*. Furthermore, a closeup of the sign (Fig. 2a) in the new photograph provided by the Israel Museum (Fig. 1) does seem to confirm this reading, with the triangular head of the ꜥꜣ sign on the right side clearly distinct from the diagonal lower stroke. This stroke would then not be part of the hieroglyphic sign, and would be due either to an engraver's mistake or to some posterior damage to the stone. Finally, a reading ꜥꜣ of our sign would also perfectly match the *mkr nṯr* ꜥꜣ clearly readable at the beginning of the lower register.

(c) The spelling of the city of Beth-Shean appears here with an *r* sign even though all Hebrew spellings of the name – as well as its unique attestation in the Amarna letters (*bit ša-a-ni* in EA 289:20[22]) – feature a Semitic *n* sound, a sound which is normally transcribed in Egyptian by an *n* hieroglyph.[23] This spelling is however consistent with all the Egyptian spellings of the city's name gathered by Ahituv, with the sole – and late – exception of Shoshenq I's topographical list, featuring both the *r* and *n* hieroglyphs.[24]

(d) The name of the deceased is reconstructed here according to the inscription in the lower register.

(e) Note the unusual, rather cursive, aspect of the S3 red crown hieroglyph. Other examples of hieroglyphs bearing a cursive aspect in the Mekal stele are the A40 seated god hieroglyph at the bottom of column 4 and the V28 (*ḥ*) hieroglyph at the bottom of column 7 (both in the upper register).

(f) Paraemheb ("Ra is in a festive mood") is a common name in the New Kingdom.[25] Albright proposed a possible identification of this character with an Egyptian scribe and physician named *Pareamaḫû*,[26] mentioned in an Akkadian letter from Boğazköy.[27] The identification rested on the phonetic similarity between the names, the chronology of the letter (dating to Ramesses II), and an alleged reference to *Pareamaḫû* being sent to Hatti for the purpose of "building houses" (*ana epeši É.MEŠ*). This identification (still appearing in Thompson's monograph[28]) is however obsolete, as the correct reading is now universally understood to be *ana epeši Ú.MEŠ*, "*in order to prepare medecines*", an activity more in line with a physician's work than house building.[29]

(g) The reading *spd-ḥr* proposed by Rowe[30] is the only one to possibly make sense in this context. The spelling of *ḥr* seems strange however, especially as it appeared in previous photographs of the stele, with the upper part of the quadrat resembling *ḥr* but its lower part hinting at a *b* sign.[31] Rowe's facsimile made it look like a *smꜣ* sign and Eggler's like a *ti* sign. The reading *spd-ḥr* is however assured, and one cannot escape Rowe's conclusion that "the sign after *sepd* is a sculptor's error for *ḥer*".[32] Rowe's reading – and the sculptor's "error" – are con-

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[17] Rowe 1930, 15.

[18] Rowe 1930, 14.

[19] Rowe 1936, 253.

[20] Thompson 1970, pl. V.

[21] See also Rowe 1930, pl. 33.

[22] See Mazar 2011, 157.

[23] See for example Schenkel 1986, 115; Hoch 1994, 432.

[24] Ahituv 1989, 78–79.

[25] Ranke 1935, 114, no. 13.

[26] Albright 1936, 77.

[27] KUB III, 67.

[28] Thompson 1970, 56.

[29] See Edel 1976, 87–88, for a more detailed discussion of Albright's misreading.

[30] Rowe 1930, 15.

[31] Thompson 1970, pl. V.

firmed by our closeup of the new Israel Museum photograph (Fig. 2b), where the *ḥr* face and its underlying Z1 sign appear more clearly than before, but where the engraver apparently extended the Z1 sign too much upwards, thus creating a lack of space forcing him to orient the face and beard of the *ḥr* face slightly towards the left (instead of its expected downward orientation).

(h) Litt. "sharp of face", a *nfr ḥr* construction, used here in a substantive way, and often accompanying *ḥswt* and *mrwt* in offering formulae.[33] The expression is rendered as "*aufmerksam, tüchtig*" by the *Wörterbuch*[34] and "alert, alertness" by Faulkner's dictionary.[35] It is often interpreted as referring to intelligence,[36] but also to skill in interpersonal relations, being able to discern between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour.[37]

(i) According to the *Wörterbuch*,[38] the expression *wḏꜣ rꜣ* refers to qualities related to the proper use of the mouth, notably the quality of discretion (*verschwiegen*), among others. The expression has also been rendered as such in Barta's treatise on offering formulae, where *rꜣ.i wḏꜣw* is rendered "*daß mein Mund richtig gebraucht wird*".[39] Used here in conjunction with *spd-ḥr* (after the more standard formulaic *ḥswt mrwt*), the formula seems well suited for government officials, whose role certainly involved a certain amount of discretion, as well as skill in interpersonal relations (see note (h) above on *spd-ḥr*).[40] We have thus opted for a translation highlighting this aspect of proper use of the mouth, rather than the rendering "a prosperous mouth" favoured by Rowe.[41]

(j) The expression *nmtt r st.s* refers to liberty of movement,[42] hence, in our funerary context, to the deceased's liberty of movement in the afterlife. The *s* suffix pronoun in *nmtt r st.s* refers to *nmtt*, and not to the deity, as sometimes assumed,[43] since this *s* pronoun even occurs in funerary inscriptions when the god is clearly masculine or a plurality of gods are involved.[44]

(k) The sign next to the *nmtt* (D54) ideogram and above the Z1 stroke looks more like a *rꜣ* mouth than a *t* sign (as does the *t* of *nṯr* in the next column). We read it however as the *t* phonetic complement expected in the common spelling of *nmtt*,[45] rather than a less elegant *r* preposition followed by the Z1 stroke (note that the *Wörterbuch*[46] does not mention any spelling of *nmtt* written with the sole D54 ideogram, without any phonetic complement).

(l) The stele apparently uses here a *sḏm.t.f* form, thus justifying Rowe's translation "[until] thou reachest a venerated state in peace".[47] We note that some authors, such as Barta,[48] in parallel inscriptions with *pḥ* and a *t* infix, remove the written *t*, seemingly preferring a subjunctive form denoting goal, rather than a *sḏm.t.f* form. There is no need for such emendation however, and the adding of an omitted *r* preposition before the verbal form seems preferable.[49] Indeed, the *sḏm.t.f* form preceded by *r* is well attested in the sense "until + verb", with an accomplished connotation.[50] Furthermore, the use of *sḏm.t.f* with the verb *pḥ* is noted in several grammars, such as De Buck's, who translates *r pḥ.t.i ẖnw* by "*jusqu'au moment où j'atteignis la Résidence*",[51] and Lefebvre's, who provides *pḥ* as the first example in his list of verbs attested in the *sḏm.t.f* form.[52]

(m) The name Paraemheb is restituted here according to the inscription in the upper register.

2. Iconography

This section examines the iconography of the stele, starting with a general description, then dis-

[32]   Rowe 1940, 59.
[33]   Barta 1968, Bitte 122.
[34]   *Wb.* IV, 109, 16.
[35]   F*CD*, 223–224.
[36]   David 2004, 48.
[37]   Nyord 2009, 161.
[38]   *Wb.* I, 400, 7–8.
[39]   Barta 1968, 133.
[40]   On *spd-ḥr* as a typical quality of officials, see for example Kaper 2003, 171.
[41]   Rowe 1930, 14–15.
[42]   *Wb.* II, 271, 9.
[43]   Davies 1927, 39.
[44]   See examples in Barta 1968, 120, 148.
[45]   *Wb.* II, 271, 9.
[46]   *Wb.* II, 271.
[47]   Rowe 1930, 14–15.
[48]   Barta 1968, 148, Bitte 114, no. a.
[49]   For the frequent omission of the *r* preposition in Late Egyptian, see for example Černý and Israelit-Groll 1993, 110–111.
[50]   See for example Allen 2000, 310–311, §22.14 and §22.16, where *sḏm.t.f* is translated as "up to (the point of) his complete hearing".
[51]   De Buck 1982, 90, §175.
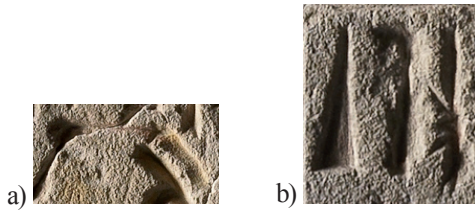[52]   Lefebvre 1955, §416.

Fig. 2 Closeups of selected signs, (a) ꜥꜣ, (b) *spd-ḥr*

cusses in more details the iconography of the god and its parallels.

2.1 The scene

In the upper register, the god is shown seated on a throne, holding a *was* sceptre and a flower in his left hand, and an *ankh* cross in his right hand. He is faced by two adoring figures, depicted with typical Egyptian dress and headdress. They are both standing with their right hand facing the god in adoration, and the left hand holding a lotus flower. The larger figure is identified by the inscription above him as the deceased, Amenemopet, and the smaller figure behind him as his son Paraemheb, dedicator of the stele. Traces of two additional floral features can be seen between the god and the deceased, the first one apparently a flower, facing the god near his sceptre, the second one apparently a leaf, situated between the deceased and his lotus flower. These two floral features probably emerged from an offering stand (now lost) situated in the space between the god and the deceased. In the lower register, the larger figure (almost certainly the deceased) is shown kneeling, with only the lower part of his body preserved, and the smaller figure (the dedicator) standing behind him, with his right hand facing the ground, and his left hand raised. The shape of his left leg is somewhat unusual as it is both very large and drawn as if covering the dress. In front of the kneeling figure stands

an offering stand surrounded by floral motifs, well preserved on the left side, and only slightly visible on the right side.

2.2 The God

Mekal. The stele's scene could be seen as a typical Egyptian funerary stele, except for the particular iconography of the god, which we now discuss. The god's depiction mixes some typical Egyptian features (e. g. *was* sceptre, *ankh* cross) with characteristics not typical of Egyptian gods, rather pertaining to the Levantine repertoire. Among the latter, his most specific attribute is his conical tiara (roughly reminiscent of the Egyptian white crown) terminated by a long streamer descending until knee level, with a headband attached around the tiara's base, ending in a ribbon descending along the god's back. Two horns depart from the god's front, at the level of the headband. The god's beard is a real "Asiatic type" beard, as opposed to the classical Egyptian fake beard. The face of the god is neatly executed, with finely carved ear, eye, nose and mouth. He also wears a small and tight necklace. His dress seems otherwise fairly simple, without any apparent distinctive elements, and his lower limbs are not preserved below knee level. As the Mekal stele provides the only known depiction of the god, authors have naturally compared his depiction to that of the two other main Levantine gods attested in New Kingdom Egyptian iconography, namely Baal and Reshef. The next sections present some features of these gods' iconography, in order to discuss how Mekal stands in relation to them.

The Baal-Seth parallel. Baal-Seth is the name commonly given[53] to a god that appears under the name "Seth" in New Kingdom Egyptian reliefs, but bears Levantine iconographic attributes which entailed his identification by modern scholarship as an avatar of the god Baal.[54] Fig. 3a illustrates a typ-

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[53] We use the now standard term "Baal-Seth" throughout this paper, inspired by Cornelius's classical study of the iconography of Baal (CORNELIUS 1994, 143–144). Alternative names include "Seth-Baal" (TAZAWA 2009, 154–158) and "the Asiatic Seth", which we have used in a recent study of the Baal-Zaphon stele from Ugarit (LEVY 2014) in order to highlight the fact that the god's name is always written as "Seth" – not "Baal" – (four times ideographically, once phonetically) in all Egyptian reliefs where the god's name is still preserved.

[54] Baal is one of the main gods of the ancient Levant, well-known from both the biblical and classical literary tradition, as well as ancient Near Eastern epigraphy. Egyptian reliefs of "Baal-Seth" always name the god "Seth" (once phonetically, four times ideographically), never explicitly "Baal". Since this particular iconography of Baal-Seth does not match Seth's classical Egyptian iconography, and since Seth is known as the god of foreign countries (LÄ V, 910) and as such often represents foreign deities (see e. g. the Egyptian-Hittite peace treaty signed under Ramesses II, where the foreign gods are named 'Seth of Hatti' and

Fig. 3 Baal-Seth and Reshef. (a)Typical representation of Baal-Seth (Stele Berlin 7265; from CORNELIUS, Iconography, pl. 38; Image courtesy of the BIBLE+ORIENT Foundation), (b) Typical representation of Reshef (stele Turin 50066, Deir el-Medineh (detail); Image courtesy of the Museo Egizio di Torino)

'Seth of Aleppo', among others [PRITCHARD 1969, 201]), modern scholarship rightfully concluded that some foreign god hides under this particular iconography of Seth. The consensual identification of this god with Baal seems to rest on solid grounds for several reasons: (1) the God Baal was very popular in Ramesside Egypt, as shown by his repeated mentions in royal texts of the period (TAZAWA 2009, 128–129), hence his appearance is also expected to occur in the iconography of that period, (2) the name Baal, when written phonetically in Egyptian, usually ends with the Sethian determinative (LGG II, 778; see also SOUROUZIAN 2006, and ALLON 2007) which is not the case for Reshef and Hauron, the two other main male Asiatic gods depicted on Egyptian reliefs (LGG IV, 727; LGG V, 108), (3) the only named iconographic depiction of a Baal in Bronze Age epigraphy, provided by the Baal-Zaphon stele from Ugarit, conforms to a large extent to the iconography of Baal-Seth, and also bears the Sethian determinative after the (phonetically-spelled) name of the god (LEVY 2014, 305–306).

	Conical tiara	*Ankh & was*	Horns	Streamer
BR 5 (400 year stele)	YES	YES	YES	YES
BR 6 (Tanis stele)	YES	YES	**NO**	YES
BR 9 (Berlin 8440)	YES	YES	YES	YES
BR 10 (Berlin 7265)	YES	YES	YES	YES
BR 13 (Asmolean E714)	YES	YES	YES	YES
Mekal stele	**YES**	**YES**	**YES**	**YES**

Table 1　Iconographic attributes in named NK Egyptian reliefs depicting Baal-Seth. The numbering of the items follows Cornelius (with "BR" standing for "Baal Relief"). The table shows great uniformity in Baal-Seth's iconographic features, with only one outlier (the horns in relief BR 6).

ical[55] depiction of this god (stele Berlin 7265): he bears a conical tiara (resembling or identical to the Egyptian white crown), a *was* sceptre and *ankh* cross, two simple horns protruding from the tiara, and a long streamer descending from the tip of the tiara until knee level. Other depictions of Baal-Seth do not vary much around this basic type,[56] as shown in Table 1, which gathers the characteristics of all five Baal-Seth reliefs where the name of the god is clearly readable.[57] The table reveals a perfect uniformity among all the reliefs, with only one exception, namely stele no. BR6, expressing disagreement on the horns variable. As to Mekal, he does wear a conical tiara with horns and streamer, and carries a *was* and an *ankh*, hence his iconography agrees with all the typical attributes of Baal-Seth enumerated above.[58] This full agreement jus-

tifies the Baalic iconographic character of Mekal already noted in Vincent's 1928 seminal study.[59]

The Reshafic parallel. Another important Levantine god has often been cited as a parallel to Mekal,[60] namely Reshef. This important god[61] is depicted in several New Kingdom Egyptian reliefs. Fig. 3b (stele Turin 50066) illustrates some of his typical attributes: a *conical tiara* (resembling or identical to the Egyptian white crown), hand-held *weapons*,[62] a *gazelle head* protruding from the tiara, and a *headband* knotted around it. Most other depictions of Reshef do not vary much around this basic type, as shown in Table 2, which gathers the characteristics of all 20 Reshef reliefs where the name of the god is still clearly readable.[63] The table shows that Reshef reliefs present almost perfect uniformity for the tiara and weap-

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[55] Another non-standard depiction of Seth is that of a winged serpent slayer in Asiatic garb, which has also often been interpreted as an avatar of Baal (CORNELIUS 1994, 161–167). This iconographic type has been excluded from the present discussion, as it varies very strongly from the better-attested type considered here and offers no interesting parallels with the Mekal stele.

[56] In all other examples, this streamer widens at its end, producing a lotus flower-like shape. In the case of stele Berlin 7265, this widening is only slightly sketched.

[57] Our review gathers all cases presented in Cornelius's and Tazawa's monographs on Levantine gods (CORNELIUS 1994; TAZAWA 2009). Examples with similar iconography, but not bearing any readable divine name, have been excluded from our statistics for the sake of methodological rigor, in order to avoid contamination by material pertaining to another god. Also, in one case, a relief with a name still readable (CORNELIUS 1994, no. BR8) has been excluded because its iconographic features were not well enough preserved to allow good comparison with the Baal-Seth type under discussion here.

[58] Another notable difference between the Baal-Seth examples listed here is that Mekal is depicted in a sitting position, as opposed to the uniform standing position of Baal-Seth.

[59] VINCENT 1928.

[60] THOMPSON 1970, chap. 7.

[61] For a recent detailed study of Reshef, see LIPIŃSKI 2010.

[62] Aside from one or two weapons, in most cases Reshef also carries a shield. He usually also has one armed arm raised in a smiting gesture.

[63] Our recension gathers all cases presented in Cornelius's and Tazawa's monographs (CORNELIUS 1994; TAZAWA 2009), as well as the recently discovered Reshef stele from Tell el-Borg (HOFFMEIER and KITCHEN 2007, 127–136). As for Baal-Seth, examples with a similar type of iconography but not bearing any readable divine name have been excluded from our statistics for the sake of methodological rigor (see note 57).

	Conical tiara	Weapons	Gazelle head	Headband
RR 2 (Hildersheim 110)	YES	YES	?	YES
RR 7 (OIC 10569)	YES	YES	YES	YES
RR 8 (UC 14401)	YES	YES	**NO**	YES
RR 10 (UC 14400)	YES	YES	**NO**	**NO**
RR 11 (Aberdeen 1578)	YES	YES	**NO**	**NO**
RR 12 (Memphis 2792)	YES	YES	YES	YES
RR 17 (BM 263)	YES	YES	?	YES
RR 18 (Wilkinson 1878)	YES	YES	YES	**NO**
RR 19 (Berlin 14462/Turin 50067)	YES	YES	YES	**NO**
RR 21 (Cairo JE 70222)	YES	YES	**NO**	**NO**
RR 23 (Cambridge EGA 3002)	YES	YES	?	YES
RR 24 (Avignon A16)	YES	YES	YES	YES
RR 27 (Tushka rock-relief)	YES	YES	**NO**	**NO**
RR 28 (Turin 50066)	YES	YES	YES	YES
RR 29 (Louvre C86 [N. 237])	YES	YES	YES	YES
RR 30 (BM 191)	**NO**	YES	YES	YES
RR 31 (BM 355)	**NO**	YES	?	?
RR 32 (Cairo JE 8613)	YES	**NO**	YES	YES
RR 34 (Aswan 16)	YES	YES	**NO**	YES
Tell el-Borg stele	YES	YES	YES	NO
Mekal stele	**YES**	**NO**	**NO**	**YES**

Table 2 Iconographic attributes in named NK Egyptian reliefs depicting Reshef. The numbering of the items follows Cornelius (with "RR" standing for "Reshef Relief"). Question marks indicate cases where the state of preservation of the relief does not allow clear evaluation of the iconographic attributes.

ons variables (with only two and one exceptions, respectively), and a less obvious majority for the gazelle head and headband variables (about 63 % of clear cases, for both variables).[64] As to Mekal, his iconography agrees with Reshef's on the conical tiara and headband variables, but not on the weapons and gazelle head variables.

Opposing Baal-Seth and Reshef. On the basis of the characterisation of Baal-Seth and Reshef outlined above, we now have a series of opposable variables that will enable us to clearly differentiate the iconography of the two gods. This question is of importance, since in some cases differentiating between both is not an easy task, as shown by the

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[64]   Setting aside the unclear cases, marked in the table by a question mark, we have 10/16 agreements for the gazelle head variable, and 12/19 agreements for the headband variable. Both fractions amount to approximately 63 %. There-

fore, Reshef's iconographic attributes, although clearly conforming to a given canon, show less uniformity than Baal-Seth's.

	Tiara features		Front features		Hand attributes	
	Streamer	**Headband**	**Horns**	**Gazelle head**	***Ankh & was***	**Weapon(s)**
Baal-Seth	Always	NEVER	Always (but once)	NEVER	Always	NEVER
Reshef	NEVER (but once)	Mostly (~ 63 %)	NEVER	Mostly (~ 63 %)	NEVER (but once)	Always (but once)
Conclusion	**Baalic**	**Reshafic**	**Baalic**	**Reshafic**	**Baalic**	**Reshafic**

Table 3 Baal-Seth and Reshef: opposing variables. The table highlights the following result: allowing at most one exception per variable, if one god has "always" or "mostly" for a given variable, then the other god invariably has "never" for the same variable.

contradictory conclusions sometimes reached by scholars on some precise reliefs.[65] Our goal here in clearly establishing the opposing variables of the two gods lies of course in rationalising the choice of classifying Mekal as closer to the Baal-Seth or the Reshef type. A first conclusion, drawn from Tables 1 and 2, is that the conical tiara is characteristic of both Baal-Seth and Reshef, and hence not an opposing criterion between the two gods.[66] We shall thus keep the other six variables, namely the streamer and headband, horns and gazelle head, *ankh & was* and weapons, organised as three opposing pairs within the "tiara features", "front features", and "hand features" categories, as shown in Table 3. The results obtained by thus organising our variables are very meaningful, as they show that if we allow at most one exception per variable, the following rule holds: if one god has "*always*" or "*mostly*" for a given variable, then the other god *invariably* has "*never*" for the same variable (allowing at most one exception per variable). We can thus say that from a statistical point of view, based on named reliefs of Baal-Seth and Reshef, the two gods present a form of full opposi-

tion for the six chosen variables. This is shown by the last line of Table 3, which presents a perfect alternation between the Baalic and Reshafic character of the variables within each category. Hence these variables can be used as an objective basis of comparison when trying to classify Mekal as closer to one or the other iconographic type.

Mekal: a mostly Baalic type. Having established the iconographic opposition between Baal-Seth and Reshef, we naturally come to see where Mekal stands in this system of opposing variables. Table 4 shows that Mekal agrees with Baal-Seth on five variables (streamer, horns, gazelle head, *ankh & was*, weapons) and with Reshef on only one variable (headband[67]). In terms of the three more general categories outlined in the preceding section, Mekal's tiara features are both Baalic and Reshafic, his front features are Baalic, and his hand-held attributes Baalic as well. We therefore conclude that a categorisation of Mekal as a typically Reshafic type is not justified (although he does share one important characteristic with that god, namely the headband), as already noted by Lipiński.[68]

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[65] See for example stele Cairo JE26048 (and the full discussion in TAZAWA 2009, 46–47), for an example where authors are divided between an identification of the god as Baal-Seth or Reshef.

[66] As noted above, this tiara sometimes is identical to the Egyptian white crown, and sometimes of a slightly different shape, considered as more Asiatic in design (CORNELIUS 1994, 246). The same can be said of the beards of Baal-Seth and Reshef, which are sometimes classical fake Egyptian beards, and sometimes real "Asiatic" beards. As for the tiara, the beard variable occurs in almost all cases for our two gods, hence cannot be used as a distinguishing variable between them.

[67] In most depictions, Reshef's headband is identical to Mekal's. One slight difference, however, is that Reshef's headband is usually shown with two ribbons under the knot at the back of the tiara (see Fig. 3b), whereas only one ribbon is visible in Mekal's case (i.e. the second half of the headband is not explicitly shown).

[68] See LIPIŃSKI 1987, 91. Lipiński's argument was based on the fact that Reshef is a martial god (as confirmed by his handheld weapons in Egyptian iconography), whereas Mekal is shown sitting holding *ankh* and *was*, without weapons or smiting gesture. Note however that a depiction of Reshef holding *ankh* and *was*, without weapons, is also attested (CORNELIUS 1994, no. RR32). In the same way, the Baal-Seth type under discussion here does not appear with weapons in the Egyptian reliefs studied in this section, despite Baal's frequent description as a martial god (see for instance the "poem" of the battle of Qadesh, where Ramesses II says: "I was like Baal in the moment of his power, I killed among them, I did not let up" [RITA II, 10] or, in Ugaritic literature, Baal's thundering voice and his role in protecting the city from its enemies [TOORN *et al.* 1999, 134]). We have therefore opted for a more detailed analysis of the relevant iconographic variables, before rejecting Mekal's iconographic type as typically Reshafic.

	Tiara features		Front features		Hand attributes	
	Streamer	Headband	Horns	Gazelle head	*Ankh & was*	Weapon(s)
Mekal	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES	NO
Conclusion	Baalic and Reshafic		Baalic		Baalic	

Table 4 Comparison of Mekal's main attributes to those of Baal-Seth and Reshef.

3. Identification of the god

The most interesting feature of our stele lies in the mysterious identity of Mekal, a god apparently unknown from Egyptian and Levantine epigraphy, and from the literary tradition.[69] This section offers a critical review of some past attempts at an identification of the god.

3.1 The elusive Mekal

Mekal's name, whether transcribed *mkl* or *mkr*, does not directly evoke any well-known Levantine divinity. Biblical sources, Ugaritic texts[70] and the Amarna letters[71] (our main sources for ancient Canaanite theonyms) do not seem to provide any clear match, nor does the ancient Levantine onomasticon.[72] Hence, researchers have proposed diverse interpretations of Mekal's name, by connecting it either to verbal roots or to other theonyms bearing some phonetic resemblance to Mekal. Both approaches are discussed in the sequel.

3.2 Verbal etymologies

Several Semitic roots have been proposed as bases for explaining Mekal's name. Vincent first noted that the letters *mkl* do not match any known Hebrew root.[73] He thus opted for an *m*-prefixed form (such as a *piel* or *hiphil* participle) of a verb based on the *kl* fundamental root. After reviewing several such candidates, he opted for the verb *ykl*

("be able, be powerful"), with a possible meaning of "*vainqueur et puissant par excellence*".[74] Rowe, following the same approach, proposed the root ʾ*kl* ("eat"), with a meaning of "fierce devourer".[75] Lipiński first considered a reading based on the root *mkr* ("sell"), but rejected it as yielding no meaning suitable for a theonym. He then opted for a participial form derived from *kwr/kyr* ("smelt"), hence "the smelter", with parallels in gods such as Hephaistos.[76] All the above etymologies provide plausible meanings for the name Mekal, but unfortunately none can be proven correct at the current stage of research. The other approach, discussed below, tries to relate Mekal to similar-sounding theonyms.

3.3 Theonymic etymologies

This section briefly discusses three theonymic parallels to Mekal proposed by Albright, Rowe and Lipiński, respectively.

3.3.1 Nergal, Molech and Makir

Nergal. Albright proposed to relate Mekal to the Mesopotamian god Nergal, by noting that Nergal's Sumerian title *Umun-urugalla(k)* ("Lord of the great city") could easily have contracted into *Muk(k)alla*.[77] Furthermore, Rowe hypothesised the presence of Nergal worship in Beth-Shean, on the basis of a basalt panel representing a lion fighting a dog (or lioness), allegedly depicting Nergal fighting his enemies.[78] Rowe also considered that the

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[69] The only exception is a possible second mention of Mekal on a fragmentary bowl from Beth-Shean, whose inscription is tentatively read "[Me]kal Ba[ty-Shar]" by Rowe (Rowe 1940, 92, pl. 67A:4, 5).

[70] Ugaritic god-lists do feature a divinity called *nkl*, but this theonym is interpreted as referring to the goddess Nikallu, of Hurrian origin (Watson and Wyatt 1999, 201, 557–558).

[71] The only exception known to us is Albright's variant reading of *Abdi-Tirshi*, king of Hazor (EA 228), as *AbdiMukalli(m)* ("servant of Mukalli(m)") (see Albright's editorial notes to Levi Della Vida 1943, 33, n. 14). This variant reading seems however not to have been retained in subsequent literature on the Amarna letters, which either keep Knudtzon's traditional reading *Abdi-Tirshi*

(Hess 1993, 17; Moran 1992, 289) or introduce the variant readings *Abdi-Irshi* (Weippert 1966, 322.) or *Abdi-Shullim* (Rainey *et al.* 2015, 967, 1552–1553).

[72] See Sec. 3.3.2 for a discussion of an alleged Cyprian anthroponymic match.

[73] Vincent 1928, 526.

[74] Vincent 1928, 526–527.

[75] Rowe 1930, 15.

[76] Lipiński 2006, 275–276.

[77] Albright proposes here a haplological loss of a middle syllable justified in the context of a long compound name containing several liquids. See Albright's editorial notes to Levi Della Vida 1943, 33, n. 14.

[78] Rowe 1930, 16.

panel originated in the same temple and stratum (str. 9) as the Mekal stele,[79] thus producing additional, non-philological, evidence linking Mekal to Nergal. Although these arguments were deemed compelling by Thompson,[80] we feel that this evidence is far from certain. First, Albright did not produce any attestation of the contracted form *Muk(k)alla*, to the best of our knowledge. Second, Rowe's evidence for Nergal's attestation in Beth-Shean is very indirect, since the lion can also be identified with other gods.[81] Finally, the dating and stratigraphic setting of the panel itself have been discussed, and their contemporaneity with the Mekal stele has not been proven.[82]

A *mlk*-based theonym. A second theonymic approach tries to link Mekal to divine names based on the Semitic root *mlk* ("king") such as the biblical *Molech*[83] (2 Kgs 23:10, Je 32:35). This hypothesis requires however the presence of a metathesis in the stele between the *k* and *l* consonants, whether "intentional"[84] or due to a scribal error. The strength of this theory lies in its simplicity, and the fact that it provides a link to a biblically-attested divinity worshipped in ancient Israel. Its weakness lies of course in the recourse to a metathesis with no apparent phonetic justification.[85]

Makir. A fascinating proposal by Lipiński[86] links Mekal to the tribal name *Makir* (*mkyr*), attested in the Bible as a Transjordanian clan within the tribe of Manasseh (Josh. 17:1).

Lipiński first noted that an early biblical mention of Makir seems to attest to a Cisjordanian original location for the clan (Judg. 5:14). He then located the clan's later Transjordanian setting between the Yarmuk and the Jabboq Rivers, on the basis of Numb. 32:39–42. Noting that this location lies just opposite the Beth-Shean Valley, Lipiński concluded that the clan's original Cisjordanian location lay within that valley, and that its name

might have preserved a form of the ancient theonym *Mekal*, possibly derived from a divinised eponymic ancestor. This astute proposal is the only one known to us that proposes both a perfect phonetic match with Mekal's name *and* a geographical link to the region of Beth-Shean. The theory remains however speculative at this stage, since the proof for the clan's origin in the Beth-Shean Valley is indirect, as is the proposed theonymic origin for the clan's name.

3.3.2 The alleged Cyprian connection

Several authors have claimed that Mekal is attested in a series of 5th–3rd centuries BCE Phoenician inscriptions from Cyprus. These inscriptions comprise an epigraphic series from Idalion mentioning a god called *RŠPMKL* (CIS I, 89–91, 93–94), and a heterogeneous set of other Cyprian inscriptions featuring the expression *MKL*. Both corpora are discussed below.

The RŠPMKL inscriptions. The name *RŠPMKL* appears as a theonym in a series of 4th–3rd century BCE Phoenician dedicatory inscriptions from Idalion (CIS I, 89–91, 93–94) known since the late 19th century.[87] The first part of the theonym is universally understood as referring to Reshef, but the meaning of the second part, *MKL*, has been debated. An early view makes *MKL* a geographic epithet of Reshef.[88] This view is based on the bilingual Phoenician-syllabic Greek inscription CIS I, 89, where *RŠPMKL* is translated in Greek as *to-A-po-lo-ni to-A-mu-ko-lo-i*, understood as "Apollo of Amyklos", a well-known epithet of Apollo referring to his famous temple in the city of Amyclae in Laconia (Pausanias III, 19, 2). This simple and elegant interpretation has however been questioned since the 19th century by authors conjecturing that a Semitic interpretation of the name *MKL* should be favoured, rather than

[79]   Rowe 1930, 16.
[80]   Thompson 1970, 127.
[81]   See discussion in Thompson 1970, 96–97.
[82]   See discussion in Thompson 1970, 110–112, as well as our discussion below (Sec. 4.1) on the dating of the Mekal stele.
[83]   Rowe 1930, 15.
[84]   Rowe 1930, 15.
[85]   Hoch notes that examples of metathesis in Egyptian spelling of Semitic words are "surprisingly numerous" and provides 25 "certain instances", among which 75% concern the second and third consonant of the triliteral root (Hoch 1994, 419–421), as expected in the Molech hypothesis.

None of them concern the *mlk* root, however (see also Hoch 1994, 144–145), but one case of *k-r* metathesis (as expected for Mekal-Molech) appears among Hoch's "certain" examples, namely *makarbata* for *markabata* ("chariot") (see also Hoch 1994, 146, 420).
[86]   Lipiński 2006, 274.
[87]   An additional short mention of *RŠPMKL* appears on a bronze bust of the Michaelidis collection, but this inscription has been convincingly shown to be a forgery (Lipiński 1987, 97).
[88]   See Caquot and Masson 1968, 308, n. 2 for a list of 19th century references supporting this view.

a reference to a Greek divine epithet.[89] The discovery of the Mekal stele in 1928 brought some credit to this hypothesis, and led its proponents to identify *RŠPMKL* as a compound divine name "Reshef-Mekal" attesting to a late survival of the Canaanite Mekal in Cyprus.[90] This view gained such momentum that Caquot and Masson proclaimed in 1968 that "*On ne conteste plus maintenant l'identité du dieu de Beth-Shan et du dieu d'Idalion*".[91] This identification is however much weaker than it looks, as shown by Lipiński.[92] First, a period of about a millennium separates the Mekal stele from the *RŠPMKL* inscriptions, with no other attestation of Mekal during the interval. Furthermore, the alleged iconographic links between Mekal and Reshef have been shown to be weaker than they seem (see Sec. 2 above). But Lipiński's strongest argument comes from a new Cyprian dedicatory inscription mentioning our god, published in 1968.[93] This inscription runs on the four faces of a small bronze base, and names the god under the variant spelling *RŠPHMKL*, with a *h* letter before *MKL*, and with the expressions *RŠP* and *HMKL* separated on two different faces of the base, due to lack of space. The *editio princeps*, which favoured the Reshef-Mekal hypothesis, considered the *h* letter as a definite article (thus "Reshef the Mekal"). Lipiński noted however that the definite article never introduces proper names in Phoenician, and hence proposed seeing the *h* as a *mater lectionis* denoting an initial vowel (namely the *a* of Amyclae), rendered necessary by the fact that *RŠP* and *HMKL* are written on two different faces, in order to avoid pronouncing the second part of the name with an initial *m* only, without a preceding vowel. Such a break in the middle of the name did not occur in the other *RŠPMKL* inscriptions, hence the lack of need of a *mater lectionis* there. This brilliant proposal of Lipiński brought a fundamental new argument for the reading of *MKL* as the geographic epithet "Amyclaean". Such a reading would also fit nicely with other geographical epithets of Reshef attested in bilingual Greek-Phoenician inscriptions from Cyprus, such as *RŠP'LYYT* translating the Greek *to-i A-pe-i-loni to-i E-le-i-ta-i* (Apollo of Helos) and *RŠP'LHYTS* translating the Greek *to-i A-po-lo-ni to-i A-la-si-o-ta-i* (Apollo of Alashiya).[94] Finally, the addition of the words "in Idalion" (*b'dyl*) after *RŠPMKL* in CIS I, 90 (among others) also adds credit to the idea that the preceding word (*MKL*) is a geographic epithet mentioning the original foreign origin (in this case Amyclae) of the divinity, as already noted long ago by Clermont-Ganneau.[95] Given all these elements, it thus seems to us that, in the current state of research, and unless new contradictory epigraphic data ever comes to light, Lipiński's interpretation of *MKL* as a geographic epithet of Reshef remains the most likely hypothesis.

The other MKL inscriptions. A few other Cyprian inscriptions have been proposed as bearing attestations of the name Mekal (without the *RŠP* element). Among them, two alleged mentions of *MKL* (one by restoration) appear in 5th century Phoenician accounts of expenses of the temple of Astarte in Kition (CIS I, 86). Lipiński has however shown that a reading of this word as the lexeme *mkl* ("cistern") seems to make better linguistic sense here and to also offer a better fit with the archaeological data uncovered in the temple.[96] In the same way, a theophoric name *mkl'*[*zr*] ("Mekal has helped") supposedly appears on a fragmentary Phoenician dedicatory inscription from Kition (Ashmolean C.111), but here again Lipiński proposed a possible variant reading, namely the title *mkl'*[*pt*] (litt. "guardian of the reins") attested in Akkadian.[97] Finally, Power's old reading "*The Amathusians, a people whose god is Mukul*"[98] in a 4th century syllabic inscription from Amathus (ICS 196) is outdated, since it was based on an identification of the inscription's language as Akkadian, a view now abandoned in favour of the native – and now lost – "Eteocypriot" language.[99]

We conclude that Lipiński's fundamental 1987 paper has convincingly shown that the old geo-

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[89] See Caquot and Masson 1968, 308, n. 6 for a list of early references supporting this view.

[90] See, among many others, Vincent 1928, 525–527; Power 1929; Levi Della Vida 1943, 33–34; Caquot and Masson 1968, 309–310; Thompson 1970, chap. 8.

[91] Caquot and Masson 1968, 309; see also Thompson 1970, 164, 170–171.

[92] Lipiński 1987.

[93] This inscription is considered by its publishers as coming from the same series as CIS I, 89–94 but gone unnoticed and unpublished for almost a century, probably due to its extremely small size (Caquot and Masson 1968, 303–304).

[94] Lipiński 2010, 232.

[95] See Caquot and Masson 1968, 308.

[96] Lipiński 1987, 94–95.

[97] Lipiński 1987, 92.

[98] Power 1929, 141.

[99] Steele 2013, 103.

graphical interpretation of the *MKL* epithet in the Cyprian theonym *RŠPMKL* – abandoned by some in favour of a link with the god of Beth-Shean – remains the most rational and likely reading hypothesis, in our current state of knowledge. In the same way, the other alleged identifications of Mekal in Cyprus are based on readings which are far from certain (CIS I, 86; Ashmolean C.111) or severely outdated (ICS 196). Hence, we conclude that no Phoenician god named Mekal can be considered as attested in Cyprus at this stage of research.

3.3.3 The Michael connection

Several authors have noted a possible link between Mekal and the biblical angel *Michael* (*mykʾl*, litt. "Who is like El?", attested in Dan. 10:13, 10:21, 12:1),[100] some of them explaining it as a phenomenon of incorporation into monotheistic Yahwism of an ancient Canaanite god in the lesser form of an angel.[101] This proposal is based on a phonetic match between the names, which Thompson considers perfect, even identifying the Egyptian *alef* sign G1 (𓅐) of Mekal with the Hebrew *alef* in Michael's name.[102] This argument is incorrect however, since New Kingdom Egyptian spelling of Semitic words uses G1 for rendering a vowel rather than a Semitic *alef*.[103] It is actually the reed hieroglyph *i* (totally absent from Mekal's name), possibly followed by G1 (thus 𓏭 or 𓏭𓅐), that renders Semitic *alef* in Egyptian hieroglyphs.[104] Checking all the hieroglyphic spellings of the Semitic element "El" gathered by Hoch confirms that "El" is never spelled 𓅐𓏤, but always features an initial *i* sign for the *alef*,[105] except for two

occurrences where the Semitic *alef* is not rendered at all, and explained as elisions.[106] It is thus certain that the vulture sign in Mekal's name does not represent the initial *alef* of "El", but rather provides the vowel to the preceding consonant *k*. The only way to still read the name "Michael" in the stele is therefore to posit an elision of the *alef* or a scribal mistake. This remains a possibility of course,[107] but an additional reason lends us to reject the Mekal-Michael connection, namely the millennium-long time-span separating the Mekal stele from the earliest attestation of Michael in the book of Daniel. The two phenomena should thus most probably be seen as independent, and indeed the appearance of named angels rather seems to be a specific phenomenon of late Second Temple period Judaism, as witnessed by their absence from the Hebrew Bible outside of the late book of Daniel, and their numerous occurrences in later biblical Apocrypha and Qumranic literature.[108]

3.3.4 Mesopotamian god-lists

An alternative approach to the search for phonetic correspondences to Mekal within the realm of West Semitics lies in the recourse to Mesopotamian god-lists. Lipiński noted that a god named [d]*Mu-gu-ùr-ra*[109] is attested in a copy of the Weidner list[110] found in Ugarit.[111] He proposed to read the name as *Mukurra*, a phonetic equivalent to our Mekal, relying on the fact that the *gu* cuneiform sign can be read *ku₈* in the Ugaritian syllabary. This justification is not mandatory, however, since the *k* hieroglyph of Mekal's name can also correspond to Semitic *g* or *q* according to Egyptian spelling practice of Semitic names.[112] Lipiński's

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[100] See GRAHAM and MAY 1936, 108; THOMPSON 1970, 178, 191–192; LIPIŃSKI 1987, 89; WIMMER 2000, 32–25; DAVID and BUMANN 2015/16, 114–115.

[101] GRAHAM and MAY 1936, 108; THOMPSON 1970, 178.

[102] THOMPSON 1970, 192.

[103] See HOCH 1994, 500; SCHENKEL 1986, 116–117. Note that even in the older Middle Kingdom Egyptian spelling rules of Semitic names, G1 is usually not used for Semitic *alef*, but rather for Semitic *l* or *r* (HOCH 1994, 503).

[104] HOCH 1994, 431, 435, 503.

[105] See 𓏭𓈖𓂝𓅐𓏤𓏥 (Israel) and 𓏭𓈖𓂸𓏏𓅐𓏤 (Yaqub-El), among many other examples.

[106] HOCH 1994, 27–28. Note that in both cases, unlike in Mekal's name, the Egyptian G1 *alef* sign is missing, and the *r* sign is replaced by the E23 recumbent lion hieroglyph.

[107] For a recent defence of the identification of Mekal with Michael, see DAVID and BUMANN 2015/16, 114–115.

[108] TOORN *et al.* 1999, 569–570.

[109] The Mesopotamian version of the list rather has [d]*Mu-uḫ-ra* (WEIDNER 1924, 79), a name usually identified with the Netherworld divinity *Muhra*, often associated with Nergal (WEIDNER 1924, 79, no. 7; DALLEY 2000, 325).

[110] The Weidner god-list is an important and widely diffused Mesopotamian god-list, comprising about 200 names, and was in use from the Third Dynasty of Ur until Late Babylonian times (LAMBERT 1969, 474).

[111] NOUGAYROL 1968, 222–223; LIPIŃSKI 1987, 89.

[112] See HOCH 1994, 436. Examples for Semitic *g* include the cities of 𓅐𓏤𓎡𓈖𓈖 (Megiddo) and 𓎡𓂝𓏤 (Gath), both written with the *k* hieroglyph for Semitic *g* in all their Egyptian occurrences gathered by Ahituv (AHITUV 1989, 95–96, 139). Examples for Semitic *q*, though rarer, include 𓅐𓏏𓏤𓈖 for Semitic **qarta* (town, city) and 𓅐𓏤𓎡𓈖 for Semitic **qamḥa* (a type of bread, see Hebrew *qmḥ* [flour]) (HOCH 1994, 303, 322).

proposal is important since Mesopotamian god-lists are our most complete source of documentation on ancient Semitic gods and thus offer a most relevant source for the search of parallels to a new theonym. In fact, this approach could be extended to lists other than Weidner's, and should include any triconsonantal name starting with *m* followed by *k, g* or *q,* followed by *r* or *l.* Applying this approach to the largest Mesopotamian god-list, namely the *AN=Anum*[113] list, yielded the following results:[114] ᵈ*Ma-gi-ru* and ᵈ*Má-gur₈*.[115] The search could further be extended to the other available Mesopotamian god-lists,[116] but the few results presented here merely serve to emphasise the fact, already noted by Lipiński, that ancient Mesopotamian god-lists can indeed provide prototypes to Mekal's name, and that these prototypes constitute perfect phonetic matches to Mekal's name according to the Egyptian spelling rules of foreign Semitic names.

3.4 Assessment of the identification proposals

We have seen in this section that Mekal's elusive character has given rise to numerous identification attempts, usually based on theonyms having some phonetic proximity to Mekal. We have seen that some of them seem far-fetched, such as Nergal and the Cyprian connection, and that others remain possible (although not certain) but usually either imply a non-perfect phonetic/graphical match (Molech, Michael) or are based on indirect arguments (Makir). The same can be said of course concerning the attempted identification of verbal roots and precise meanings for Mekal's name, most of which are totally plausible, but none is provable. Finally, we saw that at least three theonyms (Mukurra, Magiru and Magur) attested in ancient Mesopotamian god-lists can provide ancient prototypes for Mekal's name, but here again the link is only phonetic, and no direct connection can be proven.

4. Dating the stele

This section discusses the dating of the Mekal stele from stratigraphic, textual and iconographic points of view, in order to provide additional arguments for the new 19th Dynasty dating of the stele proposed by James and McGovern,[117] as opposed to the 18th Dynasty dating originally proposed by Rowe.[118] The section is followed by a discussion of a second stele from Beth-Shean, which most likely refers to the same Amenemopet as the Mekal stele.

4.1 Stratigraphy

Stratification of the stele. According to Rowe's original excavation report, the Mekal stele fragments were found in stratum 9,[119] except for the small lower right corner[120] found in stratum 7.[121] Rowe concluded that the stele was originally erected within the time-span of stratum 9, which he dated to the reign of Thutmose III.[122] The last Beth-Shean excavation report of the University of Pennsylvania Museum however reassigned the main Mekal stele fragments to stratum 8, on the basis of a discrepancy between the published excavation report and the original excavation records, the latter indicating that the fragments were found in stratum 8 rather than 9.[123] The report then concluded that the stele was originally erected in the time-span of stratum 8 or 7, without more precision.[124] Our feeling is that a date within the time-span of stratum 8 seems preferable that in stratum 7, since stratum 8 is both the lowest stratum containing fragments and the stratum containing most fragments of the stele.

Absolute dating. Rowe's original dating of Beth-Shean ascribed strata 9–7 to Dynasty 18 (starting from Thutmose III) on the basis of objects bearing Dynasty 18 royal cartouches discovered in these strata.[125] Following this scheme, the Mekal stele (allegedly found in stratum 9) belonged to the time of Thutmose III. Rowe's dat-

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[113] *AN=Anum* is the largest known Babylonian god-list, comprising almost 2000 names (Litke 1998). It was composed in the Old Babylonian period and was still in use during the late Assyrian period (Lambert 1969, 475–476).

[114] Litke 1998, 29, 119, 144.

[115] The theonym ᵈ*Má-gur₈* is also attested in the shorter *An=Anu= šà amēli* list (Litke 1998, 231).

[116] See Lambert 1969 for an overview of such lists.

[117] James and McGovern 1993, 5, 239–240.

[118] Rowe 1930, 10–17.

[119] Rowe 1930, 14.

[120] This fragment is labelled "Fragment of a private Egyptian stela" in Rowe's 1930 excavation report, as it had not been yet identified as belonging to the Mekal stele. The correct identification appears in the 1940 excavation report (Rowe 1940, 9–10).
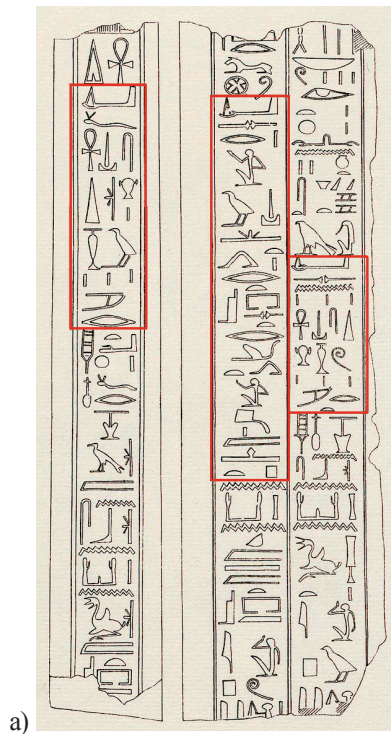
[121] Rowe 1930, pl. 49.

[122] Rowe 1930, 10–17.

[123] James and McGovern 1993, 249–250; Mazar 2011, 162–163, n. 25.

[124] James and McGovern 1993, 239–240.

[125] Rowe, 1930 7; Rowe 1940, IX.

a)

b) (7) M. Kuentz found in the vicinity, and kindly handed over to me, the right jamb of a door-framing, on which were incised records of homage (A) to a king "that he may grant life, weal, and health, ability, favor, love, a happy life, and enjoyment of health; (B) to [Mût, lady of] Asher, that she may grant that my mouth may be wholesome, and access to her shrine, until I reach peaceful retirement; (C) [to Ḥatḥor, mistress] of all the gods, the eye of Rê, without her peer, lady of the two Egypts, and to Horus, that they may grant life, etc. (as above). For the *ka* of the sculptor and servitor in the Place of Justice, Apy." The first prayer is on the cheek, the other two on the face, of the jamb (Plate XL, 4).

Fig. 4 Doorjamb from the tomb of Ipuy in Deir el-Medineh.
(a) Text (Davies, Ramesside tombs, pl. 40), (b) Translation
(Davies, Ramesside tombs, 39).

ing scheme was however strongly rejected by Albright, who noted that the site's ceramic evidence points towards much lower dates than those indicated by the royal cartouches.[126] Albright's scheme eventually prevailed, and entailed a revised chronology of Beth-Shean, with strata 8–7 now seen as covering the whole of Dynasty 19, instead of the second part of Dynasty 18.[127] Combining this updated dating scheme with the revised stratification of the Mekal stele to strata 8–7

implies a 19th Dynasty dating for the stele, as opposed to the 15th/14th century dating still sometimes encountered in the literature. Furthermore, if our assignment of the stele to stratum 8 is correct, a date in the reign of Seti I or the first part of Ramesses II's reign would emerge.

4.2 Textual parallels

This section explores whether the offering formula of the stele can provide any dating clues. We base ourselves on the work of Barta,[128] who devised a convenient typology of the $ḥtp(t)di\text{-}nswt$ offering formula, and gathered many parallels as well as chronological ranges for each attested offering. The offering formula of the Mekal stele contains three offerings, namely $spd\text{-}ḥr\ ḥsw(t)\ mrwt,\ r3$ $wd3(w)$, and $nmtt\ (r)\ st(.s)$, corresponding respectively to formulae 122, 225 and 114 of Barta's typology. These three formulae are attested, respectively, from Dynasty 18 to the Greco-Roman period, from the second half of Dynasty 18 until Dynasties 21/24 and from Dynasties 13–14 to Dynasty 20.[129] The intersection of these ranges provides a dating for our inscription between the second half of Dynasty 18[130] and Dynasty 20, thus compatible with the stratigraphy-based 19th Dynasty dating described in the preceding section. Furthermore, among the many parallels provided by Barta for our three offering formulae, only one contains all three formulae together, namely a doorjamb inscription from the tomb of Ipuy in Deir el-Medineh (TT217), dated to the reign of Ramesses II.[131] In addition to the three formulae, this inscription also provides a parallel for the (r) $pḥt.k\ im3ḫ\ m\ ḥtp$ concluding expression. Davies's facsimile and translation of the inscription are provided in Fig. 4. This parallel is most interesting in the context of the Mekal stele, since Deir el-Medineh has been described as "the most frequent source of evidence for Syro-Palestinian deities in Egyptian popular religion",[132] and since its dating to Ramesses II matches the stratigraphic 19th Dynasty dating of the Mekal stele. A further textual parallel (not included in Barta's corpus) will be discussed in the excursus below.

[126]   Albright 1936, 76–77.
[127]   James 1966, 3; James and McGovern 1993, 236; Mazar 2011, 161.
[128]   Barta 1968.
[129]   Barta 1968, 239, 243.
[130]   Barta defines the second half of Dynasty 18 as starting after the reign of Thutmose III. Also included in his corpus of the second half of Dynasty 18 is all the Dynasty 18 material which could not securely be attributed to the first part of the dynasty (Barta 1968, 85, n. 1).
[131]   Davies 1927, 39, pl. 40.
[132]   Tazawa 2009, 1.

4.3 Iconographic parallels

As we saw previously, the representation of Mekal shares many similarities with other New Kingdom Egyptian depictions of Levantine gods, mostly with Baal-Seth, but also, to a limited extent, with Reshef. The chronology of these parallels might thus also offer useful clues for dating the Mekal stele. Concerning the five named Baal-Seth parallels presented above (see Sec. 2.2), two are dated to Ramesses II, one to Merneptah and two to the 13th century,[133] thus anchoring the iconographic Baal-Seth phenomenon in Dynasty 19. For our second parallel, namely Reshef, we had gathered 20 named parallels, most of which date to the Dynasties 19 and 20, but with some early exceptions[134] (at most 4) dating to Dynasty 18. Interestingly however, none of these 18th Dynasty examples feature the Reshafic headband parallel to Mekal's,[135] which thus appears as a Ramesside-period phenomenon. These combined observations place the best iconographic parallels to Mekal (namely Baal-Seth) in Dynasty 19, and the Reshafic parallels to Mekal's headband in Dynasties 19–20. The intersection of these two ranges covers Dynasty 19 and thus confirms the dating obtained above through the stratigraphic approach and textual parallels.

4.4 The Mekal stele: a 19th Dynasty monument

This section has shown that all elements, whether stratigraphic, textual or iconographic, point towards a 19th Dynasty dating of the Mekal stele as proposed by James and McGovern,[136] as opposed to the previous 18th Dynasty dating origi-

nally proposed by Rowe.[137] James and McGovern's dating rested entirely on stratigraphic grounds, but is now reinforced by the additional textual and iconographic arguments provided in this section. Finally, we will argue below that a second stele from Beth-Shean (which still lacks a more recent edition than Rowe's 1930 excavation report, to the best of our knowledge) most probably refers to the same Amenemopet as the Mekal stele.

5. Excursus: a second Amenemopet stele?

Another private funerary stele from Beth-Shean mentions[138] a certain [...]ipt (Fig. 5).[139] The name is not fully preserved, however, but is restored by Rowe as imn-m-ipt since, says he, "we can hardly restore any words other than "Amen-em-" ".[140] Although imn-m-ipt is one of the most frequent Egyptian names, other Egyptian names ending in ipt are attested in the New Kingdom,[141] so the restoration [imn-m-]ipt is not certain if based on no additional arguments. The [...]ipt stele has been discovered in stratum 5,[142] with one additional small fragment discovered in stratum 6.[143] This late stratigraphic placement of the stele might explain why the Pennsylvania University excavation reports did not attempt an identification between this [...]ipt and the Mekal stele's imn-m-ipt (note also that the Mekal stele was still assigned to stratum 9 as late as the 1966 excavation report[144]). Thompson noted however that the offering formula in the [...]ipt stele matches exactly that of the Mekal stele,[145] and discussed the possibility of identifying [...]ipt with the imn-m-ipt of the Mekal stele, but concluded that the parallel could be "mere coincidence".[146] We believe that the

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[133] CORNELIUS 1994, 147–151, 154.

[134] These exceptions are Cornelius's stelae RR21, RR27, RR32 (CORNELIUS 1994, 44, 49–50, 64–65) as well as the Tell el-Borg stele (HOFFMEIER and KITCHEN 2007).

[135] There is only one possible exception to this affirmation, namely stele RR32, dated by Cornelius to the "End 18th-begin 19th dynasties", but attributed to Ramesses II's reign by Kitchen (KRI III, 266).

[136] JAMES and McGOVERN 1993, 239–240.

[137] ROWE 1930, 10–17.

[138] Rowe notes that it is uncertain whether the stele was made for [...]ipt himself or for his son (by restoring "X son of" in the lacuna before [...]ipt), due to the damaged state of the text (ROWE 1930, 37). Another possibility, not considered by Rowe, would be to restore "by his son [...]ipt" making the deceased the father of [...]ipt (see Sec. 1 above for the same construction restored in the Mekal stele).

[139] ROWE 1930, 37–38, pl. 49:1.

[140] ROWE 1930, 37, n. 61.

[141] See PN III, 19.

[142] ROWE 1930, 37.

[143] ROWE 1940, 18.

[144] See JAMES 1966, 171.

[145] The full formula reads "An offering-which-the-king-gives [to] Ra-Harmachis, Atem, Horus, Kheperi, Thot lord of the words of the god, Shu, Tefnut, the lords of the other world (?), and Osiris, at the head of the west, the great god, the ruler of eternity, that they may give life, prosperity, health, keen vision, honour and love, a sound mouth, the footstep in its place, until the reaching of a venerated state in peace, the end thereof being a good funeral, and burial in the cemetery of my town." (ROWE 1930, 37–38).

[146] THOMPSON 1970, 55–56.

Fig. 5 The second Amenemopet stele from Beth Shean
(Penn Museum stele 29-107-951; Courtesy of Penn Museum,
image # 153819)

argument of the offering list, coupled with the argument of the possible match in the names, is compelling. As seen above, Barta knows of only one inscription featuring the same three offerings as in the Mekal stele (though in different order and not consecutively, see Fig. 4). This shows that this exact phrase is rather rare, hence the occurrence of these same three offerings in the [...]*ipt* stele, in the same order, on the same archaeological site, and with a possible match between the names of the deceased is certainly not a coincidence. As to the stratigraphic difference between the two stelae (stratum 8–7 for Mekal, as opposed to stratum 6–5 for [...]*ipt*), it should come as no surprise, since Egyptian monumental material is known to have been reused in later strata in Beth-Shean, as shown by the famous year 1 stele of Seti I and the Ramesses II stele, both discovered in stratum 5, despite having originated in strata 8–7.[147]

Conclusion

This article has presented a critical overview of the currently-known data concerning the Mekal stele, one of the very few examples of private Egyptian stelae found in the Levant and featuring local Levantine gods.[148] On the positive side, we have offered several arguments confirming James and McGovern's redating of the stele to Dynasty 19 rather than Dynasty 18. We have also attempted to relate Mekal's iconography to Baal-Seth and

Reshef in a finer way, by highlighting the iconographic differences between the two gods using pairs of opposed variables. We provided a new edition of the stele's text, taking advantage of a new and clearer photograph provided by the Israel Museum. On the negative side, after critically reviewing past attempts at identifying the god, we have seen that several of them are indeed reasonable possibilities, but that none can be proven at this stage. This should come as no surprise, however. What are indeed our ancient sources concerning the religion of Palestinian Canaanites? Much has been written on the subject of Canaanite religion, but it is a fact that most of our literary data originates from a unique source, namely the religious texts unearthed in Ugarit, on the Syrian coast, quite far from Palestine proper, even beyond the Phoenician city-states. No Canaanite religious or literary texts from Palestine proper have ever come to light, so our only sources for possible Late Bronze Age theonyms from this region are provided by the (much later) biblical texts, theophoric anthroponyms mentioned in some Amarna letters, and very rare, short and fragmentary Proto-Canaanite and cuneiform inscriptions from within Palestine. We thus totally lack concrete indigenous contemporary evidence on the gods of Palestine during the Late Bronze Age, especially when it comes to regional gods, who might have been worshipped only in a limited zone, around a given city. It thus comes as no surprise, in our eyes, that occasionally, an otherwise unknown god appears in an isolated inscription. Mekal is most probably a local god of the Beth-Shean region, as witnessed by his Egyptian title $<nb>$ $b3ti\text{-}š3r$ ("<lord of> Beth-Shean") and by the absence of any attestation from within Egypt proper, as opposed to the Levantine gods Baal-Seth, Reshef and Hauron, well attested in Egypt. Not much more can be said about him for the moment, within the framework of Canaanite (or Levantine) religion. On the other hand, the iconographic attributes of Mekal do reveal some information. We have seen that these attributes fit within an iconographic series of Egyptian depictions of Levantine gods, namely Baal-Seth and Reshef, and that although Mekal's depiction is almost identical to Baal-Seth's, he bears one important difference – the headband – which he shares with Reshef. We suppose that at the time of erection of the Mekal

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[147] Mazar 2011, 160–162.

[148] Levy 2014, 309.

stele, the Egyptian iconography of Baal-Seth and Reshef was already well established, and that Mekal, as a lesser Canaanite god, had to be represented within these known iconographic canons, but at the same time needed to display some difference with these two major deities, in order not to be confounded with them. Hence the mixing of mostly Baalic traits with the Reshafic headband, thus providing an iconographic specificity to Mekal. We would like to finish by saying that although much mystery remains around the personality of our god, much positive information could also be brought forward, as shown in this paper. Concerning identification however, caution dictates that Mekal remain for the moment "the lord of Beth-Shean", and the "lord of Beth-Shean" alone.

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