

# Introduction

## The Importance of the Stamp-Impression System for an Understanding of the History and Administration of Judah in the First and Second Temple Periods

Storage jars were widely used throughout the ancient world and throughout history. This type of pottery vessel, which appeared in many shapes and sizes, served an important function in the transportation and storage of liquid agricultural products, such as wine and oil—products that played a pivotal role in the agriculture, economy, commerce and diet of ancient Near Eastern peoples.

Among these vessels are the oval storage jars, characteristic of Judah during the Iron Age II. They have a straight (or slightly inward tilting) neck, a rounded base and wide rounded shoulders. Four thick and wide handles, set beneath the shoulder, were presumably used for tying and securing the storage jar during transportation and for stabilization during storage. These vessels, also known as “*lmlk* storage jars” or “royal Judahite storage jars,” are quite large, typically reaching 50–60 cm in height, with an average diameter of ca. 42 cm and an average volume of ca. 45 liters. They were probably used for the transportation of oil and wine over short distances from the production areas of these agricultural products to their storage sites.

Oval storage jars are known from the onset of archaeological research in Jerusalem and the Shephelah

in the late 19th century, and their typological development has been the subject of several studies. While much attention has been given to the stamp impressions that appeared on the handles and occasionally the upper body of these storage jars from the late 8th century BCE onward, these stamp impressions have never yet been treated as a unified topic, a component of a single system operating in Judah over the centuries. Most studies focused on the publication of specific stamped handles from archaeological excavations or the antiquities market, or on the investigation of certain families of stamp-impression types, the symbols characterizing some of these types, or stamp impressions characteristic of specific sites or particular historical periods.

The stamping of impressions on storage-jar handles was a well-known phenomenon throughout the ancient Near East from prehistoric times onward and was relatively widespread in the second and first millennia BCE. In most cases, a few impressions were made by the same seal or a similar one, and they were restricted to a specific geographical location and chronological period—and perhaps to a singular function. These early systems are generally a local phenomenon, limited in

time and distribution and lacking continuity. It is difficult—and at times impossible—to interpret such phenomena. Some of these stamp impressions may be a manufacturer’s label. In some cases, they may serve as evidence for palace or temple administration or for national or private commerce. They may distinguish between marked storage jars and similar unmarked ones. In other cases, the stamping of the handle may be an indication of the jar’s ownership and its attribution to a certain administrative system, the significance of which is not always clear.

An overall consideration of the phenomenon of stamp impressions on storage-jar handles—not restricted to a specific period, site, type of impression, or technical aspect—yields a surprising conclusion, which has not received sufficient attention: at the end of the 8th century BCE, the stamp impressions in Judah became—for the first time in world history—a widespread administrative phenomenon. This is evident in the appearance of an abundance of similar stamp impressions during the same period, in the recovery of numerous stamp impressions created by each seal and in the widespread distribution of the stamped jars within a specific territory. Most importantly, there is evidence of administrative continuity in the use of these stamp impressions, with numerous types developing and evolving one from the other over a period of 600 years. The administrative system of impressions stamped on storage-jar handles can be defined as a specifically Judahite development of a phenomenon that was already familiar from earlier times. This system characterizes the economy and administration of Judah from the end of the 8th century BCE until the second half of the 2nd century BCE.

An administrative system based on stamped storage jars is not a new phenomenon *per se*. All the characteristics of this system are known in the ancient Near East, in numerous and diverse places and over long periods of time. What is unique to Judah, however, is the scope, diversity, continuity and consecutive nature of the storage-jar administration over a period of 600 years. This timespan coincides with the period that Judah served as a vassal kingdom and a province under

the mighty empires that ruled the ancient Near East. The system is significant for an understanding of the history of the Kingdom of Judah under the imperial rules of the Assyrian, Egyptian and Babylonian empires, and later, the history of Judah/Judea as a province under the rule of Babylon and Persia and of the Ptolemaic and Seleucid dynasties.<sup>1</sup>

The first stamp impressions employed in Judah as part of a large and established system, probably already in the last third of the 8th century BCE, were the early types of *lmlk* stamp impressions. Despite its early date, this system is outstanding in the quality of its seals and the standardization of its storage jars. It is notable for its large number of stamp types (= seals, 11 in total), for its numerous stamped handles (723 originating in archaeological excavations and surveys), and for its widespread distribution within the Kingdom of Judah. Each stamp impression consists of three elements: a symbol (either a four-winged scarab or a two-winged sun disk), the denotation of possession (*lmlk* = “belonging to the King”) and a place name (*hbrn* [Hebron], *swkh* [Socoh], *zyp* [Ziph], or *mmšt* [?]). In Lachish, 378 handles were found bearing early types of *lmlk* stamp impressions (ca. 52% of all handles with these types found in archaeological excavations), suggesting that this site was the main storage-jar collection center when the early system was in operation.

In its later stage (probably at the end of the 8th century BCE), this system overlaps with that of the “private” stamp impressions. The latter generally display two rows of writing, usually separated by a line, consisting of a private name and patronym, sometimes with the word “son” between them and almost always devoid of decoration. The system of “private” stamp impressions consists of 45 types (= seals) known to us from the 183 stamped handles uncovered in excavations or archaeological surveys. It should be noted that the distribution of “private” stamp impressions is similar to that of the early types of *lmlk* stamp impressions and that the 72 such handles uncovered at Lachish constitute ca. 39% of all the jar handles attributed to this system. I argue that the “private” stamp impressions constituted

1. The storage-jar administration system was not the only administrative-economic system operating in Judah at the time. For the fiscal bullae, which were apparently part of the royal taxation system, see below, p. 134.



Stamp impressions of various types

an *ad hoc* system that operated in Judah for only a brief period—within the framework of the preparations to withstand the Sennacherib campaign—alongside the already familiar method of *lmlk* stamp impressions. The system of “private” stamp impressions ceased to exist after Sennacherib’s campaign, but it was not the last *ad hoc* system of stamp impressions on storage-jar handles to operate in Judah when the need arose.<sup>2</sup>

At the beginning of the 7th century BCE the system of “late” *lmlk* stamp impressions began to operate in Judah. It was a continuation of its predecessor in almost every aspect. The storage jars were of the same type, and the seals maintained the same basic concept of three elements: a symbol (now only the two-winged sun disk), the denotation of possession (*lmlk*) and the place name (one of the same four names: Hebron, Socoh, Ziph and *mmšt*). There is, however, a notable decline in the use of writing: several types lack the place name, in others the word *lmlk* is absent, and in some types only the symbol

remains. Whereas handles bearing all types of the earlier *lmlk* system of stamp impressions were uncovered under the Assyrian destruction levels of Sennacherib’s 701 BCE campaign and the earlier handles continued in use in sites not destroyed in that campaign, not a single handle of the later system was found under destruction layers dated to 701 BCE. This suggests that storage jars with these later types of stamp impressions were not yet in use. It may be concluded, therefore, that the handles marked with these later types were produced only after Judah had begun to recover from the massive destruction wreaked by this campaign.

In the later system of *lmlk* stamp impressions, the number of types (= seals) declined (to eight), and there are fewer handles bearing stamp impressions of these types (490 stamped handles found in excavations and archaeological surveys). Their distribution is also more restricted, with an acute decline notable mainly in the sites of the Shephelah. It seems that the massive blow

2. It is argued below that the *mṣṣh* and the *yršlm* stamp-impression systems were also *ad hoc* systems.

struck by Sennacherib in the Shephelah and the region's severance from Judah until at least early in the final third of the 7th century BCE are the main reasons for the division between the earlier and later systems of *lmlk* stamp impressions. The main collection centers associated with the later system are Jerusalem (ca. 180 handles)<sup>3</sup> and Ramat Raḥel (133 handles), with 64% of all handles stamped with late types found in these two sites. Only four jar handles with the late *lmlk* stamp impressions were discovered at Lachish, all from unclear archaeological contexts. In the entire Shephelah only 21 handles with late *lmlk* stamp impressions were found.

Concentric circles incised on storage-jar handles merit discussion in this book, even though they are technically not stamp impressions, because, to my mind, they served to adapt the storage jars with late *lmlk* stamp impressions (which probably existed in the first third of the 7th century BCE) to a new system of rosette stamp impressions (in all likelihood existing in the last third of the 7th and in the early 6th centuries BCE). About half of these incisions appear on handles previously stamped by *lmlk* seals, incised near—and sometimes even on—the stamp impressions, while the others were incised on similar storage-jar handles that lack any *lmlk* stamp impression. Excavations and archaeological surveys yielded 305 handles with concentric circle incisions. The main collection centers were now Jerusalem (which yielded 162 incised handles), Ramat Raḥel (40 handles), Gibeon (33 handles) and Mizpah (17 handles). In total, 212 of these 305 handles (ca. 69% of all the finds) were unearthed in Jerusalem and its vicinity, and 75 additional incised handles were found in the Benjamin region (ca. 25% of the total finds); i.e., 94% of all handles with concentric circle incisions were found around Jerusalem.

The rosette-stamped storage jars are the last of the series of systems that used stamped storage jars during the monarchic period of Judah. This system began to operate in the second half—perhaps even the final third—of the 7th century BCE and was in use until the destruction of Jerusalem. The rosette stamp impressions contain a symbol without any text. In this they resemble the concentric circle incisions, which, indeed, could

perhaps be viewed as schematic representations of rosettes. In terms of numbers, this system was similar to or slightly smaller in scope than the system of late *lmlk* stamp impressions and that of concentric circle incisions, which operated in the beginning and the middle of the 7th century BCE. In total, 290 handles with rosette stamp impressions were uncovered in excavations and archaeological surveys, stamped with 28 seals. The main collection centers were Jerusalem (which yielded 108 handles with rosette stamp impressions) and Ramat Raḥel (57 handles). A total of 172 stamped handles was found in Jerusalem and its vicinity (ca. 59% of all the finds). Only 19 rosette-stamped handles were found throughout Benjamin (ca. 6.5%), demonstrating that this region had lost its significance. The Shephelah, on the other hand, regained some stature: it is represented by 71 handles (ca. 24.5% of all the finds), with 30 uncovered in Azekah and 24 uncovered in Lachish.

The stamped storage-jar administration that existed in Judah at the end of the First Temple period, when the Kingdom of Judah was a vassal of the successive empires of Assyria, Egypt and Babylon, did not cease after the destruction of Jerusalem. A new system of stamp impressions on storage jars now began in Judah. Lion stamp impressions of a variety of types were stamped onto the handles, and sometimes onto the bodies, of storage jars that were similar in shape to the ones previously stamped with rosette stamp impressions. Like in the case of the rosettes, a single central iconographic motif was used, without any text. Most types depict a lion pacing either to the right or the left; one type depicts a lion standing on its hind legs. This system is dated to the 6th century BCE. The Shephelah no longer played a role, and storage jars with these stamp impressions were concentrated mainly in Ramat Raḥel and Jerusalem. Ten sub-types (= seals) of stamp impressions were identified in this system. In total, 136 stamped handles are known, 73 of which were found at Ramat Raḥel (ca. 54% of all the finds) and 31 in Jerusalem (ca. 23%). Nebi Samwil occupies a prominent place for the first time (13 handles), and, in total, 128 stamp impressions on jar handles or the

3. Most of the handles from Jerusalem with *lmlk* stamp impressions were published in a way that does not make it possible to identify the stamp-impression types. The estimate here is therefore based on the ratio between known early- and late-type stamp impressions (Lipschits, Sergi and Koch 2011: 30).

bodies of the jars were found in Ramat Raḥel, Jerusalem and the Benjamin region (94% of all the finds).

An additional system of stamp impressions on storage-jar handles from the 6th century BCE is known, consisting of the place name *mwšh* (Moza), written in one or two rows with three or four letters. Of this system, which operated concurrently with the lion stamp-impression system, only a few stamp impressions and seals are known, and it has a limited geographic and chronological distribution. I propose that this system was established in an effort to overcome a specific problem of supply to the Babylonian governor, who settled in Mizpah immediately after the destruction of Jerusalem. This would account for the high concentration of *mwšh*-stamped jar handles in Mizpah—30 out of a total of 43 stamped handles (ca. 70% of the finds). Isolated stamped handles were found at a few sites, including Jerusalem (four handles), Gibeon (four handles) and Jericho (two handles). Only one *mwšh*-stamped handle was found at Ramat Raḥel, indicating that this was the only system of stamp impressions in which this site did not play a central role.

The use of storage jars bearing stamp impressions continued into the beginning of the Persian period, the main change evident in the total disappearance of iconography from the seals. In the course of the subsequent 250 years, storage jars with stamp impressions written mostly in Aramaic appeared in Judah, marked with the name of the province: *yhwḏ* (with four letters), *yhd* (in defective spelling), or even *yh* with two letters, sometimes with a ligature of these two letters in an emblem-like form. Only in some types, attributed to the early Persian period, does one see vestiges of the earlier tradition of personal names of the seal bearers (or their representatives), at times even with their title: פִּהּוּרָא (in Aramaic), i.e., governor. In total, 647 stamp impressions have been found (mostly on handles), classified into 17 types and 51 sub-types (= seals) that were in use in this system. Throughout the Persian period and early Hellenistic period, Ramat Raḥel was the main collection center of storage jars bearing these stamp impressions: 372 handles were uncovered (ca. 57.5% of all the finds).

A chronological breakdown of the known corpus of *yhwḏ* stamp impressions into early types (165 stamped

handles, dating from the late 6th through the 5th century BCE), middle types (338 stamped handles, dating from the 4th–3rd centuries BCE) and late types (144 stamped handles, dating from the 2nd century BCE) makes it possible to study the history and track the changes in the administration and economy throughout the periods of Persian, Macedonian, Ptolemaic and Seleucid rule over Judah. The *yhwḏ* system continued to exist until the beginning of the Hasmonean period, when the use of stamp impressions on storage-jar handles came to a complete halt.

The final chapter in the history of Judah's stamped-jar systems is that of the *yršlm* stamp impressions. This family is characterized by the return of iconography: a pentagram is engraved in the center of the seal with five letters inserted between its vertexes, reading *yršlm*, an abbreviation of the name of the capital of the Hasmonean kingdom. Archaeological and epigraphic research have determined that these stamp impressions were contemporaneous with the end of the *yhwḏ* stamp-impression system and should be dated to the mid-2nd century BCE, when the Hasmonean kingdom was becoming firmly established. After this period, the use of stamp impressions on storage jars was discontinued and this ancient phenomenon disappeared. I contend that the *yršlm* stamp impressions—like the “private” and *mwšh* stamp impressions—constituted an *ad hoc* administrative system, which aimed to consolidate the Hasmoneans' rule in Jerusalem in its formative stage, within their efforts to establish the city as their administrative center and capital. Eight *yršlm* types (= seals) are known in total, and 104 storage-jar handles have been uncovered to date in excavations and archaeological surveys. In Jerusalem, 58 handles were discovered (ca. 56% of all the finds), and at Ramat Raḥel, 33 handles were found (ca. 32%). A total of 93 *yršlm*-stamped handles were found in the immediate environs of Jerusalem (ca. 89.5% of all the finds).

My thesis in this book is that the phenomenon of impressions stamped onto storage jars was an administrative feature that continued throughout the period of Judah's subjugation to the great empires—Assyria, Egypt, Babylon, and Persia, followed by the

Ptolemaic and Seleucid dynasties.<sup>4</sup> We have no knowledge of such a system prior to Judah's subjugation, and shortly after the establishment of the Hasmonean kingdom it ceased to exist. Administrative systems of this kind continued to operate throughout this period, regardless of Judah's status as a subjugated kingdom or province. My assumption is that it was part of the administration involved in collecting agricultural products, mainly wine and oil, and that these products were sold and exchanged for precious metals, which were Judah's currency for paying taxes.

In Chapter 1, I describe the emergence of the practice of using seals to stamp impressions upon storage jars in the ancient Near East. This serves as a background for my claim (Chapter 2) that the development of this phenomenon as a systematic practice is unique to Judah in this period. The typology and chronology of these jars are delineated in broad strokes in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4, I offer a detailed discussion of the various types of stamp impressions, their characteristics and their distribution, outlining all the data on such

impressions in the various periods. In Chapter 5, I define the time period in which the systems existed in the Kingdom of Judah (I do not deal with the time period of the systems in the Babylonian and Persian periods, since this has been extensively discussed; see Lipschits and Vanderhooft 2011). This serves as a foundation for the basic interpretation of the use, function and characteristics of the system, as presented in Chapter 6. This chapter introduces an (admittedly somewhat speculative) reconstruction of the purpose of the stamp-impression system in Judah and its *modus operandi*. Chapter 7 offers a detailed discussion on the significance of all the data introduced in the book for an understanding of the history of Judah, its economy and its administration from the late Iron Age through the Hellenistic period. In this discussion, I demonstrate how these stamp impressions can contribute to our understanding of the history of this long and important period in which Judah was first a vassal kingdom and then a province under the rule of the great regional powers.

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4. As early as 2001, Ephraim Stern wrote a comment along these lines (Stern 2001: 174–175). Although he repeated this understanding of the system in an additional remark in the En-Gedi excavation report (Stern 2007c: 140–141), he did not develop this idea further. These two general remarks, however, show his understanding of the need for a comprehensive view of the phenomenon, instead of focusing on specific types that represented it in specific periods.