

A HEBREW SEAL FROM BET SHEMESH AND ANOTHER OF UNKNOWN PROVENANCE IN THE ISRAEL ANTIQUITIES AUTHORITY COLLECTION

BENJAMIN SASS

Two inscribed seals in the Israel Antiquities Authority collection remained unpublished for decades, apparently because they were considered unreadable. One was uncovered at Bet Shemesh and the other, of unknown provenance, was acquired from an antiquities dealer in Jerusalem. The script of the two seals is Hebrew. Both are of a design popular in Hebrew seals—a longitudinal three-register layout, all registers being roughly of the same height, with a motif in the top register and the legend in the lower two.

Seal of 'lyhw 'l'r (IAA J.214i)¹

The Archaeological Context.— The seal (Figs. 1–3) comes from Tomb 1 of the Palestine Exploration Fund excavations at Bet Shemesh directed by Duncan Mackenzie in 1912 (Mackenzie 1913:61, Pl. 29a).² In the main, the pottery from Tomb 1 (Mackenzie 1913: Pls. 22–25) resembles the Lachish Level III assemblage of the late eighth century BCE. There is also a more-than-negligible component of earlier forms, but no clear-cut group that can be attributed to the seventh century BCE (Yezerki 1995:31; reaffirmed by Lily Singer-Avitz, pers. comm.). Therefore, the seal may quite confidently be assigned with the bulk of the pottery to the eighth century, possibly toward its end.³

Description.— The seal (Fig. 2) is a plain-backed, reddish limestone scaraboid (14 × 11 × 8 mm), perforated lengthwise and very worn. The slightly convex sealing surface has a single-line border, double-line field dividers, a motif in the top register, and an inscription in the two lower registers.



Fig. 1. Reproduction of Mackenzie 1913: Pl. 29a (future IAA J.214i, upside down, is marked with an arrow).

The motif in the top register appears at first sight to be comprised of a row of four dots. Yet five short curved strokes, nearly effaced and detectable only in lighting from a certain angle (Fig. 3), link the dots together. Originally the seal was probably adorned with a pomegranate garland, of which only the deep drillings are now clearly visible. These constitute the bodies of the fruit; the shallower three-pointed tops have been worn away—or perhaps not entirely,

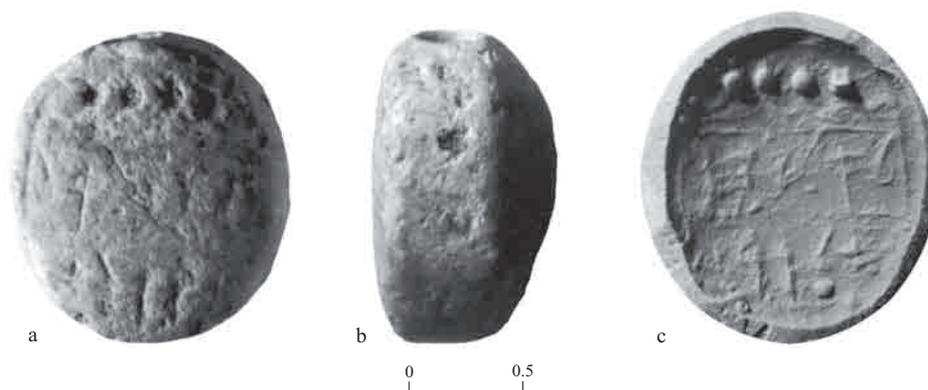


Fig. 2. Seal of *'lyhw 'lr* (IAA J.214i): (a) sealing surface; (b) side; (c) impression.



Fig. 3. IAA J.214i, impression, lighting emphasizing garland.



Fig. 4. Seal of *hunnyhw bn 'zryhw*, impression; Berlin, VA 32 (WSS 165).

as traces might be visible above some of the dots (Fig. 2). The pomegranate garland appears on other Hebrew seals, for instance, as a border on WSS 165 (Fig. 4). Note how much deeper the drillings of the pomegranates' bodies are in the latter seal, compared with the tops of the fruit or the tendrils in between. For a more detailed discussion see Sass, forthcoming.

The Inscription.— On the two lower registers are inscribed the letters *l'lyhw 'lr(?)*, Belonging to Eliyahu [son of] Eli'ur(?). Possible dots, if not damaged spots, are found under the third letter in the middle register and the second letter in the bottom register.⁴ The inscription is very worn, but the seal owner's name in the middle register is perfectly legible on the impression (Fig. 2:c). The name of his father

is less apparent: the second and fourth letters from the right are quite clearly *lamed* and *resh*; the traces of the two remaining letters could fit two *alephs*, although this is not the only possibility. Likewise uncertain is the zone to the left of the fourth letter; in the proposed reading it is considered either empty or occupied by a small triangular motif, now unrecognizable, as in WSS 469 and Shoham 2000:81. However, a fifth, mostly effaced letter is not impossible, and with it a reading other than *'lr*.

This seal joins three other seals bearing Hebrew inscriptions found at Bet Shemesh: the seals of *'hb b'd'l* (WSS 52) from Mackenzie's

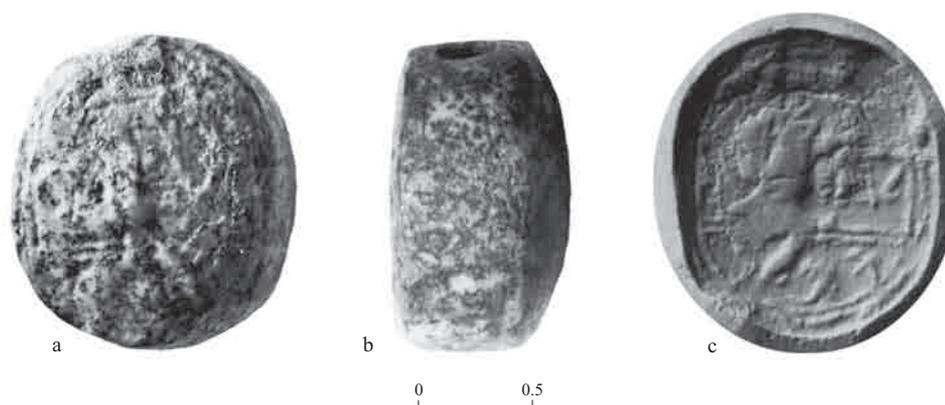


Fig. 5. Seal of *h...wmlk* (IAA I.5965): (a) sealing surface; (b) side; (c) impression.

excavation,⁵ *'dyhw 'hmlk* (WSS 293) from Grant's excavation, and *'h'mh 'lyhw* (Mähner 1992; cf. WSS:147–148), a chance find.

Seal of h... wmlk (IAA I.5965)

“Bought from Mr. Resas for 250 Mils, 16.6.1930”, this plain-backed scaraboid (14 × 12 × 8 mm), made from a red and black stone perforated lengthwise, is much damaged (Fig. 5). The slightly convex sealing surface has a double-line border and field dividers, a now destroyed motif in the top register and an inscription in the two lower registers. Most

of the sealing surface has disappeared below even the deepest engraving; thus, although this or that feature in the flaked-away zones might appear meaningful in the photograph of the impression, it is probably nothing but a scar mark.

The inscription reads *lh... wmlk*, Belonging to *h...* son of(?) *...wmlk* (Fig. 5:c). The characterization of the effaced top register as iconic arose from my taking the first letter in the middle register for a possessive *lamed* at the beginning of the legend. However, this is not absolutely certain.

NOTES

¹ My thanks to Lily Singer-Avitz for an analysis of the associated pottery and to Baruch Brandl for an insightful discussion of the seal (both in July, 2006). The photographs in Figs. 2a–c, 3, and 5a–c are by the writer.

² The section heading in Mackenzie's report reads, “Scarabs and Scaraboid Beads in Faïence and Other Materials Inscribed with Hieroglyphs and Other Signs.” Our seal is not listed individually, unless it is the one “in a red material which resembles

the terracotta of ordinary pottery.” The Hebrew inscription is not mentioned at all.

³ In any case, no seal with a Hebrew inscription can be dated with certainty earlier than the eighth century.

⁴ See WSS 156, 581, for a dot in a similar position—in the vacant space underneath a letter (in this case a *dalet*) that does not extend to the bottom of the line.

⁵ Or *'h' b<n> 'd'l*.

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