

ROSA LAST

INSCRIBED ASTRAGALUS FROM SHA'AR HA-'AMAQIM

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INSCRIBED ASTRAGALUS FROM SHA'AR HA-'AMAQIM*

Astragalus (ἀστράγαλος) is a small bone, forming part of the ankle-joint in cloven-footed animals. Ἀστράγαλοι—knucklebones were employed as dice. According to E. Stern's reports on the finds at Tell Mevorakh and Tell Dor the dice as a game had been known in the ancient East from the Bronze Age¹ till the Roman period.² In ancient Greece ἀστράγαλοι were a favorite plaything, particularly among women and children.³ The lexicographer Pollux describes the game as follows: "The knucklebones are thrown up into the air, and an attempt is made to catch them on the back of the hand. If you are only partially successful, you have to pick up the knucklebones, which have fallen to the ground, without letting fall those already on the hand . . . It is, above all, a woman's game."⁴ Knucklebones required no marks of value on them, since their sides were naturally distinguishable. Knucklebones thus have uninscribed sides.

The inscribed astragalus considered here was discovered during the excavations of the Hellenistic tower at Sha'ar Ha-'Amaqim, in the southern Lower Galilee.⁵ It was contributed by Prof. Arthur Segal (Dept. of Archaeology, Haifa University) and Mr. Yehuda Naor (Kibbutz Sha'ar Ha-'Amaqim) and submitted for publication with their kind permission.



The astragalus measures: height 2 cm., length 3 cm., thickness 2 cm. The graffito EPMH is cut on the face side of the astragalus. Height of the letters 1 cm.

The astragalus belongs to the phase of the tower dated late third–early second century B.C. Our knucklebone is inscribed with the word EPMH as mentioned above. It means the name of Ἑρμῆς in the dative or vocative. Hermes is known as the god of good fortune, unexpected piece of luck (ἔρμαιο), lot and even dice.⁶ It may explain why EPMH was inscribed on our knucklebone.

Haifa University

Rosa Last

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¹ E. Stern, Excavations at Tel Mevorakh (1973–1976) Part Two: The Bronze Age, *Qedem* 18, 1984, 25, 125.

² E. Stern, Dor – Ruler of the Seas, Jerusalem 1994, 317–318.

³ On knucklebones in ancient Greece see E. Schmidt, *Spielzeug im klassischen Altertum*, Meiningen 1971, 55–57 and British Museum, *A Guide to the Exhibition Illustrating Greek and Roman Life*, London 1929, 200–202.

⁴ Pollux, *Onomasticon*, ix, 126.

⁵ A. Segal and Y. Naor, Sha'ar Ha-'Amaqim, in: E. Stern (ed.), *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land* (Jerusalem, 1993), v. 4, 1339–1340.

⁶ Chr. Scherer, Hermes, in: W. H. Roscher (ed.), *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*, I, 2, Hildesheim 1965, 2380–2381.