

EPIGRAPHIC FINDS FROM TELL EL-UMEIRI DURING THE 1989 SEASON

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One seal, three seal impressions, and one inscribed ostrakon were discovered in 1989 at Tell el-Umeiri. All inscriptions date between the 7th and 5th centuries B.C. The seal was written in the Ammonite script, while the seal impressions were in Aramaic script; there are too few letters on the ostrakon to discern the script type.

The Seal

The scaraboid seal (object no. 1749; see Figs. 1 and 2) was found in the topsoil of Field A (Square 7K72, Locus 2) above the northernmost building of the Field A public complex. It was ca. 1.4 cm long, 1.2 cm wide, and a maximum of .8 cm thick. A hole, ca. .3 cm in diameter, was drilled through its length to accommodate a string for hanging around the wrist or neck.

The seal was inscribed on both sides with both the name of the owner and a faunal depiction. On the top, or rounded, part was a bovine head with large horns curving in sweeping "S" forms. The edge of the seal is surrounded by a series of short diagonal lines that appear like a rope motif on the impression. Above the animal is a six-letter inscription containing the possessive preposition *lamed* followed by the name of the owner: *l'l'ms*, "belonging to 'Il'amas."

On the bottom, or flat, side of the seal was a bird perched atop what appears to be an open lotus and facing left. Although the bird, as carved on the seal, stands only ca. .7 cm tall from tail to head, the seal is carved with such precision that several attributes of the bird may be discerned. Its bill is long and curved; its tail is of moderate length and terminates in a squared shape; and its wing seems to be mottled, probably to depict feather patterns. Unfortunately, size is not suggested.

I was able to find three similar birds with ranges that include Syria-Palestine. The first is the orange-tufted sunbird, which enjoys a rocky savannah habitat primarily in Palestine; this one is very small.¹ The second is the red-billed chough, found especially among steep cliffs, hill crags, and old quarries near grasslands.² The third possibility is the raven or crow, although its bill is somewhat smaller than that on our seal.³ If our bird is one of these three, the mottled wing represents feather patterns, not color differences. If the presence of the lotus flower can be connected with the bird, the sunbird could be the correct identification, because it is a nectar-feeding bird.

The inscription circles the bird and is separated from the ends of the seal by a single inscribed line encircling the outer edge of the seal. The inscription contains three words, each separated by a short vertical word divider. The first word begins below the tail of the bird and is identical to that on the upper surface of the seal: *lʿlʿmš*. Following a word divider, the word *bn*, "son of," is visible above the head of the bird. The third word, the patronym, does not continue the direction of the inscription, but switches directions, beginning at the lotus and ending at the second word divider, reading *tmkʿl*. The inscription thus reads in whole, *lʿlʿmš bn tmkʿl*, "belonging to ʿIlʿamaš son of Tamakʿil."

The paleography of the inscription displays the typical vertical stance of Ammonite characters, well known now from many seals.⁴ None of the letters is highly diagnostic, but the presence of only two strokes to the right of the upright on the *šade* and the single stroke to the right of the upright on the *taw* may suggest an advanced date (end of the 7th century B.C.). However, the *kaph* fits an earlier date best (ca. 700). A date within the 7th century B.C. is suggested.

¹C. Harrison, *An Atlas of the Birds of the Western Plaseartic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1982), 275.

²*Ibid.*, 313.

³*Ibid.*, 310-312.

⁴L. G. Herr, *The Scripts of Ancient Northwest Semitic Seals* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978); and U. E. Aufrecht, *A Corpus of Ammonite Inscriptions* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1989).

The two names on the seal, ʾIlʾamaš and Tamakʾil, are also typical Ammonite names, well known from other seals.⁵ ʾIlʾamaš probably means "Il is strong." The theophoric element, ʾIl, is ubiquitous on Ammonite seals, while the verbal element is typical of names of the region (in the Bible there are four Amaziahs [*ʾamasyhw*] and one Amoz [*ʾms*], while the element *ʾms* occurs on one Moabite seal.⁶ Tamakʾil means "Il sustains" or "Il leads."

The two features of the iconography are also very well known in the Ammonite tradition. Similar birds are found on two Ammonite seals,⁷ and a similar bovine head is found on another seal.⁸ But more importantly, the two are found together on three Ammonite seals.⁹ In all three of these occurrences, two birds flank a bovine head which is virtually identical in shape to that on our seal. In two cases, the birds seem to have mottled wings.¹⁰ Although our seal does not contain this exact scene, the juxtaposition of a bovine head with a perching bird on opposing sides of a seal suggests familiarity with Ammonite glyptic art.

Most commentators seem to suggest that the mammal head is that of a ram,¹¹ except once when uncertainty was expressed.¹² I have taken the position that it is a bovine head—perhaps that of a steer, as suggested by the shape of the horns. If there is any symbolic meaning behind the image, the prevalence for ʾIl names in the Ammonite onomasticon (and on our seal) would suggest that

⁵For Tamakʾil, see Aufrecht, nos. 1, 3, 14, 26, 62 (ʾIltamak), 76, 84, 85 (hypocoristicon, Tamakaʾ), 86, 113, 132; and for ʾIlʾamaš, see Aufrecht, nos. 5 and 18.

⁶For the occurrence on a Moabite seal, see Herr, 154.

⁷Aufrecht, nos. 14 and 60.

⁸Ibid., no. 19.

⁹Ibid., nos. 87, 106 and 114; see also H. J. Franken and M. M. Ibrahim, "Two Seasons of Excavations at Tell Deir ʾAlla, 1976-1978," *ADAJ* 22 (1978): pl. 30.2.

¹⁰Aufrecht, nos. 106 and 114.

¹¹Ibid., 231, 269, 285.

¹²Ibid., 47.

ʾEl) was associated with a bull, and some specialists suggest that the same was true in Iron-Age Israelite traditions (the golden calf/bull of Exod 32 and 1 Kgs 12).¹³

Two ʿmn Stamped Jar Impressions

Two seal impressions with identical inscriptions were found on the upper portions of two jar handles. The first (object no. 1799; see figs. 3 and 4) was found in the topsoil of Field A (Square 7K62, Locus 2) above the northeast corner of the four-room building in the Field A public complex. It was impressed into the wet clay while the hand was moving to the right, and one can see the slip marks on the left side of the impression and the pushed-up clay on the right (fig. 3). This impression measures ca. 1.8 cm long and 1.5 cm wide.

The second seal impression (object no. 2028; see figs. 5 and 6) was found in the topsoil of the same Square in Field A (Square 7K62, Locus 4) above the northeast corner of the four-room building or the southern part of the northern building in the Field A public complex. It was ca. 1.9 cm long and 1.4 cm wide. All letters are flattened at the top. Perhaps the jar was wiped with a rag after the impression was made but prior to firing.

We are considering both impressions together because they carry the same inscription. However, because the space between the two lines is greater on no. 2028 than on no. 1799, and because the letters are slightly different, they were probably impressed by different seals. Although the letters on both impressions are relatively unclear, we are virtually certain that the reading for no. 1799 is correct (fig. 4), while the visible traces on no. 2028 suggest the same letters made in similar ways. When viewed through a low-magnification binocular microscope under a variety of lighting configurations, both impressions are much clearer than in the published photographs. Unfortunately, the high density of large non-plastics in the clay of the jars has confused the appearance considerably. Both impressions are to be preserved and housed by the Department of Antiquities of Jordan.

The forms of the letters on both impressions are similar (figs. 3 and 5), reading *šbʾ/ʿmn*, with three letters on each line. There

¹³See J. M. S. Smith, *The Early History of God* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1990), 51, for the various alternatives to bull imagery among Iron-Age Israelites.

does not seem to be a line separating the two registers. There are two ways to understand the inscription. The first is that all six letters spell a personal name, with *mn*, "Ammon," the national name, standing for the theophoric element. This is the typical way of understanding normal seal inscriptions; but if so, the verbal element *šb* is very difficult to understand. I would suggest, therefore, a second and more probable alternative translation in which the first element, *šb*, is a hypocoristic name with *aleph* based on *šwb* (or possibly *yšb*), and with the second word, *mn*, referring to a regional identification. But before I expand on this reading we must first devote attention to the paleography.

It is clear that the script of both impressions is Aramaic. Both *šins* are made of three strokes, with the center stroke slanting upward to the right (contrary to appearances on the photograph of no. 1799 [fig. 3], which has been distorted by a non-plastic in the clay). This form of the letter does not occur in Ammonite,¹⁴ but it is common in Aramaic, especially in the 6th and 5th centuries.¹⁵ The *šin* of no. 2028 (fig. 5) seems to lean farther to the left than that on no. 1799.

The head of both *bets* is wide open, as is typical in Aramaic inscriptions of the 6th and early 5th centuries.¹⁶ The Ammonite open form is always more closed.¹⁷ The *bet* on no. 1799 seems to be slightly larger than the one on no. 2028.

The *aleph* is the typical star form found in both Aramaic and Ammonite script traditions.¹⁸ In our two impressions, this form seems to display the lower horizontal stretching beyond the vertical (see especially no. 1799). The horizontal strokes on no. 2028 seem to be more parallel than on no. 1799. (The vertical scratch to the left of the *aleph* on no. 1799 should not be confused with a stroke.)

Both *ayins* are squared and probably wide open at the top, although markings on both letters may suggest partial closing.

¹⁴Herr, figs. 37 and 45.

¹⁵Ibid., figs. 14 and 33.

¹⁶Ibid., figs. 2 and 23.

¹⁷Ibid., figs. 34 and 42.

¹⁸Ibid., figs. 1, 23, 34, and 42.

Under a binocular microscope, however, these markings appear secondary (scratches and ware imperfections). The squared *ayin* is well known in Ammonite seal scripts,¹⁹ but the letter is seldom open and, when it is, is usually round. The form fits best the Aramaic *ayins* of the late 7th to the 5th centuries.²⁰

The *mem* with a middle vertical stroke does not occur in Ammonite scripts,²¹ but is an important form in Aramaic inscriptions of the 6th century.²² Later forms of 5th-century Aramaic have a much shorter head, giving the letter a more vertical orientation.

The *nun* is similar to Ammonite forms of the late 7th and early 6th centuries,²³ but is extremely frequent in the Aramaic tradition from the 7th to the 5th centuries.²⁴

Most of the letters in the impressions have a relatively wide range of occurrence in the Aramaic script from the late 7th century to the early or mid 5th century. However, the *mem* can suggest a more limited time span in the 6th century, perhaps most likely in the second half of the 6th century. Moreover, the use of the Aramaic script on two impressions from an Ammonite site favors a date after the mid 6th century, when the use of the Ammonite script seems to have ceased in favor of Aramaic.²⁵ To my knowledge, this is the first time this phenomenon is witnessed on seal epigraphy.

As we return now to the reading of the seal impressions, I would suggest that, given their date and script, these impressions are the first examples (to my knowledge) of Persian provincial seals for the province of *Ammon*. As such, they parallel the *yhd/yhwd*

¹⁹Ibid., fig. 44.

²⁰Ibid., figs. 12 and 31.

²¹Ibid., figs. 36 and 44.

²²Ibid., figs. 10 and 30.

²³Ibid., figs. 36 and 44.

²⁴Ibid., figs. 11 and 30.

²⁵F. M. Cross, "Ammonite Ostraca from Heshbon," *AUSS* 13 (1975): 14.

stamps from the province of Judah.²⁶ If we may therefore use the analogy of the *yhw*d stamps for our two stamps, I would suggest that the name on the first line šbʾ, "Shubaʾ," indicates either the governor or the treasurer of the Persian province ʿmn, "Ammon," mentioned in the second line.²⁷ Because my paleographic analysis and that of Avigad on the *yhw*d stamps²⁸ came independently to precisely the same dates for these provincial stamps, it may be implied that both the ʿmn and *yhw*d stamps played similar roles at the same time in their respective Persian provinces. We are not as yet aware of an Ammonite provincial governor named Shubaʾ. The only governor mentioned in the Bible is one of the Tobiahs (Neh 2, 4, 6, and 13), but Josephus mentions others also named Tobiah.

As late as 1961 it was thought that Ammonite civilization ceased to exist in the mid 6th century and did not begin again until the Hellenistic period.²⁹ Our two seal impressions add to the emerging consensus for a Persian province of Ammon. They were most likely products of the Persian bureaucracy, perhaps associated with taxation. As far as we know, they are the only two "provincial" seals yet found in the Ammonite region. Because they were discovered in topsoil immediately above the public buildings at the western edge of Tell el-ʿUmeiri, it appears that during the latest phase, the early-Persian period of those public buildings, they functioned in association with the Persian provincial government.

Another Seal Impression

About three-fourths of another seal impression was preserved on a fragment of a jar rim (figs. 7-9). The sherd (object no. 1699) was found in the topsoil of Field A (Square 7K42, Locus 2) above

²⁶N. Avigad, *Bullae and Seals from a Post-exilic Judean Archive*, Qedem 4 (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the Institute of Archaeology, 1976); and E. Stern, *Material Culture of the Land of the Bible in the Persian Period 538-332 B.C.* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1982), 202-206. See also F. M. Cross, "Judean Stamps," *Eretz Israel* 9 (1969): 20-27.

²⁷See Stern, 205-206, for the consensus view of the *yhw*d stamps.

²⁸Avigad, 21-24.

²⁹G. M. Landes, "The Material Civilization of the Ammonites," *BA* 24 (1961),

the southern portion of the public building complex. It was impressed onto the thickened jar rim just above its join with the neck (fig. 9), and it measured ca. 2.1 cm long and 1.9 cm wide.

The inscription is contained within a single line frame. Although it is more difficult to read than the preceding two impressions, the script on this impression appears again to be Aramaic of the late 6th century and to contain three letters in each of two lines, as well.

The first letter appears to be a *bet* with a wide open head, similar to those on the preceding two impressions. The space for the second letter is covered with scratches, but may have contained an open *ayin*, again similar to those suggested for the preceding two impressions. This letter is more visible under a binocular microscope than in the photograph. An apparent circle to the left of where the letter should be is a defect in the ware. The last letter of the top line would appear to be a *lamed*, giving us a theophoric element, *b^cl*. On the bottom line, a long vertical stroke kicks to the right at an acute angle, while two slightly sloping horizontal strokes are just visible to the left of the vertical, suggesting a *yod*. At this point, the break in the sherd obscures the reading somewhat, but another open *ayin* seems to be clear.

There is room for one more letter, such as *zayin*. If it is a *zayin*, the reconstructed inscription would read, *b^cly^cz*. The name would thus mean "Ba'al strengthens." But several other reconstructions are possible, as well, such as roots like *y^cd* ("to appoint"), *y^cl* ("to profit"), or *y^cš* ("to counsel").

The script is almost identical to that of the previous two inscriptions. The wide open head of the *bet* and the one clear *ayin* suggest the Aramaic script of the late 7th to early 5th centuries. The other letters fit that time range, as well. However, because the impression comes from a region dominated by Ammonite inscriptions, my suggestion is that it postdates the early 6th century, the period when Ammonite script seems to have disappeared, as mentioned above.

The jar on which the impression was placed was a large-necked storejar with a slightly flaring, thickened rim.³⁰ It is not a

³⁰Ware description: exterior fabric color: 10YR6/2 light brownish gray; core color: 7.5YRN6/ gray; interior fabric color: 5YR6/2 pinkish gray; lithic non-plastics were highly dense: some very coarse sand, some coarse sand, some medium sand, ca. 50% fine sand; non-plastic shape was primarily round to sub-round and a few sub-angular; voids included simple fissures of very coarse sand size and round pits

typical late Iron II form in our region. The best parallels come from the Persian period at Hesi³¹ and Gezer.³² It would thus appear that the best date for the jar and its seal impression is the late 6th or early 5th century.

Inscribed Ostrakon

The ostrakon (figs. 10 and 11) was found in Field F (Square 7L08, Locus 44) in a layer of fill debris that was probably immediately outside the settlement. It was therefore in secondary deposit. The letters were inscribed onto a jar or krater before firing. From the curvature of the sherd and the presence of the top of a handle, it would appear that the inscription, which appears along the left-hand side of the handle, was written as if the vessel were on its side.

One full letter and a portion of a second one are visible. If the inscription is turned properly, the head of a *bet*, *dalet*, *qoph*, or *reš* is present, followed by a very clear *šin*. Because of the presence of the handle, it is likely that this is the end of the inscription. Above the *dalet*, two parallel lines are visible, possibly constituting a *zayin*; but it is more likely that the marks were placed there simply to bind the handle to the vessel.

Although not enough remains of this inscription to be certain of its reading, it is tempting to speculate that the original inscription read *qdš*, "holy." However, it must be stressed that many other reconstructions are likewise possible. Vessels with *qdš* inscribed on them have been found at several sites, such as Arad,³³ Hazor,³⁴

from coarse sand to fine sand size; manufacture was partially coil and wheel made; there was no surface treatment or decoration; the sherd was underfired.

³¹W. J. Bennett and J. A. Blakely, *Tell el-Hesi: The Persian Period (Stratum V)* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1989), figs. 139:5 and 143:17.

³²S. Gitin, *Gezer III* (Jerusalem: Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology, 1990), pl. 29:10.

³³Y. Aharoni, *Arad Inscriptions* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1981), 118.

³⁴Y. Yadin, *Hazor III-IV* (Jerusalem: The Hebrew University, 1961), pl. 357.

Beer Sheba,³⁵ and possibly Tell Beit Mirsim.³⁶ Barkay suggests the vessels with a *qdš* inscription were used to hold sacrificial gifts in association with temples or shrines. Our inscription differs, however, from those listed above, because it was inscribed prior to firing. Other evidence of religious activity at the site is suggested by a ceramic stand found in 1984.³⁷

The letter forms are not helpful paleographically. If the partial letter is a *bet*, *dalet*, or *reš*, the head looks closed, suggesting a date before the late 7th century. The rest of the pottery in the deposit from which the ostrakon came was dated to the late Iron II period.

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³⁵Y. Aharoni, *Beer-Sheba I* (Givatayin-Ramat Gan: Tell Aviv University Institute of Archaeology, 1973), pl. 69.2.

³⁶G. Barkay, "A Bowl with the Hebrew Inscription *qdš*," *IEJ* 40 (1990): 124-129.

³⁷B. Dabrowski, "Ceramic Stand from Tell el-‘Umeiri," *AUSS* 29 (1991): 195-204.

