

בְּקַעַ

beka (a half shekel)

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Introduction

Grammatical type: n.m.

Occurrences: 2× HB (2/0/0); 0× Sir.; 0× Qum.; 35× Inscr. (Total: 37).

Torah: 2: Gen 24:22; Exod 38:26.

Inscriptions: Ashdod; Beth-Zur; Ekron; Gezer; Jerusalem (2×); Kh. el-Kom; Kh. Uza; Lachish (3×); Nahal Elteke; Ramat Rahel; Ras Salāh; Shueifat; unknown provenance (22×).¹

Text doubtful: —

A.1 Many weights inscribed with the word **בְּקַעַ** have been found;² whereas one weight was found with only the **ב** and one with probably the letters **קַע** (letters not clear on the photograph).³ See section [6.4. Archaeology](#).

1. Root and Comparative Material

A.1 The word **בְּקַעַ** is derived from **בַּקַּעַ**, ‘to cleave’, ‘to split’,⁴ which has, apart from **בְּקַעַ**, a few derivatives: ***בְּקַיעַ**, ‘breach’, ‘rubble’, and **בְּקַעָה**, ‘valley’. The latter word is used in a number of locative or topographical names: **בְּקַעַת אֲזֹן** (Amos 1:5); **בְּקַעַת יְרֵחוֹ** (Deut 34:3), etc.

A.2 The noun בֶּקַע is not attested in the cognate languages.⁵ However, the root בקע is attested in, for example, Ug. *bq*⁶, ‘to split, open’,⁶ Moab. *bq*⁶, ‘to break through (of dawn)’,⁷ LMHebr. בקע, ‘to split, chop’.⁸

A.3 The BHebr. word בֶּקַע, ‘weight, coin’, is used in a quotation from Exod 38:26 in the midrashim, such as Bereshit Rabba (84:18):⁹ אַתֶּם מְכַרְתֶּם בְּנֵה שֶׁל רַחֵל בְּעֶשְׂרִים בְּקַע לְגִלְגָּלֶת, הִדָּא הוּא דְכְתִיב (שְׁמוֹת לֵח, כו): בְּקַע לְגִלְגָּלֶת בְּקַע לְגִלְגָּלֶת, מְחַצֵּית הַשְּׁקָל. ‘You sold Rachel’s son for twenty pieces of silver, therefore shall each of you bring a *beka* a head; thus it is written (Exod 38:26): *A beka a head, half a shekel*.¹⁰

2. Formal Characteristics

A.1 בֶּקַע is a *qatl* formation – the most common noun pattern (almost a quarter of all nouns)¹¹ – of the root *tertiaie gutturalis* √בקע.¹²

3. Syntagmatics

A.1 In the Hebrew Bible בֶּקַע occurs twice in the singular absolute. No other forms are attested. In epigraphical sources the word is solely used as the designation of the weight on which it is inscribed.

A.2 בֶּקַע occurs in a nominal clause:

בֶּקַע מִשְׁקָלוֹ, ‘a *beka* is its weight’, Gen 24:22;

בֶּקַע לְגִלְגָּלֶת ... וְכֶסֶף פְּקוּדֵי הָעֵדָה, ‘the silver of the counted ones of the congregation was ... a *beka* per head’, Exod 38:25–26.¹³

A.3 בֶּקַע occurs in apposition:

בֶּקַע ... מְחַצֵּית הַשְּׁקָל, ‘a *beka* ... half a shekel’, Exod 38:26.¹⁴

4. Ancient Versions

a. Septuagint (LXX) and other Greek versions:

δραχμή, ‘drachma (weight)’:¹⁵ Gen 24:22^{LXX}; Exod 39:3^{LXX} (38:26^{MT});

δίδραχμον, ‘coin of two drachmas’:¹⁶ Exod 39:3^a (38:26^{MT}).

b. Targumim (T: O/N/PsJ/Smr):

דרכמון, ‘drachma’:¹⁷ Gen 24:22^{PsJ}; Exod 38:26^{PsJ};

טבע/טבי, ‘half-shekel, coin’:¹⁸ Gen 24:22^{N,Smr}; Exod 38:26^{Smr};

תקלא, ‘shekel’:¹⁹ Gen 24:22^O; Exod 38:26^O;

No rendering: Exod 38:26^N.²⁰

c. Peshitta (S):

ܡܬܩܠܐ (*matqālā*), ‘weight, scale, shekel’:²¹ Gen 24:22; Exod 38:26.

d. Vulgate (V)

siclos duos, ‘two shekel’:²² Gen 24:22.

No rendering: Exod 38:26.²³

5. Lexical/Semantic Fields

A.1 בְּקַע occurs in the context of the description of the weight of gold (זָהָב, Gen 24:22) and silver (כֶּסֶף, Exod 38:25–26). Another weight mentioned in its context is the shekel (→ שֶׁקֶל). The *beka* is even equated with a half shekel in Exod 38:26. This use seems to agree with the custom of expressing the worth of precious goods in terms of weight, whereas food was described on the basis of size or volume.²⁴

6. Exegesis*6.1 Literal Use*

A.1 The word בְּקַע has the basic meaning ‘split off’, ‘piece’, ‘part’,²⁵ and in Exod 38:26 it is a ‘part’ (from two parts) of a shekel.²⁶

A.2 The designation בְּקַע is mentioned as a weight in Gen 24:22: Abraham’s servant gives rich gifts to Rebecca. He takes (לָקַח) a golden ring (נִיִּם זָהָב), whose weight (מִשְׁקָל) is a בְּקַע, as well as two bracelets, which weigh ten golden shekels (עֲשָׂרָה זָהָב; cf. → שֶׁקֶל). The use of בְּקַע for a ring, next to ‘ten shekels’ for bracelets, suggests that a *beka* weighs only part of a shekel.

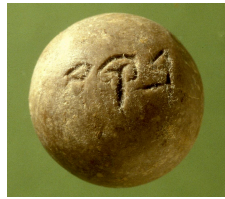
A.3 In Exod 38:26 a בְּקַע is mentioned in the context of silver (כֶּסֶף, Exod 38:25) as processed material (Exod 38:24–31) in the manufacture of the tabernacle, and was gathered in a census. This is referred to as a בְּקַע in silver per head for every one who was numbered in the census from the age of twenty and upwards. A בְּקַע is further referred to in Exod 38:26 as half a shekel (מִחֲצִית הַשֶּׁקֶל, ‘half of a shekel’) ‘by the sanctuary shekel’ (בְּשֶׁקֶל הַקֹּדֶשׁ, → שֶׁקֶל).

6.2 Figurative Use

Not attested.

6.3 Pictorial Material

A.1 Some pictures or drawings of *beka* weights have been published.²⁷ Two of these are presented below (Figs. 1–2), of which the round, stone weight is the most common example.

FIGURE 1: Stone beka-weight²⁸FIGURE 2: Metal beka-weight²⁹

A.2 A First Temple period *beka* weight was discovered during the sifting project of archaeological soil originating from the Western Wall foundations in the Emek Tzurim National Park under auspices of the City of David Foundation. The find is interesting, because the weight was inscribed in mirror script (see Fig. 3, below), which suggests that the craftsman was used to create seals and to writing in mirror script.³⁰

FIGURE 3: *Beka* weight inscribed in mirror script.³¹

6.4 Archaeology

A.1 Kletter mentions thirty-five weights designated with the letters ב, ק, and ע (or one or two of these letters) as a בְּקֶע.³² Their provenance is, as far as is known, for the most part in Judah. They date from the late 8th century BCE, and later centuries and vary in weight from 5.51 to about 6.90 grams, with an average of 6,003 grams.³³ These weights, all homogeneous in shape, are as a rule made of stone as all weights were,³⁴ although a metal weight has been found.³⁵ It is also possible to point out a number of uninscribed *beka* weights (6.0-6.6 grams, mostly of stone), of which it is difficult to say whether they date from the same or from an earlier period.³⁶

7. Conclusion

A.1 The בְּקָע, 'half shekel', is part of a system of weights that is based on the שֶׁקֶל. The fact that the found *beka* weights vary in weight, is attributed to the existence of more than one weight standard.³⁷ However, it can also be explained by factors such as mistakes in the manufacture of the weights, inability to weigh accurately, and to wear and tear.³⁸ Since the found *beka* weights originate from the same period and, as far as is known, come largely from the same area (Judaea), and are largely homogeneous in terms of material and shape, it is probable that these weights are based on the same standard of weight.³⁹ It is therefore likely that the same weight standard is to be applied to the בְּקָע of Gen 24:22 and the one of Exod 38:26. It is true that for the בְּקָע of Exod 38:26, unlike that of Gen 24:22, the standard of the 'sanctuary shekel' applies. But the question remains whether this standard set by the sanctuary would have deviated from the standard that was in normal use (see → שֶׁקֶל).

Notes

- 1 ↑ See esp. Kletter 1998: 211–17 and 243, with references to the sources and earlier literature.
- 2 ↑ Cf. Diringier 1934: 277–80; Tav. XXIII, 14–17; Moscatti 1951: 103; Tav. XXIV, 9–10; Shany 1967: 54–55; pl. XI; Kletter 1998: 211–17, 243; Heltzer 1998: 44*–46*.
- 3 ↑ See Kletter 1998: 213, # 6; 214, # 10, respectively.
- 4 ↑ KBL, 144: 'Teil, Stück *part, piece*'; Zorell, 124; *HAL*, 144; *HALOT*, 150; Ges¹⁸, 169.
- 5 ↑ Cf. *HAL*, 144; Ges¹⁸, 169; *DNWSI*, 187.
- 6 ↑ *WUS*, 57, # 567; *DULAT*¹, 234.
- 7 ↑ *KAI*, 176, # 181.
- 8 ↑ Jastrow, *DTT*, 186.
- 9 ↑ Jastrow, *DTT*, 186.
- 10 ↑ For a somewhat different rendering, cf. Freedman 1939, 783.
- 11 ↑ BL, 455, § 61.i'.
- 12 ↑ BL, 456, § 61.k'γ.
- 13 ↑ *DCH*, vol. 2, 249.
- 14 ↑ *DCH*, vol. 2, 249.
- 15 ↑ LEH³, 161; *GELS*, 178.
- 16 ↑ LEH³, 151; *GELS*, 164. Remarkably LEH³, 151, has in addition to 'coin of two drachmas' also 'half-shekel', which suggests that *δίδραχμον* equals 'half-shekel'. Apparently 'half-shekel' was intended as a definition for *one* drachma, because a *δίδραχμον* equals always a shekel (see Gen 23:15, 16; Exod 21:32).

- 17 ↑ Levy, *CWT*, vol. I, 188: ‘*Dareicos*, eine persische Goldmünze = einem gemeinen Shekel’; Jastrow, *DTT*, 324: ‘(late b.h.) = דְּרַכְמוֹן (= *Daric*, *ad loc.*); Dalman, *ANHT*, 105: ‘(δραχμή) Drachme’; Sokoloff, *DJPA*, 156.
- 18 ↑ Tal, *DSA*, 302 s.v. טבע; Levy, *CWT*, vol. I, 294: ‘1. *geprägte Münze*, ...bes. die Hälfte eines heiligen Sekel’. Jastrow, *DTT*, 519: ‘*Teb‘a*, a coin equal to half a Sela’. Dalman, *ANHT*, 166: ‘1. Münze; 2. eine bestimmte Münze (ein halber Sela)’.
- 19 ↑ Levy, *CWT*, vol. II, 551, ‘*Siclus*, u.zw. der gemeine Sekel = der Hälfte eines heiligen Sekels oder Sela = Dareikon, ungef. 13 Sgr. nach unserm Gelde’. Jastrow, *DTT*, 1691: ‘*weight*, esp. (*half a*) *Shekel*’. Dalman, *ANHT*, 447: ‘II. Sekel (Gewicht u. Münze)’.
- 20 ↑ Only in the marginalia of T^N an equivalent טבע for MT בֶּקַע is found.
- 21 ↑ Payne Smith, *CSD*, 321; Sokoloff, *SLB*, 875.
- 22 ↑ *LD*, 1693: ‘a shekel’.
- 23 ↑ The whole phrase of MT in Exod 38:26, in which the word בֶּקַע is applied, was not rendered in V.
- 24 ↑ De Vaux, *IAT*, vol. I, 309.
- 25 ↑ Gesenius, *TPC* vol. 1, 232; BDB, 132; KBL, 144: ‘Teil, Stück *part, piece*’; Zorell, 124; *HAL*, 144; *HALOT*, 150; Ges¹⁸, 169.
- 26 ↑ Gesenius, *TPC* vol. 1, 232: ‘*pars dimidia*, a findendo dicta (...), nonnisi spec. dimidius siclus’; *HAWAT*, 46: ‘1/2 Šeqel: ca. acht Gramm’; BDB, 132: ‘fraction, half, i.e. half-shekel, a weight’; *GB*, 111: ‘halber Sekel’; Zorell, 124: ‘... sec. Ex 38 26 dimidia pars sicli sacri (= 8,18 gr. nostri ponderis...)’; *HAL*, 144: ‘e. Gewicht als Metallwert 1/2 שֶׁקֶל; Halbschekel’. *DCH*, vol. 2, 249: ‘half a shekel’. Ges¹⁸, 169: ‘GBdtg Abgespaltenes, bzw. Teil, i. בֶּקַע Beka, Halbschekel 1. Gewicht (...) = ca. 6 g. m. lok. Abweichungen’.
- 27 ↑ Diringer 1934: Tav. XXIII, ## 14–17; Diringer 1958: 231, pl. 13; Moscatti 1951: Tav. XXIV, ## 9–10; Scott 1959: 36, fig. 7, ## 4–6; Strobel 1964: 1166, Abb. 3, # 3; Kletter 1998: 218, Fig. 36; Stern 2001: 196, Fig. I.85.
- 28 ↑ Photograph: Zev Radovan; courtesy of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.
- 29 ↑ Photograph: Zev Radovan; private collection.
- 30 ↑ Cf. Borschel-Dan 2018.
- 31 ↑ Photograph: Eliyahu Yanai; Courtesy of the City of David Archive.
- 32 ↑ Kletter 1998: 17, 43, 60, 76, 78–80, 52–53, 211–17, 243.
- 33 ↑ Cf. Barrois 1953: 255; Diringer 1958: 228; Scott 1959: 35; De Vaux, *IAT*, vol. I, 311; Kletter 1998: 211–17, 243; Kletter 2009: 834–35; Röllig 2003: 435–36; Bashan 2007: 706; Cf. also Powell 1992: 907.
Heltzer 1998: 44*-46*, argues for 6.82gr as the weight of a Judaeian half-shekel, whereas most studies assume the average weight in line with Kletter’s observations. In this respect the comment by Marvin Powell (Powell 1992: 905) should be kept in mind: ‘Most surviving weight specimens are small and deviation from a given norm increases as the size of the weight decreases.’ Similarly Weippert 1977: 93.
- 34 ↑ Cf. the reference to weights as ‘stones’ (אֲבָנִים), comparable to Akk. and Ug.; e.g. Lev 19:36; 2 Sam 14:26; Mic 6:11; cf. *HALOT*, 8; Barrois 1953: 252; De Vaux, *IAT*, vol. I, 309; Weippert 1977: 93; Powell 1992: 905; Bashan 2007: 703.

35 ↑ Shany 1967: 54–55; Kletter 1998: 216, # 20. Other (larger) weights were also cast, see Bashan 2007: 703; for some illustrations of cast weights, see *ANEP*, 36, ## 118–21; 341, # 777.

36 ↑ Kletter 1998: 132–37, 143, 254.

37 ↑ Diring 1958: 228.

38 ↑ Cf. Cook 1988: 1052, 1054; Kletter 1998: 71, 78, 140.

39 ↑ Kletter 1998: 70–72.

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For the abbreviations → [List of Abbreviations](#)

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First published: 8th November 2021

Last update: 27th January 2022

This article should be cited as:

Raymond de Hoop & Bertus van 't Veld, 'בֶּקָה, beka (a half shekel)', PDF downloaded from: <http://sahd-online.com/>.

* Thanks are due to Mrs Alice Deken (Amsterdam), who was so kind as to correct the English of this paper.