

# Researchers seek to decipher ancient Moabite inscriptions

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A Moabite inscribed altar from the Iron Age found in the ancient town of Altaruz (Photo courtesy of Chang-ho Ji)

AMMAN — An inscription known as Mesha Stele or Mesha Inscription indicates that in the ancient town of Altaruz, located some 30 kilometres southwest of Madaba, Chemosh, the god of the Moabites, was worshipped.

“The Mesha Stele, which was commissioned by King Mesha of Moab, was written in the Moabite language,” professor Christopher Rollston, an American epigraphist, told The Jordan Times in a recent interview. It is Chemosh who was worshiped at Ataruz and to whom the offerings mentioned on the Ataruz inscription would have been dedicated, Rollston said.

There is a reference in the Mesha Stele to the Moabites conquering Ataruz and killing the Gadite tribe, said Rollston. “The inscriptions are written in the Early Moabite script,” the epigraphist said, adding that the Ataruz inscriptions also use Hieratic numerals, which were originally developed in Egypt.

“An altar found in Khirbet Al Mudayna has an inscription which identifies the object as a ‘mqtr’, a Moabite word meaning ‘burner’, which means an altar for burning incense or other aromatic substances,” American researcher Adam Bean, who studied ancient Middle Eastern languages and Near Eastern studies, told The Jordan Times.

The Ataruz inscriptions are the earliest evidence for a distinctive Moabite script, according to Rollston. “It’s clear that ancient Moab had some gifted scribes,” he said.

“There is one word of debated reading in the inscription which might be read as ‘plunder’, which might suggest some scenario such as that a certain amount of bronze was looted from the destroyed city and offered in the shrine. Whether or not that exact scenario is accurate, the recording of the quantities of metal on an altar, in a shrine, suggests some cultic significance such as offerings to a deity,” Bean pointed out.