

*Yehud Stamp Impressions
in the Fourth Century B.C.E.:
A Time of Administrative Consolidation?*

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The Yehud Stamp Impressions (YSI) represent one of the most important sources of administrative data for Judah (Yehud) in the Persian and early Hellenistic periods. These impressions were most often stamped on the handles of various types of jars, in a few cases on the bodies of jars. In an ongoing project by the two authors to collect and publish a comprehensive catalog of these stamp impressions, we offer here new evidence pertaining to the administration of Yehud in the Persian and early Hellenistic periods.

Distribution

We have examined or recorded 570 stamp impressions of different types; about 150 of these were not previously published. However, 38 stamp impressions that were originally published as YSIs have proved upon closer inspection not to belong to the corpus, so we are now dealing with a total of 532 seal impressions.¹ At Ramat Rahel, 4 km south of the City of David, 252 YSIs were found (48% of the total number). In the area of the ancient city of Jerusalem, 162 YSIs (30% of the total) were found; of these, 135 are from the City of David and the area of the Ophel (25% of the total), and 27 YSIs (5% of the total, all of them very late types) were discovered in various areas of the Western Hill and its immediate vicinity. Outside these two main centers of YSIs, 79 were found in six secondary centers (15% of the total number): 20 were found in Tell en-Nasbeh, 16 in Nebi Samwil, 8 in Gezer, 10 in En-gedi, 7 in Rogem Gannim, and 18 in Jericho. An additional 21 YSIs (4% of the

1. This number includes nearly all known stamp impressions, including those recently published in *TA* 34/1 (2007).

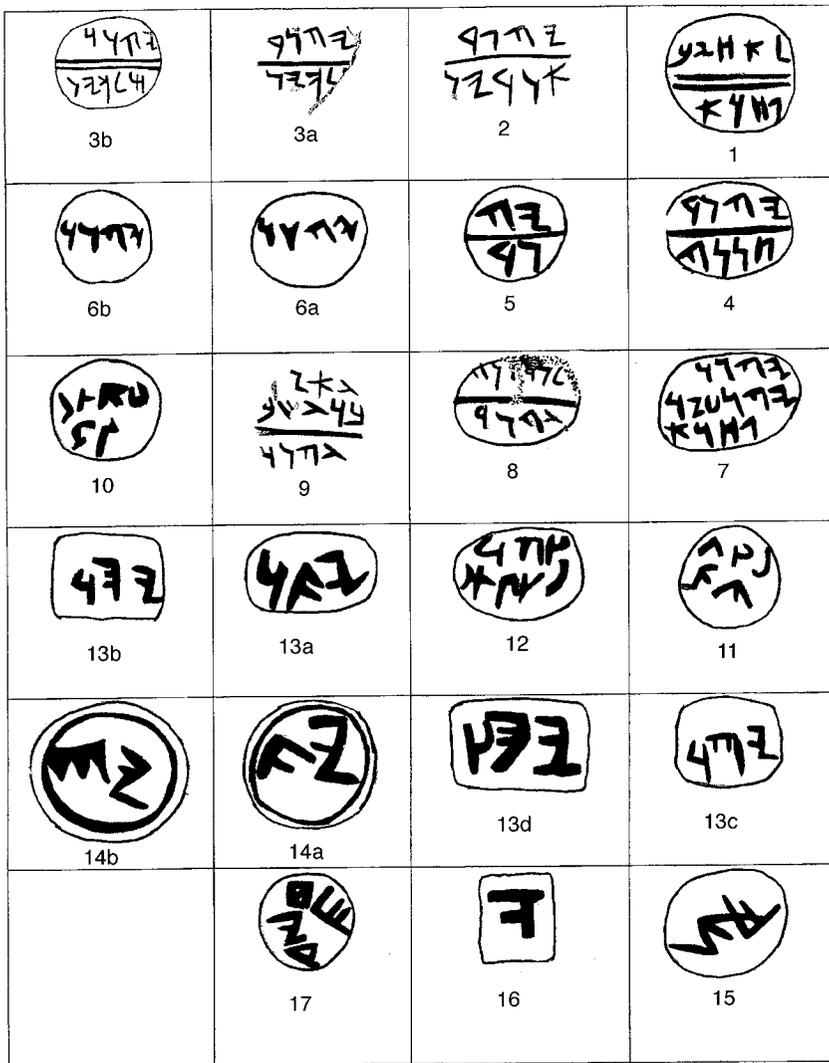


Fig. 1. Yehud stamp impressions: Types 1–17.

total number) were found in small sites (with 1 or 2 in each site, except for Khirbet Nisya, where 3 YSIs were found). The source of 13 YSIs (2.5% of the total number) is not known.

These distribution data show that 80% of the YSIs were found in Ramat Raḥel and Jerusalem. About 95% of the entire corpus was found

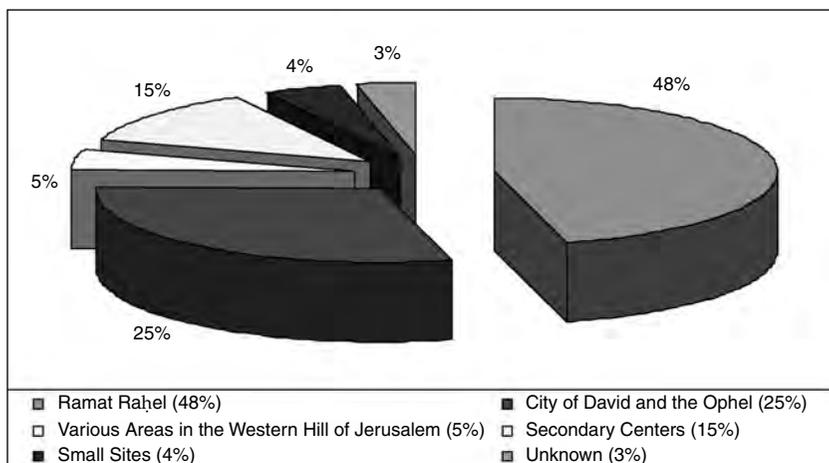


Fig. 2. Sites where YSIs were found.

in a small circle between Tell en-Nasbeh in the region of Benjamin and Ramat Raḥel. Only about 5% were found outside this circle, including at Gezer and Tel Harasim in the west, and En-gedi and Jericho in the east. A few were found farther afield, including 1 each in Kadesh Barnea, Tel Nimrin (east of the Jordan), and in the city of Babylon.

Overview of Typology

Content, paleographic typology, form, and stratigraphic data permit grouping of the large number of YSI types into three chronologically defined groups: early, middle, and late (Vanderhooft and Lipschits 2007). Within these groups, there are 12 early types (fig. 1: types 1–12), 3 middle types (fig. 1: types 13–15), and 2 late types (fig. 1: types 16–17). We date the 12 early types to the late sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. In total, 108 YSIs belong to the “early group,” about 20% of the total number of YSIs. Three types, with at least 16 subtypes (that is, different seals with the same readings), belong to the middle group, dated to the fourth–third centuries B.C.E. In total, 283 YSIs belong to this “middle group,” 53% of the total number of YSIs. Two types (with many different subtypes) were defined as late types, dated to the second century B.C.E. In total, 141 YSIs belong to the “late group,” 27% of the total number of YSIs.

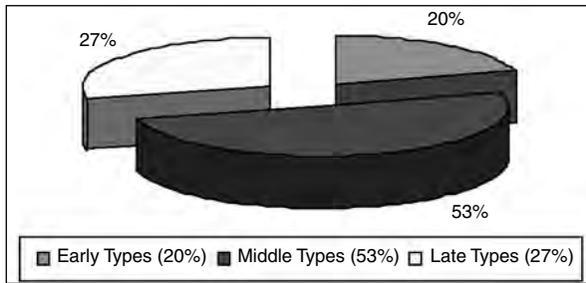


Fig. 3. Relative dates of YSI types.

Early Types

The main characteristic of the early group is the diversity among the different types. Many of the different stamp types belonging to the early group are known from only a few impressions each.² It is interesting to note that of the 6 early types from which we have only a few exemplars each—types 2, 3, 5, 8, 9, and 11 have yielded 15 YSIs in total—only 3 were found in the City of David and one in Ramat Raḥel. These types may have been used in an ad hoc manner in very local contexts, perhaps for occasional purposes. From the 6 types that produced slightly more exemplars—types 1, 4, 6, 7, 10, and 12 (see fig. 1) have yielded 93 YSIs in total—68 were found in Ramat Raḥel, 14 in the City of David, and only 11 in other sites. These types may represent formal provincial seals, and their use on different types of jars could mean that the seals were used over a longer period of time.

Several overlapping criteria place these stamp impressions in the early group of YSIs:³ all of the seals were incised in lapidary Aramaic; only a few examples of cursive Aramaic letter forms appear; and no Paleo-Hebrew letter forms appear. Paleo-Hebrew letter forms begin to appear in coins and epigraphs of the fourth century.⁴ The absence of Paleo-Hebrew forms from the early types is, therefore, an important

2. Four of the types are known from only 1 or 2 exemplars; 4 types are known from between 4 and 7 exemplars; 2 types have 11 or 13 exemplars, while 1 type has 16 exemplars. Only 1 type has produced a significant number (42 exemplars).

3. A fuller presentation and analysis of these early stamp types will appear in the completed catalog. See also Vanderhoof and Lipschits 2007.

4. Naveh (1998: 91 n. 5) has remarked that the script should more properly be called “Neo-Hebrew;” but we retain the traditional terminology for the sake of simplicity.

chronological criterion. Also, 9 of the 12 early types contain the geographical name יהוד, always spelled fully with the *waw* as a *mater lectionis*, never as יהד, which is more common in later stamps and in Yehud coins. The spelling יהוד does appear occasionally in later stamps (as it does on coins), but in those stamps the script is Paleo-Hebrew. The full spelling יהוד in Aramaic script appears to be an early characteristic.⁵

Three of the early types also contain the title פחורא 'governor'.⁶ Two of the governors are named: אהיב אהיב⁷ and יהועזר יהועזר.⁸ No personal names appear in the middle or late groups of YSIs, which possess Paleo-Hebrew script and the defective form of the province name, יהד, or its abbreviated form, יה. In fact, 9 of the early stamp types contain personal names (in one case also a patronym). This phenomenon resembles the "private" seal impressions from the end of the Iron Age, but it disappears in the later groups of YSIs. Among the early stamps, 7 possess line dividers between the fields of text, most commonly one line but occasionally two. This feature, especially the double line divider, is also in continuity with late Iron Age sealing practices and is also attested among the so-called *mws̄h* stamp impressions. The *mws̄h* impressions are likewise incised in lapidary Aramaic, while one *mws̄h* type has a single-line field divider between two rows of letters. All of these characteristics argue in favor of assigning the stamps of the early group to the sixth–fifth centuries B.C.E.

Secure stratigraphic information for YSIs in this early group remains difficult to ascertain. Although almost all known YSIs come from licit excavations, few sites possess Persian-period stratigraphy sufficiently precise to do more than assign the stamps to the general

5. The use of the Aramaic toponym, Yehûd, for the former Kingdom of Judah is an Achaemenid period innovation. Naveh (1996), among others, explained the origin of the Aramaic toponym as originating secondarily from the gentilic by analogy. Of course, biblical sources in the Persian era also refer in Aramaic to the former kingdom as יהוד מדינתא 'the province of Judah' (Ezra 5:8). Use of the Aramaic toponym could conceivably date from the period of the Neo-Babylonian dynasty after the fall of the Kingdom of Judah (586–539 B.C.E.), but other evidence argues for the emergence of the Aramaic form of the toponym as a designation for the distinct province of Judah in the Persian era.

6. This office was not established before the demise of the Judean kingdom; it never appears in Iron Age Hebrew seals or epigraphs. It was probably introduced as an imperially sanctioned office in the Achaemenid era (Petit 1988). There is as yet no clear philological evidence that the Babylonians installed governors of this sort in the southern Levant (Vanderhooft 1999; Lipschits 1998; 2005).

7. The reading אהיב is new (Vanderhooft and Lipschits 2007: 14–16).

8. We have not included Elnathan among the governors or in the corpus, primarily because the bullae and seals associated with this name came from unprovenanced sources (Avigad 1976: 6).

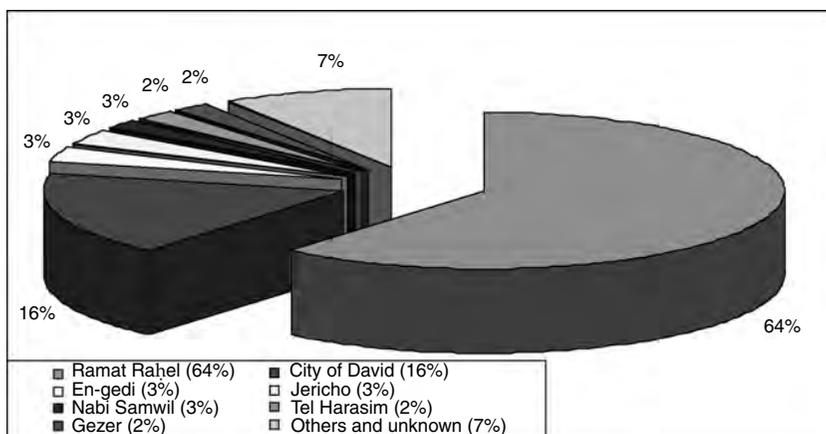


Fig. 4. Site distribution for the early group.

era (Stern 2001: 549). The best data come from the City of David exemplars, where excavators have securely dated numerous stamps to stratum 9 from the Persian period. Some of the early types were found in an early subphase together with a *mwšh* stamp impression; a *אחיב פחורא* stamp was in a later subphase. The early types, in any case, were found under the YSIs of the later types, which were excavated in the second or the third phases of stratum 9 (DeGroot and Ariel 2004). More important is the total absence of the early and middle groups from the second-century stratum in the Western Hill of Jerusalem, where only YSIs from the late types were found, together with well-known pottery from this period and 10 *yršlm* seal impressions (Geva 2004; 2007). An identical second-century date for the late types is now supported by the excavations of Zubah (Finkielsztejn and Gibson 2007). We can therefore conclude that the early and late groups do not overlap, and we can date the late group fairly securely to the second century. Thus, considerable time elapsed between the first and third groups, and it is to the interval between them, roughly the fourth and third centuries, that we must assign the middle group.

In sum, the early stamp types show considerable uniformity in their Aramaic lapidary script, significant diversity in content, and relatively restricted distribution. They most often specify the toponym, Yehud, and either the personal name or the official title, “governor,” of the seals’ owners.

Middle Types

The profusion of types and subtypes characteristic of the early group disappears in the middle group. Three main types of stamps now occur, types 13–15 (see fig. 1). These stamps were produced from seals reading simply יהי (in three letters, type 13) or from seals with the abbreviated writing יה (in two letters, types 14–15). Among the 246 seal impressions belonging to the middle types—more than 50% of the total YSI corpus—personal names no longer appear. The toponym is now uniformly spelled יהי, or it is abbreviated to יה. No official titles appear in any stamps from the middle group (or among later stamps). Furthermore, new shapes appear among the stamp types: many of the יהי stamps come from rectangular seals with rounded corners or from square seals, while the יה stamps come from round seals set in a ring. The early types were uniformly round or oval stamp seals.

Our relative chronology for the YSIs is not precise enough to associate the changes in form and content between the early and middle types with a single historical catalyst. How can we be sure that our proposed middle types really do belong to the fourth and third centuries, as we suggested above? Paleography of the middle types is helpful in this respect and shows several important changes, even though the number of letters relevant for paleographic analysis is small. The letter *he* in particular deviates substantially from the lapidary Aramaic model that prevailed in the early types. Now, *he* often appears with three bars joining the main stroke, and its orientation varies widely. Occasionally the *he* is inscribed in reverse and sometimes upside down. This “three-bar” *he*, in any case, is not Aramaic and appears to reflect Paleo-Hebrew influence (Vanderhooft and Lipschits 2007). This type of *he* also appears on pre-Macedonian יהי coins that have Paleo-Hebrew legends (Meshorer 2001: nos. 2, 3 [retrograde], 4 [retrograde], 5 [retrograde], 6, 9, 10 [retrograde], 13, 15, 16, 17 [retrograde], and 18 [retrograde]). These fourth-century coins with Paleo-Hebrew script may have provided the model for this style of *he* in the יהי stamps. The same may be true for the *yod* in several of the יהי stamp subtypes. If this is correct, the evidence supports a fourth-century date for our middle יהי stamp types.

Other comparative material for our middle stamp types includes coins from Yehud and Samaria and the so-called Philisto-Arabian coins. The famous large-denomination drachma with a male figure seated above a winged wheel possesses the legend יהי.⁹ Paleography, as Cross argued (1969: 142), indicates that the lapidary Aramaic script of the

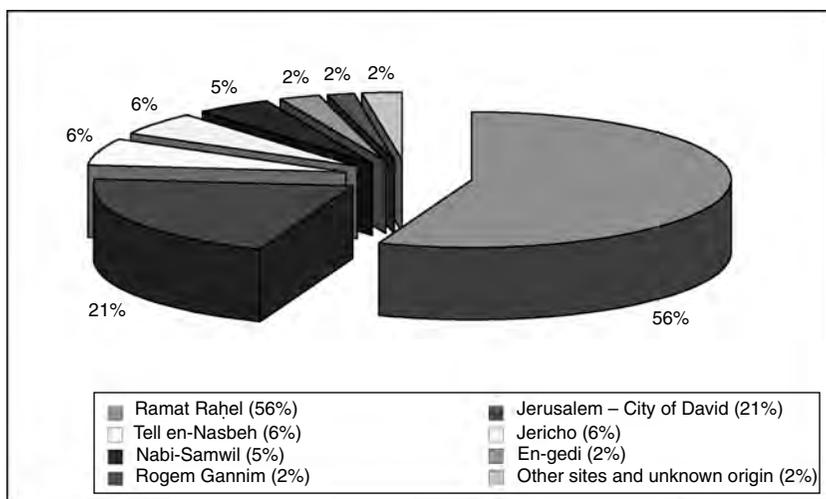


Fig. 5. Site distribution for the middle group.

coin is characteristic of the fifth century and later. According to Mildenberg (1979), stylistic indications date the coin more precisely to the period between about 380 and 360 B.C.E. Its date in the late Persian period is, in any case, well established (Barag 1986–87: 6; Naveh 1998: 92). The orthography, without *waw*, is the same as the YSIs of our proposed middle group. In the corpus of יהד coins, Meshorer dates the coins in which the toponym is spelled without the *mater lectionis*, whether in Aramaic or Paleo-Hebrew script, to the pre-Macedonian era. Coins with the toponym spelled יהוד or יהודה in Paleo-Hebrew characters are later. Thus, the יהד stamp impressions of our middle group find a fairly good parallel in this coin.

A second important comparative example is another fourth-century Yehud coin, a silver obol (Meshorer 2001: no. 12, p. 198, and pl. 2:12; cf. Meshorer 1990–91: pl. 17:2), which preserves a legend that is very close to our יהד subtype 13a (Vanderhooff and Lipschits 2007). The coin legend reads יהד in retrograde Aramaic script. The *yod* on the coin could be Aramaic or Paleo-Hebrew. The letter *he* is, however, close to the *he* on the יהד subtype a. Meanwhile, the *dalet* of the coin is the usual open Aramaic lapidary form.

9. The most recent full catalog of the Yehud coins was published by Meshorer (2001); the coin in question is no. 1 (pp. 2–6).

Another Yehud silver obol from the fourth century bears an inscription that also deserves mention as an excellent parallel to our יהי subtype 13f (Vanderhooft and Lipschits 2007). Meshorer (2001: no. 9, pl. 1: 9) suggested that this coin was inscribed in Paleo-Hebrew, but close analysis reveals that, although the *he* is Paleo-Hebrew, the *dalet* is a reverse Aramaic exemplar with an open head formed with two lines, while the *yod* is not determinative. The form and stance of the letters on this coin parallel almost exactly the script of our יהי stamp subtype 13f (Vanderhooft and Lipschits 2007). Both have an upright *yod* (with an admittedly uncharacteristic breakthrough of the foot in the stamp); the *he* is the three-bar Paleo-Hebrew type, while the *dalet* is a reverse Aramaic type with open head. The fact that both the coin and the stamp have the Paleo-Hebrew *he* and the reverse Aramaic *dalet* leads to the suspicion that the seal and coin engravers shared a very similar model. These fourth-century Yehud coins in particular provide, therefore, close orthographic and paleographical parallels for our יהי subtypes. These parallels support the proposed fourth–third-century date for the YSIs of our middle type.

The second type of YSI in our middle group has only the abbreviated יה. The phenomenon of abbreviated spellings of geographical names, such as יה, proliferated in the regional mints of the southern Levant beginning in the fourth century. Several different coin issues from Judah and nearby regions have abbreviated spellings of toponyms. Examples include: יד from Judah (Meshorer 1982: pl. 56:1); ש, שם, שן, שמר, from Samaria (Meshorer and Qedar 1999: 17); אן from Ashkelon; and עז from Gaza (Meshorer 1982: pl. 56:1; Meshorer and Qedar 1991: 14). The phenomenon in the stamps thus has a parallel development in the fourth-century coins, giving additional evidence to support a fourth- and perhaps third-century date for the middle YSI types.

One of the יה stamp types, 15, is newly deciphered by us, based on the finds from Ramat Raḥel. It is formed by an overlapping *yod* and *he*. The letters of the seal were not incised in the correct orientation or stance. In the impressions, the *yod* appears on the left and the *he* to its right. The *yod* is also retrograde, which means that the engraver inscribed the *yod* in positive, instead of negative. If this interpretation is correct, stamps of this type may represent a transitional type between *yh* stamps and the later, so-called *yh*-ligature stamps (type 16). Reliable stratigraphical information is lacking for this type, but if we are correct to see it as transitional between the יה stamps of the middle group and type 16 (Vanderhooft and Lipschits 2007), then a fourth- or third-century date seems suitable.

If the proposed date for the middle group in the fourth–third centuries B.C.E. is correct, it argues for administrative continuity between the Persian and the Macedonian-Ptolemaic periods. Similar continuity can be seen in the use of local coinage in Judah, as well as in Samaria (Meshorer 2001: 11, 22). It may also be noted that the prominence of Jerusalem increases somewhat among YSIs from the middle group. As against 16% of YSIs from Jerusalem in the early group, now 21% come from Jerusalem, all of them from the City of David and none from the Western Hill. Meanwhile, the number of stamps excavated at Ramat Raḥel decreases from 64% in the early group to 56% of the middle types, although Ramat Raḥel remains the best represented administrative center. Tell en-Nasbeh and Nabi Samwil possibly served as secondary centers, connected perhaps to administrative activity about which no further information can be recovered.¹⁰

Although there are at least 9 subtypes (that is, distinct seals) among the type 13 יהי stamps and several subtypes among the type 14 יה stamps, the question remains: what does the relatively rapid consolidation of types mean for reconstructing the administrative system of Yehud in the fourth century?

Administrative Consolidation in the Fourth Century B.C.E.

Before we can answer this question, we may restate the main conclusions that derive from the above discussion about the early and middle groups of Yehud stamp impressions:

1. Clear continuity exists in form, style, content, paleography, and other characteristics between seals and stamp impressions of the late Iron Age and the early group of Yehud stamp impressions; the early group dates to the late sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E.
2. A fundamental change occurs between this early group and the second, or middle, group of YSIs. Differences include form, style, paleography and, importantly, the orthography of the province name, now in three letters, including Paleo-Hebrew letter forms. If our dating is right, the changes between the early and middle groups occurred around the end of the fifth or the beginning of the fourth century B.C.E.
3. Continuity existed in the provincial administration between the late Persian period and the Macedonian and Ptolemaic periods.

10. These finds indicate that Tell en-Nasbeh did continue to function as an administrative center throughout the Persian period, even if it was eclipsed in importance by Jerusalem and Ramat Raḥel.

The characteristics of the second group of YSIs, and even the places where those stamped handles were found, demonstrate that during the fourth and third centuries a slow and gradual development occurred in Judah, during which no fundamental change can be detected. The same phenomenon of continuity can be detected in the coins of this period.

4. The next change occurs in the late stamp types, probably during the second century B.C.E. Again, the differences include form, style, paleography and, importantly, the orthography of the province name, now with *yod* and *he* written together as a digraph (type 16) or in three letters plus *tet* (type 17), all in Paleo-Hebrew. These changes may pertain specifically to the Hasmonean period, during which other administrative changes also took place.

The first point has been much discussed in recent years (see the summary in Lipschits 2005: 185–271) and is beyond the chronological horizons of the current volume. The fourth point has not received sufficient attention and deserves a separate discussion. However, it is also beyond the chronological horizons of the current volume.¹¹ Scholars have discussed the third point as well, especially in connection with the coins (Meshorer 2001: 22); it argues in favor of administrative continuity after the end of the Persian period into the Hellenistic. In what follows, however, we wish to focus on the second point in order to outline and assess administrative changes that accompanied the fundamental shift between the first and second groups of the Yehud stamp impressions around the end of the fifth or the beginning of the fourth centuries B.C.E.

In the foregoing discussion, we emphasized six fundamental changes between the early and middle types:

1. The disappearance of the profusion of types and subtypes characteristic of the early group and the emergence of two main stamp types, יהד and יה, each with different subtypes (that is, different seals cut according to two main “models”).
2. A change in the way the name of the province was written: from יהוד, always spelled in Aramaic characters, to the defective יהד and יה in the second group.
3. Unlike in the early group, in which personal names appear in 9 of the 12 types, personal names no longer appear in the second group.

11. We will discuss these points further in our future volume, *The Yehud Stamp Seal Impressions: A Corpus of Inscribed Stamp Seal Impressions from the Persian and Hellenistic Periods in Judah* (forthcoming at Eisenbrauns).

4. Unlike in the early group, no official titles appear in any stamps from the second group or the late group.
5. Unlike the early group, which had uniformly round or oval stamp seals, new shapes appear among the second group. Many of the $\eta\eta$ stamps are from rectangular seals with rounded corners or from square seals, while many η stamps come from round seals set in a ring.
6. The paleography of the second group shows several important changes from the lapidary Aramaic model, especially the introduction of non-Aramaic letter forms such as the Paleo-Hebrew *he*.

These six changes point to a disjunction in administrative habits: the early group of stamps from the late sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. shows substantial continuity with techniques of the late Iron Age, even allowing for differences in script and language. The second group, from the fourth and third centuries B.C.E., points to a much more consolidated system. The provincial administration moved in the direction of unification and consolidation. These later habits of the last century of Persian control in Palestine continued beyond the Persian period into the Macedonian, Ptolemaic, and possibly the early Seleucid period. After that, a major change evidently occurred under the Hasmoneans in the second century B.C.E.

Historical Context

We suggest that the administrative consolidation in Yehud during the fourth and third centuries was one of numerous changes in the administration of Palestine in the Persian period, especially in its southern part, that occurred around the beginning of the fourth century B.C.E. Scholars have already linked other social, economic, and military changes during this period to the more robust Persian interest in the area after 404 B.C.E., when the Egyptians sought to free themselves from the Persian yoke.¹² In 398 B.C.E., Pharaoh Nephertites, founder of the XXIXth Dynasty, entered into a coalition with Sparta against Arta-

12. On the beginning of the rule of King Amyrtaeus (probably the grandson of Amyrtaeus I, mentioned by Herodotus [3.15]) in the delta region of Egypt, see Porten 1990: 19; cf. Briant 2002: 619, with bibliography on pp. 989–90. On the significance of the new situation for both Persian and Egyptian affairs, see Lloyd 1994; Briant 2002: 663–66; and Ray 1987. We cannot accept, however, the terminology of Betlyon (1986: 636), who connected one of the changes (the appearance of the first Jewish coins) with the “decadence” of the Persian Empire (cf. Briant 2002: 992). For specific changes in Palestine affected by these developments, see Graf (1993: 160); Eph'al (1998: 108–9, 117–19); and Fantalkin and Tal (2006: 186–89).

xerxes II (Memnon, 404–359 B.C.E.; Briant 2002: 634–35). In 380 B.C.E., Nekhtenebef (Greek Nectanebo I, 380–363 B.C.E.) was recognized as pharaoh and founder of the XXXth Dynasty. He perpetuated an anti-Persian policy focused on fortifying the Delta region, on blocking future Persian attacks, and on initiating an active policy in Asia in coalition with potential allies. The Persians did not forego their attempts to reconquer Egypt, because an independent Egypt (preserved until 343 B.C.E.) was a threat to Persian control in the Levant and a natural ally to any future anti-Persian coalition (Briant 2002: 652). Palestine, and especially its southern part, therefore became one of the most important border zones of the Empire for more than 50 years. After “the peace of Antalcidas” (386 B.C.E.), when Artaxerxes II ended a long period of instability in Asia Minor (begun with the formation of the Delian League, 478–477 B.C.E.) and along the eastern Mediterranean (Briant 2002: 648–49), Egypt remained the lone enemy of Persia outside Europe.¹³ Even if unrest in the eastern Mediterranean continued during the following years, the description of Justin (6.6.2) may indicate that the possibility of war against Egypt was the main reason for Artaxerxes II to impose peace during this time (Briant 2002: 649).

Few historical sources illuminate Persian activities in Egypt, but we know that huge Persian armies attacked Egypt probably in 385–384 B.C.E. and again probably in 374–373 B.C.E. (Briant 2002: 652–55, 992, with additional references). Large numbers of Persian troops were stationed in Palestine after the withdrawal from Egypt, preparing for a new assault on the country. Persians and Egyptians may have encamped face to face during the years between the Persian attacks, although no historical sources prove this (Briant 2002: 655). The next clash between the two sides attested in historical sources occurred in 359 B.C.E. Under the leadership of Tachos, along with many Greek mercenaries and Sparta as its ally, the Egyptian army attempted to attack the coastal region of Phoenicia or Palestine. This war ended with no real results, possibly because of a conspiracy against Tachos (Briant 2002: 663–65, 993–94, with additional literature). The Persians may have reacted with an attack of their own in that same year, led by Artaxerxes Ochus (Artaxerxes III, 359–338) just before he became king (Briant 2002: 665). We then have no clear evidence about Persian attacks on Egypt until 351 B.C.E., when Artaxerxes III was defeated in his attempt to gain a foothold in Egypt (Briant 2002: 682–83, 1004, with

13. On the chronology of this period, see Shrimpton 1991; van der Spek 1998. For literature on the King’s Peace, see Briant 2002: 991.

bibliography). In the next years we learn only about the suppression of revolts in Cyprus and Sidon (the famous “Tennes rebellion”) but with no real knowledge about its extent or its effect in Judah and Samaria (Stern 1982: 242, 255; Elayi 1990: 182–84; Briant 2002: 683–85). Egypt was reconquered in 343–342 B.C.E. (Bickerman 1934), about 60 years after it had begun to seek independence from Persian domination. During that period, order was restored in Phoenicia. However, a short time later the king was poisoned and Egypt revolted again. The last two Persian kings—Arses (338–336) and Darius III Codoman (336–331)—did not have sufficient time to prepare the Persian army for another expedition to Egypt before Alexander defeated Darius III and brought the Achaemenid Empire to an end.

For the military expeditions just described, the Persian army had to requisition ships in Phoenicia and control logistic bases along the coast. They also needed a sufficient agricultural supply and at least a basic administration to organize all of this. Palestine, especially the southern Shephelah, served as an important station in the Persian network on the way to and from Egypt until Persia lost its hold in Egypt. It was important for military and civilian officials, for military units, and for commercial traveling caravans (Naveh 1981: 171–74; Ephʿal and Naveh 1996: nos. 11, 28; Ephʿal 1998: 117–19). Palestine was also important for the Arabian trade that arrived from the east and was concentrated in Gaza.¹⁴

After the loss of its hold in Egypt, Palestine became an especially important border area of the Persian Empire, particularly its southern parts (Briant 2002: 646–55, 663–66, 991–92; Lipschits 2006: 38). Palestine no doubt underwent a transformation in its administrative and probably also its political organization, possibly as a result of direct imperial involvement (Fantalkin and Tal 2006: 180–81).¹⁵ This was probably the period when the Idumean provincial district was created, or at least when its population began to crystallize (de Geus 1979–80:

14. In our opinion, this is probably the reason for the linear setting of many of the Persian fortresses along the Beer-sheba–Arad valley (Horvat Rogem, Arad, Beer-sheba, and probably Tell el-Farah [S]), and along the Negeb highlands, about 30 km to the south (Mesad Nahal Haroʿa, Horvat Ritma, and Horvat Mesora). Kadesh-barnea and En Haseva were probably important stations on the southern roads and not parts of the military defensive line against Egypt, as Fantalkin and Tal (2006: 184–86, in many respects following the suggestion of Graf 1993: 160) have indicated.

15. We will not deal here with the various theories connecting Ezra’s mission to the seventh year of Artaxerxes II (398 B.C.E.). See Cazelles 1954; cf. Lemaire 1995; 1992: 88–93, with additional literature).

62; Eph'al 1982: 197–201). The Achaemenids evidently entrenched their rule and reorganized the administration and security along the roads in the southern parts of Palestine, including along the southern part of the coastal area, the southern Shephelah, and throughout the Beer-sheba–Arad valleys. This was also the probable date for the erection of the main administrative center in Lachish (Level Ib; Fantalkin and Tal 2006: 167–77) along with other administrative centers and Persian forts in the Negeb (Stern 2001: 420–21, 577–79) and the southern Shephelah, along the main roads adjacent to the coast, in the Shephelah, and along the central mountain ridge (Tal 2005; Fantalkin and Tal 2006: 181–83). During this period, the Persians allowed the local cities and regions, including Yehud and Samaria, Gaza, Ashdod, and Ashkelon, to start minting their own coins (Betlyon 1982; 1986; Meshorer 1989: 287–91; 2001: 1–17; Mildenberg 1990; Machinist 1994; Meshorer and Qedar 1999; Eph'al 1998: 111–13). Many unprovenanced Aramaic ostraca from the southern Shephelah come from this period (Lemaire 1996; 2002; Eph'al and Naveh 1996; see recently, Lemaire 2006; Porten and Yardeni 2006, with additional literature), along with ostraca from the Beer-sheba–Arad valleys. Taken together, these data point to the importance of the southern Shephelah and the Beer-sheba–Arad valleys for local Persian economic, military, and administrative interests.

Summary

In this essay, we have presented a new thesis about the development of the YSIs. A fundamental change in the form, style, paleography, and orthography occurred at the end of the fifth or the beginning of the fourth century B.C.E. This change resulted in the consolidation of stamping practices connected with the Yehud jars. We have also suggested a possible link between this fundamental change and the historical circumstances of the Persian Empire during the same period. When the Persians lost control over Egypt, the significance of the southern Levantine coast as a border zone increased. This, in turn, may account for greater Persian involvement and influence in the southernmost reaches of the eastern Mediterranean littoral.

The consolidation in stamping practices in Yehud is apparently one of numerous other changes that occurred in the southern Levant after the Achaemenid loss of control in Egypt. We can hypothesize that Achaemenid authority over populations in the border region was tightened. The Aramaic ostraca from the southern Shephelah point in this direction, as does the date of the establishment of the palace in Lachish

and probably some other forts in the Judean Hills, the Shephelah, and the Negeb area. The use of natural resources in the area, including agricultural products such as grain, wine, and oil became much more critical for the Persian army as a consequence of the presence of large contingents of Persian troops stationed in the area, as well as the presence of administrators. Persian forces must have assembled and passed through the border region before and after the numerous expeditions to Egypt or as part of the defensive battles against Egyptian and allied assaults.

The changes that occurred in the YSIs of the middle period, in any case, point to a simplification or consolidation of previous practices connected with collecting agricultural products, perhaps as taxes. This could have resulted from tighter control—possibly tighter Persian control—in the administration of the distribution system, which the stamps reflect. The province name, or its abbreviated form, becomes the only necessary piece of information in the stamps. This suggests that the names of local administrators, whether governors or not, were no longer relevant for the system. Only the source of the product was significant. Given that the jars were not designed for export and were found almost exclusively within a small radius in the heart of Yehud, we may conclude that the system functioned on the basis of a simple binary opposition: there were jars stamped with the name of the province and jars that were not stamped. We may hypothesize about why the jars were stamped at all: they may have been marked for official consumption (whether local or imperial); they may have been marked as taxes; the volume or quality of the produce in the jars may have been verified by the stamp; or perhaps the product originated from official estates. We cannot know, however, whether Persian administrators had a direct role to play in the consolidation reflected by the middle types or whether it was an indirect consequence of the increased Persian presence in the region.

We may note, finally, that the system represented by the middle YSI types was quite durable and evidently persisted through the first half of the second century, when it underwent additional modification during the Hasmonean period. Even then, however, continuity with the middle types is discernible, because only the name of the province appears in the late stamps, either abbreviated with the *yh* symbol or in Paleo-Hebrew with the *ʔet* symbol. Thus, the new system, created around 400 B.C.E., continued until the first half of the second century B.C.E. and was changed only during the Hasmonean period.

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