



Ancient Schools in Palestine



By Hamdan Taha

Early forms of writing emerged gradually from pictorial representations of nature and human activities, drawn possibly for cultic purposes, to record-keeping and counting, which many scholars consider a form of proto-writing, and finally pictorial writing (such as Egyptian hieroglyphs and Mesopotamian cuneiform script) and early alphabets (such as the Proto-Canaanite script, Phoenician consonantal alphabet and Greek alphabet that also indicated vowels). The invention of writing necessitated the obvious need to learn it, and human history consequently witnessed the advent of a new profession: teaching. Palestine and Mesopotamia were among the early showplaces of this emerging skill, as indicated by archaeological, epigraphic, and philological evidence. Early sources include the notes written by an unknown teacher to a Sumerian student in the form of a dialogue that describes the daily proceedings at the House of Tablets in Iraq. In another source, a Canaanite teacher from a school at the archeological site Tell Balata near Nablus asks for his salary in a letter dated to around 1400 BC. And as in Iraq, many training exercises written by pupils of this early school were found.

Tell Balata features a Canaanite urban center, identified with the ancient Shikmu (Shechem) based on circumstantial evidence since no historical records have been found in situ that would corroborate this identification. The site was inhabited 6,000 years ago and reached its zenith in the Middle Bronze Age (around 2500 to 2000 BC), when its cyclopean wall, monumental gates, fortress temple, and domestic quarters were built. In the late Bronze Age, Labaya became king of Shikmu. He rebuilt the city that flourished during this period, as evidenced in its material culture. The cuneiform tablets date to this period in the urban history of the city that in the first century BC was abandoned until a new city, Nablus (Neapolis),



Tell Balata near Nablus.

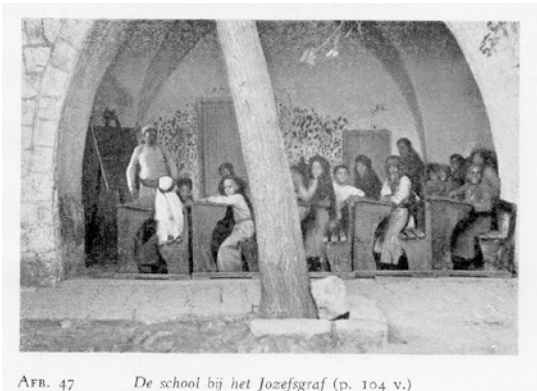
was erected during the Roman period. The village of Balata was built in the Medieval period along the southern edge of the ancient tell and has continuously been inhabited until the present time, inheriting the legacy of the ancient tell. It is worth noting that the shrine of Joseph's Tomb (Maqam Nabi Yusuf) was used in the 1930s as a school by Balata Village bearing the last vestiges of an ancient educational system in Palestine that used religious sites for various activities, among them teaching.

It seems that the first form of schools appeared with the advent of writing in ancient Mesopotamia, at the beginning of the third millennium BC. We all know how much time a person needs in order to learn how to write

his or her first correct sentence and may safely assume that in the past, people faced similar difficulties. Even though information about the first experiments in learning and teaching are scanty, there are some sources that can give us an idea about the first schools and teachers. The Sumerians called a school *edubba*, which in their Akkadian language meant *the house of cuneiform tablets*, which is the equivalent of Beit Dibi. The student was known as the son of the House of the Tablets. The school's name is derived clearly from the clay tablets and indicates that the clay tablets were used for writing. Such schools were echoed in traditional Palestinian society with Madares al-Kuttab, which used wooden tablets before the

Writing on clay Tablet.





School at Maqam Nabi Yusef (Joseph's Tomb) (BöhlPal.1931.47).

AfB. 47 De school bij het Jozefsgraf (p. 104 v.)

appearance of modern schools at the end of the Ottoman rule in Palestine.

Archaeologists in Iraq have found large numbers of exercise tablets. It seems that initially the schools were one of the extensions of a temple, the center of administration and economy at the time. This phenomenon was evident in Palestine as well, where teaching was associated with mosques, churches, and religious shrines and institutions. Clay tablets were found also in palaces and private dwellings, which indicates that a form of private schooling existed as well. In addition, and since the early second millennium BC, schools have emerged as independent institutions, similar to those of the Kattatib school system that was popular in Palestine before the emergence of modern schools.

Sources furthermore indicate that in the past, children went to school at the age of six, similar to the custom in our schools today.ⁱⁱ But back then, students had to memorize hundreds of signs (in the early stages there were more than 1,200 of them) instead of the twenty-some letters of the alphabets used in the Arabic or English languages of today. In some of these schools, basins were found, and we can assume that the pupils in ancient Iraq also had to learn how to prepare clay tablets for writing, which were used like the copy books or modern tablets of our days. In Egypt and Palestine, papyrus, leather, and

clay shards were used for writing; it is needless to say that paper was not known at the time. The pens in Iraq were made of cane and had a head in the form of a nail or screw. Writing was done by pressing the pen on the soft clay, which is why philologists called the resulting script cuneiform. Students had to learn the basic skills of how to prepare their clay tablets and pens before they began to learn how to write the signs. It is clear from the recovered training tablets that pupils at the elementary level were practicing the individual signs, whereas the more advanced pupils were writing simple sentences and lists of concepts and nouns. Advanced students copied longer and complex texts before they proceeded and practiced copying classical texts and literary passages. The whole process was done under the supervision of a teacher, who checked and corrected the texts before returning them to his pupils. Some clay tablets bearing both the pupil's and the teacher's scripts have been found.

Such teaching took several years of schooling, and we can imagine the difficulties involved in learning so many signs. Eventually, students took up work as writers in the economic and administrative sectors. However, education was not limited to writing skills but also to other essential knowledge such as mathematics, music, and dance.

Diary of a Sumerian Pupil

One can find notes directed at a Sumerian pupil in the form of a dialogue, written by an unknown teacher in the form of a diary of a student at the House of Tablets. The striking similarities between the psychological implications in this ancient text and today's modern school reality are surprising. The following text has been translated by Kramer.ⁱⁱⁱ

- O son of the Tablet House, where did you go from earliest days?
- I went to the Tablet House.
- What did you do in the Tablet House?
- I recited my tablet, I ate my lunch, and then I prepared my new tablet, and set it up, wrote it, finished it, and in the afternoon, they assigned me homework. I returned what I wrote.
- When the Tablet House was dismissed, I went home, entered the house, and found my father sitting there.
- I told my father of my homework, then recited my tablet to him, and my father was delighted....
- The next day I got up early, looked at my mother and said to her: Give me my lunch, my mother gave me two rolls and I went to school.
- In the Tablet House, the guard said to me, Why are you late?
- I felt scared, and my heart beat.
- Then I appeared in front of my teacher and made a respectful curtsy.



Schoolday Tablet (Samuel Noah Kramer, Schooldays: A Sumerian Composition.).

Letter of a Canaanite Teacher

At Tell Balata, two cuneiform tablets were found by Ernest Sellin and Franz M. Bohl in 1926. They date back to the late Bronze Age (ca. 1400 BC). One incomplete tablet contains a list of personal names, and the second, a complete tablet, is a letter from a teacher to the prince of Shikmu. The tablets were read and published by the Dutch Assyriologist Bohl and later commented on by the American biblical archaeologist W. Albright.^{iv} It is a letter of a man who most probably headed a school of cuneiform tablet writing in the Canaanite city of Shikmu and addressed his letter to the prince of Shikmu. It is interesting to note that despite the delay in tuition payment, the teacher continued to attend to his tasks in teaching his pupils. The fees comprised goods such as grains and oil, similar to the fees paid in the Palestinian Dar al-Kuttab traditional education system.

Unto Birashshenu

Say:

Thus Baniti (Ashirate)

From three years ago until now thou has had me paid

Is there no grain nor oil nor wine

What is my offence that thou hast not paid

The children who are with me

Continue to learn

Their father and mother

Every day alike

Am am i

(.....Interruption in the text)

Now

Whatever

At the disposal of my ---unto me

And let him inform me



Balata Teacher's Tablet (Sellin1926).

Teaching is one of the old professions in Palestine as is evident from these cuneiform writings. The teacher's text from Tell Balata forms a unique literary historical evidence of schools in Palestine from 3,500 years ago. It throws light on cultural life in the Canaanite period and shows the striking similarities between ancient and modern schools with regard to the education system, the material that was taught, the fear of being late for school, and delays in payment. Teaching was probably not the most

privileged profession financially, but for sure it has been one of the most honorable professions throughout history.

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ⁱ For more information on this site, please visit Tell Balata Archeological Guide, published by the Palestinian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquity at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002319/231930e.pdf>.

ⁱⁱ Samuel Noah Kramer, *History Begins at Sumer: ThirtyNine Firsts in Recorded History*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981.

ⁱⁱⁱ Available at <https://cdli.ucla.edu/cdlitabnet/showcase>, for more details visit <https://goo.gl/LSRDUL>

^{iv} William F. Albright, "A Teacher to a Man of Shechem about 1400 B.C.," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 86 (April 1942), pp 2831.



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