

AN ISRAELITE BASKETRY-BOX SEALING FROM THE WESTERN WALL PLAZA EXCAVATIONS, JERUSALEM

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INTRODUCTION

During the 2008 excavation season at the Western Wall Plaza in the Old City of Jerusalem,¹ a clay sealing bearing a seal impression was found in the course of wet sifting material from the Iron Age II building, together with a bulla fragment, identified as Hebrew (Ornan et al. 2012: No. 7).

This find is well-dated and can be culturally attributed on both typological and stylistic grounds. Therefore, it may contribute to the reconstruction of the site's history.

The photographs, drawings and reconstructions were all prepared under the author's guidance. When several references are given to illustrate a single parallel, it is in the hope of increasing accessibility.

DESCRIPTION

Reg. No. B71071 [from wet-sifted Basket 61231]. Fig. 1.

L6172; Room 5 in the Iron Age II building.

Material: Clay, light brown color.

Dimensions: Sealing: H 19+ (est. 20) mm; W 13.5+ (est. 22) mm; T 5.0–9.5 mm.

Seal impression: H 9+ (est. 15.3) mm; W 4.5+ (est. 14) mm.

Method of Manufacture: An oval clay strip was attached to the surface of a basketry-box that was made in the plaiting technique, and the two ends of a single string that encircled the box were knotted over it (see Fig. 8:a–c). The strip was then folded in half, trapping the ends and

the knot itself (see Fig. 8:d). The obverse was stamped while it was leather-hard.

Workmanship: The sealing, the impression and the original seal (reconstructed), are all well-made.

Technical Details: Fingerprints and a seal impression are visible on the obverse (Fig. 1:a); impressions of basketry are visible on the reverse (Fig. 1:c), with burnt negatives left by two string ends, tied in a knot, on the left (broken) edge (Fig. 1:d). Fingerprints are visible on all other sides (Fig. 1:b, e, f), some made after the impression (Fig. 1:a bottom).

Preservation: Broken, only half of the sealing and less than a quarter of the original impression have survived (see Figs. 3, 5). The break exposes the edge of the hollow space that enclosed the burnt knotted string, indicating that the fracture developed along this weakness line (see Figs. 2; 8:d).

DISCUSSION

The Impression

At first glance, the remnant of the original impression may have at least two alternative interpretations.

When viewed vertically, a rendition of a human figure or deity, sitting on a chair or throne, can be discerned. For a comparable scaraboid from Tel Yoqne'am, see Ben-Tor and Rosenthal 1978:81, n. 50 = Ben-Tor et al. 1987:6 = Keel and Uehlinger 1992:350–352, Fig. 307 = Keel and Uehlinger 1998:307–308,

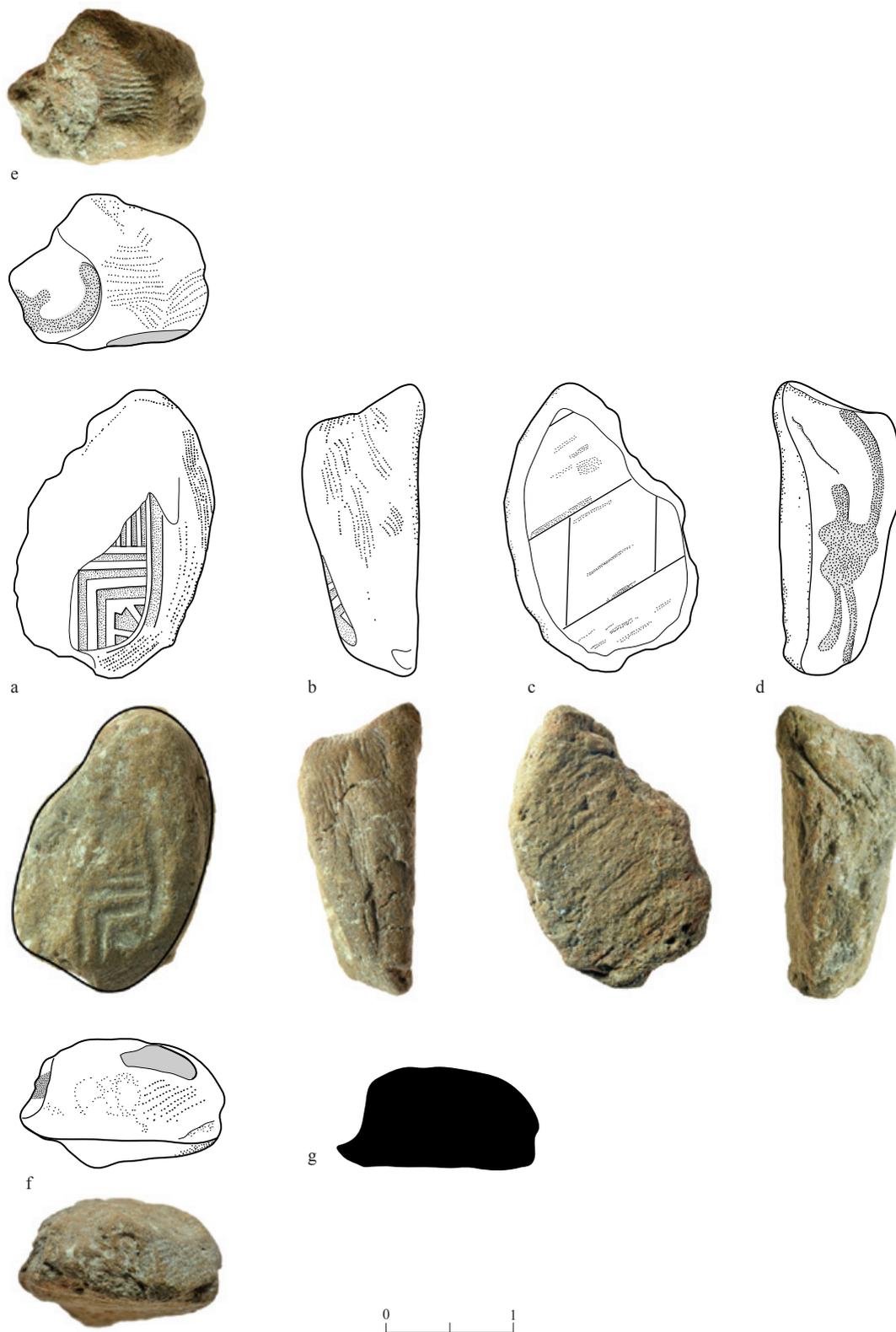


Fig. 1. The sealing: drawings and photographs of the faces and section.

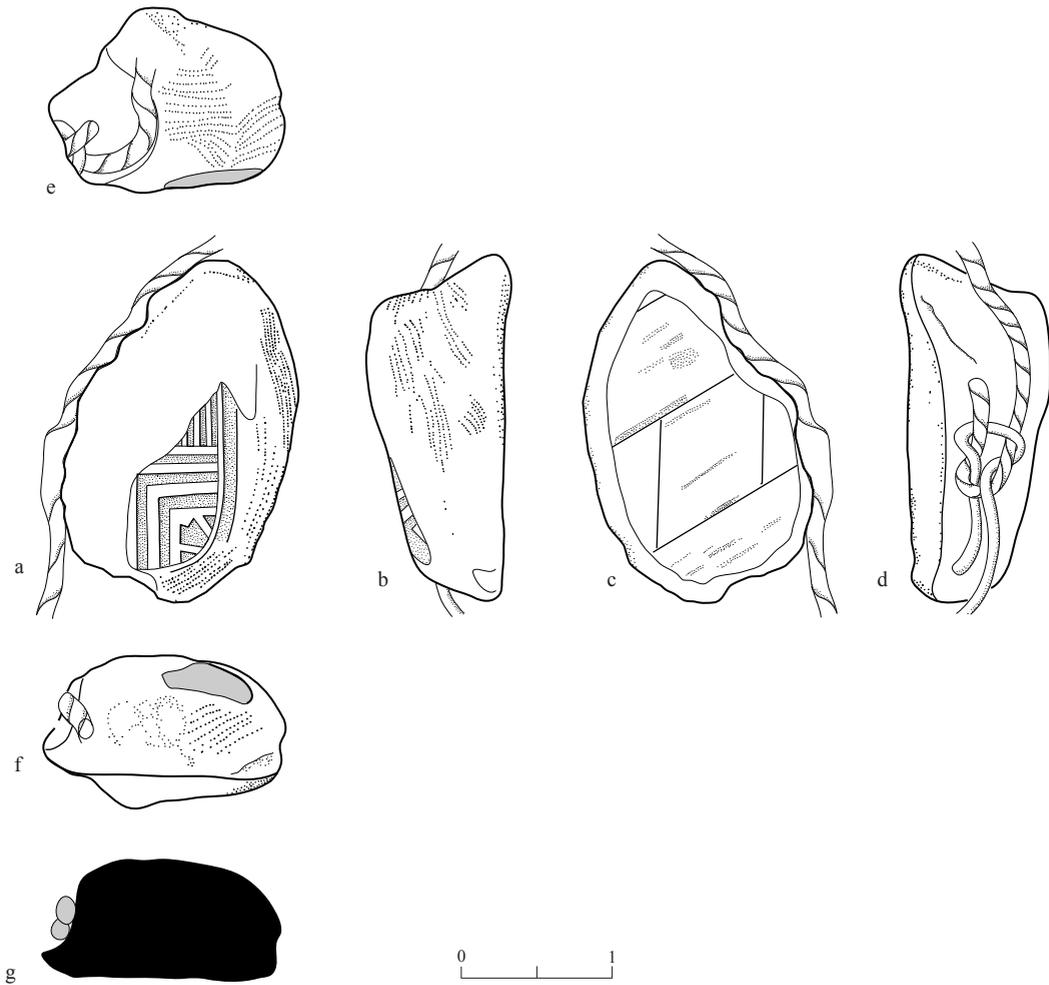


Fig. 2. The sealing: faces and section, with strings.

Fig. 307 = Uehlinger 1993:264, Fig. 8 = Ornan 1997:298–299 (No. 2); 2005:351 (No. 7). For a scaraboid attributed to the “Lyre Player Group”, see Parayre 1993:36, 41, 46, Fig. 34.

When viewed horizontally, it seems to be a geometric space-filler in the upper, plano-convex-shaped register of an inscribed seal. For a Phoenician scaraboid in the Louvre, see Lemaire 1977:32–33 (No. 4); Bordreuil 1986:42–43 (No. 38), with additional references therein; Avigad and Sass 1997:268 (No. 720).

Both these interpretations were eventually rejected due to an incongruous component at the corner of the impression, and it became clear that the preserved part of the impression

is only one quarter of the original motif, which could be viewed either vertically or horizontally.

This observation made it possible to reconstruct a symmetrical motif of *a cross with a lotus flower between each pair of its arms* (Fig. 3:a–c). It was also possible to reconstruct the shape of the original seal as a square-shaped scaraboid set in a metal bezel (Fig. 3:b–d). The bezel obscured the top of the lotus flower (compare Fig. 3:a and b with Fig. 3:c).

Origin

The seal is identified as Israelite, an attribution that is based on the geographical distribution

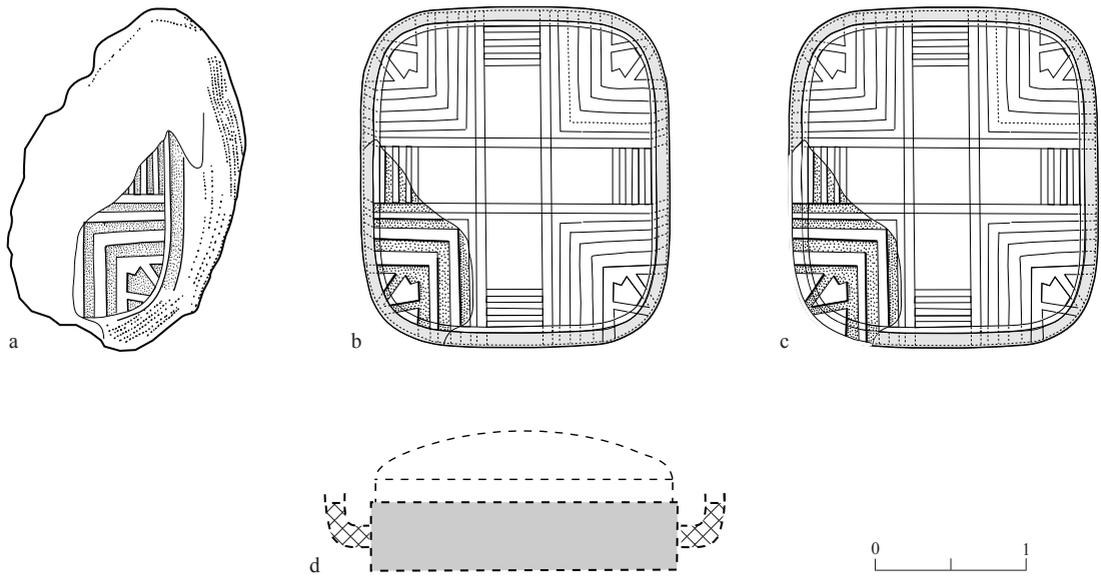


Fig. 3. Reconstruction of the seal that stamped the sealing.

of seals that have one of the following characteristics:

1. scaraboids with the lotus flower component as part of the motif.
2. seals with the complete motif of *a cross with a lotus flower between each pair of arms*.
3. scaraboids of a square shape set in a metal bezel.

An additional criterion is the political affiliation of contemporary sites in which similar sealings were found.

Lotus Flower as Part of the Motif.— Lotus flowers appear on Israelite seals either independently or incorporated in a composite design.

As an independent component, the lotus flower is depicted above a lion's back on a scarab from Tell en-Naşbeh (McCown 1947:296 [No. 74], Pl. 55:74), a site that was under Israelite rule for a short period at the beginning of the ninth century BCE, during the reign of Baasha (see Kallai 1960: Map No. 4; Zorn 1993:1098).

As part of a composite design, lotus flowers and leaves are depicted above three stems located on a 'boat'.

This design appears on scaraboids excavated at Nush-i Jan, Iran (Stronach and Roaf 1978:9, Pl. IVc = Curtis 1984:22, 24–25 [No. 234], Fig. 4:234, Pl. XI:234 = Ornan 1997:215, Fig. 233) and at Tel Dor (Stern 1992:71, Fig. 90 [left] = Stern 1994:146, Fig. 85 [right] = Ornan 1997:215, 337 [No. 105], Fig. 105 = Keel 2010:464–465 [Dor 7]), a site that "...was the main Israelite port on the Mediterranean Coast" (Na'aman 2007:406). The same motif also decorates a stamp of unknown provenance, kept in the Australian Institute of Archaeology in Melbourne (Merrillees 1990:133 [No. 68] = Uehlinger 1993:264, Fig. 7).

Stronach and Roaf identified the three stems on the Nush-i Jan scaraboid as "three chevron stands", while Curtis described them as "...stylized tree(?), and in the centre a table(?) or offering-stand(?)...". Stern identified the same elements at Tel Dor as "...three fire altars...", Ornan as "...sacred structures—fire altars or trees...", while Keel calls them "...Ankh-signs...".

Two additional related groups of Israelite seals with the so-called boat motif (see Keel and Uehlinger below) are known. The first

group, showing three palm trees on top of a 'boat', includes a round limestone stamp seal from the National Maritime Museum, Haifa. Barnett, who published the seal, identified the 'boat' as a representation of an enclosure or garden (Barnett 1969–71:48, Pl. XIV:6).

The second group shows a masculine figure sitting on a throne between two palm trees, all on a 'boat'. This group comprises four seals, only one from a known provenance. The first seal is a scaraboid that was bought in Jerusalem, and was for many decades part of the Clark Collection (Culican 1970:29, Fig. I:d, 32–33 = Avigad and Sass 1997:76 [No. 80], with additional references therein). On its domed back is the Hebrew inscription "*Belonging to Elishama' son of Gedalyahu*". The second seal was purchased by Tushingham in 1952 near Irbid, Jordan, a site located in the territory of the Israelite Gilead (Tushingham 1971 = Eggler and Keel 2006:172–173 [Irbid No. 1]). The third seal, said to have been found near Jerusalem, is in the National Maritime Museum, Haifa (Barnett 1969–71:48, Pl. XIV:5)—Barnett mistakenly identified the sitting figure as Isis suckling her child Horus. The fourth seal, a scaraboid, is in the Collection of the Biblical Institute of the University of Freiburg, Switzerland (Keel-Leu 1991:114–115 [No. 133]).

The Hebrew inscription on the first seal, with the Judahite name *Gedalyahu*, seems, on first consideration, to weaken the relation of the entire second group to the Northern Kingdom, but this apprehension was already challenged: Keel and Uehlinger—in their discussion of this group as part of a larger one they define as "the Moon God in a Boat"—identified the sitting figure as the Israelite god El, who could be identified *inter alia* with the Judahite god Yahweh (Keel and Uehlinger 1992:340–355 = Keel and Uehlinger 1998:298–311); Ornan rightly stated that the Judahite inscription could have been added to the seal whose iconographical origin was the Northern Kingdom (Ornan 1997:25–28).

A Cross with a Lotus Flower between Each Pair of Arms.— Three seals with this motif are known (Fig. 4:1–3): a scarab from Megiddo, a scaraboid from Tel Gezer, "...the main centre on the Kingdom's south-western boundary" (Na'aman 2007:406) and a scaraboid made of bone from Tell en-Naşbeh (see comprehensive discussion below, under *Typology*).

Square Scaraboids Set in a Metal Bezel.— The famous carnelian scaraboid excavated at Carthage, which bears the name "*Abiyaw*" or "*Yo'ab*", is set in a gold mount (Lidzbarski 1915:46 = Diringer 1934:170–171, No. 9, Pl. 19:9 = Galling 1941:153, 186–187, Pl. 7:97 = Keel and Uehlinger 1992:221–223, Figs. 212b = Keel and Uehlinger 1998:196–198, Fig. 212b = Avigad and Sass 1997:107 [No. 185], with additional references therein).

Sealings.— Three sealings (published as bullae), all impressed by the same seal that was set in a metal mount, were excavated in one locus in Level H-3 [= IVA] at Megiddo (Sass 2000:408–409, Fig. 12.44).

A basket sealing and a mat sealing, of Phoenician origin, were excavated in the same locus (in Stratum S-1a?) at Tel Bet She'an (Brandl 2009:671–674 [Nos. 34, 35], and *Administration*, p. 674).

Typology

The scaraboid that stamped the Western Wall Plaza sealing joins a small group of seals that bear the motif of *a cross with a lotus flower between each pair of its arms*. The lotus flowers, however, appear in various shapes.

The first seal, a scarab (Fig. 4:1), was found at Megiddo. It was included in a group photograph without any independent description (Schumacher 1908:88–89, Fig. 124 [second row, first on right]). Othmar Keel located it in the Classical Department of the Archaeological Museum in Istanbul, and discussed it (Keel 1994:36–37 [No. 18], Pl. 9:18). Keel identified the elements between the arms of the cross—

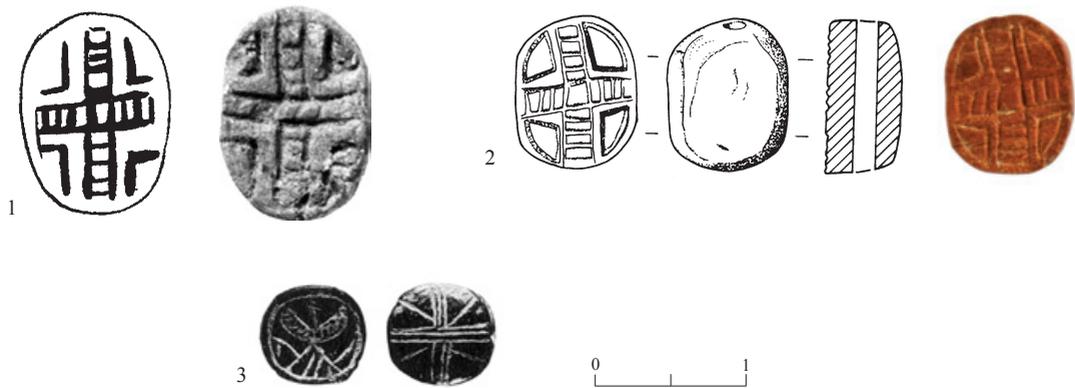


Fig. 4. Parallels to the sealing's motif: Megiddo (1), Tel Gezer (2), Tell en-Naşbeh (3).

erroneously—as small angles (“winkel”), but a careful observation of the photograph shows them to be lotus flowers. Likewise, the parallels mentioned by Keel belong to a different and earlier group without lotus flowers.

The second seal (Fig. 4:2), a scaraboid, was found at Tel Gezer. It received a very short note, without a written description of its motif (Dever 1986:127, Pls. 62:15, 120A). Careful scrutiny indicates that the motif is comparable to that of the Megiddo scarab.

The third seal (Fig. 4:3), another scaraboid, was found at Tell en-Naşbeh, but its raw material is bone, rather than stone, like the other two seals, and it is carved on both the base and the back. The cross on the back has thick, single line arms, and there are four lotus flowers at the intersection points between them, each segmented by a median line. On the base is a typical motif of a landing bird en face (McCown 1947: Pl. 54:56).

Date

Based on the parallels discussed above, it is possible to suggest a production date for the original seal, and the sealing, during the ninth–eighth centuries BCE, or, more precisely, between 850 and 722 BCE.

The earliest possible date for the arrival of the sealing in Jerusalem would be during

the reign of Queen Atalya (842–836 BCE), although a connection to a refugee escaping from the Assyrian conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel (c. 722 BCE) should not be ruled out.

Archaeological Context

Locus 6172 is, according to the excavators, a fill 67 cm thick between the main floor and a conjectural lower floor segment, or alternatively, a sunken installation (724.03 m asl) in the Iron Age II House, Room 5 (724.70 m asl; Ornan et al. 2012: Table 2: Floor level—Item 7. Bulla).

Basket 61231—from which Bulla No. 7 originated—is the accumulation of the lowest 20 cm above the suggested lower floor segment, or the surface of the sunken installation (724.03–724.23 m asl; Ornan et al. 2012: Table 2: Basket level—Item 7. Bulla).

The location of the surface segment—near the doorway between Rooms 5 and 6—is problematic in both the alternative reconstructions suggested by the excavator (Compare Ornan et al. 2012: Plan 1: Section 1–1).

There is a possibility that Basket 61231 is part of debris from an earlier structure, which remained in the untouched soil between the foundation trenches of the later Iron II building. Alternatively, the small surface segment may

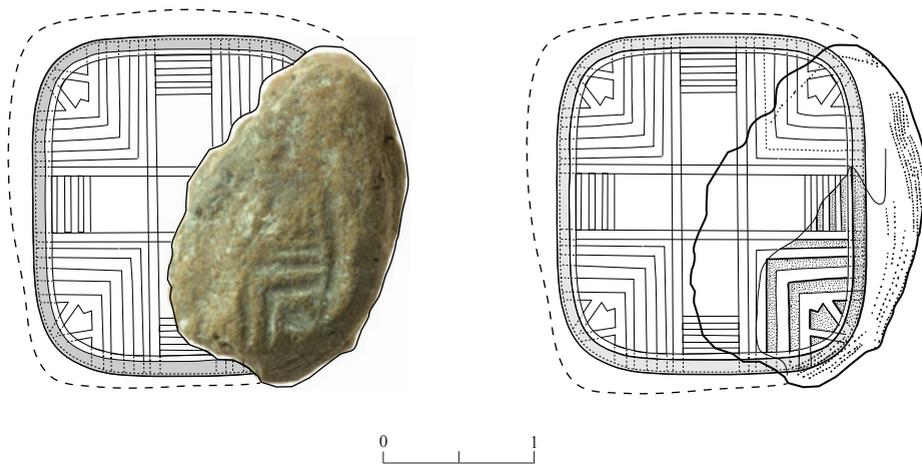


Fig. 5. Reconstruction of the complete sealing, based on the reconstruction of the seal that stamped it.

be part of the fill under the main floor, a fill that could have been transferred from a nearby, earlier ruined structure.

Relating the Western Wall Plaza sealing to a construction fill rather than to floor material, proves only that it predates the main, seventh-century BCE floor (Ornan et al. 2008: 116–117).

ADDITIONAL TECHNICAL DISCUSSION

Reconstruction of the Basketry Box

The reverse side of the sealing preserved the impression of the basketry, which made it possible to reconstruct the sealed container as follows (Fig. 1:c):

1. The impression was extended by repetition in all directions, resulting in a relatively sophisticated pattern, achieved by the use of the plaiting technique (Fig. 6; see Wendrich 2000:255–256, Fig. 10.1:d; for the simpler pattern usually used for sandals, see Dubis 1996:62–62 [No. 7b]; Bienkowski and Tooley 1995:47 [No. 61]).
2. The reconstructed obverse of the sealing was superimposed as a mirror-image on the reconstructed basketry pattern (see Fig. 7).
3. A cylindrical box with a detached lid and a single string passing through both was

reconstructed. This solution incorporates the interpretation of the burnt traces found on the broken edge of the sealing (compare Fig. 2:d with Fig. 1:d) as a single string with knotted ends (Fig. 8:a, b), and differs from the mechanism suggested by Gerlach for sealing a cylindrical basketry-box with an attached lid (Gerlach 1997:18–19, Ill. 17 [right]).

The Western Wall Plaza sealing demonstrates a different way of sealing a basketry container from that of the sealings from Gerar (Ben-Tor 1995:366–374) and Bet She'an (Brandl 2009:671–673 [No. 34]).

Reconstruction of the Sealing Technology

The negatives of burnt, knotted string-ends identified the left (broken) edge of the sealing (Figs. 1:d; 2:d) as a channel through which the string had passed (see Fig. 8:b). Such a channel could only have been made by folding the clay strip that was attached to the basketry-box over the knotted string ends (see Fig. 8:c, d).

This sealing technique is different from the one suggested for the bullae from the City of David. There, string negatives appear also on the internal surface created by folding the clay strip, and the fold trapped only the two loops of the knot (Brandl 2000:60–61, Figs. 6, 7, 68, 69).

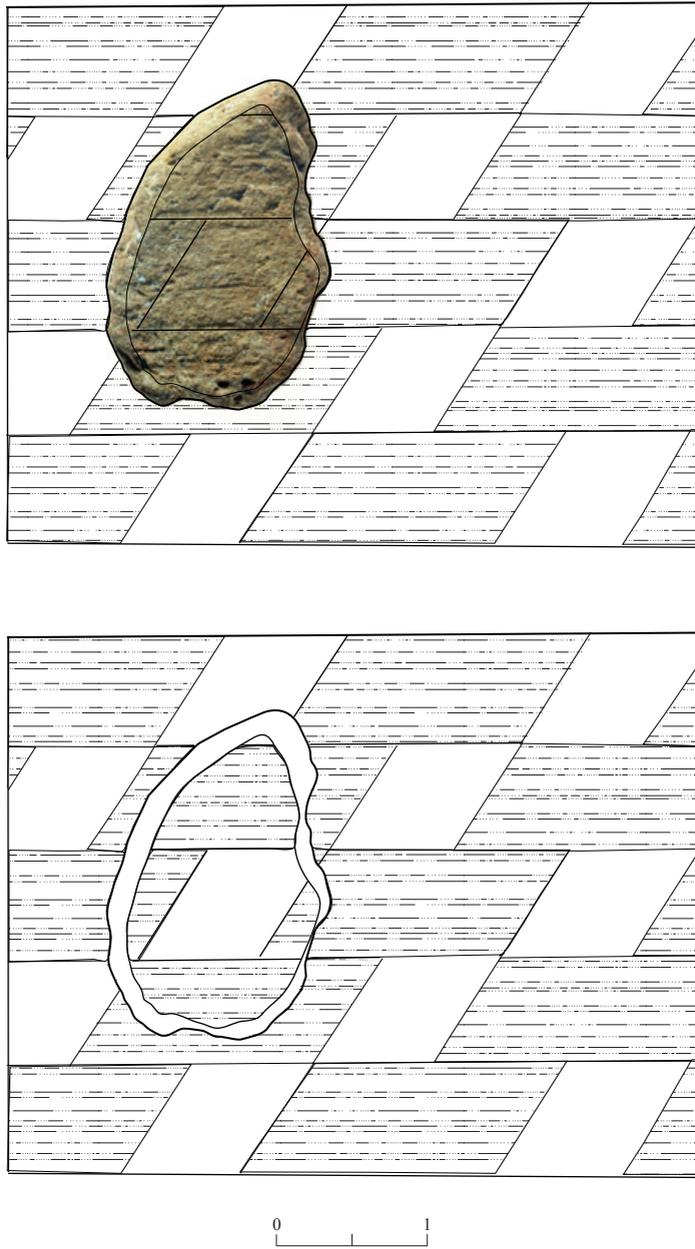


Fig. 6. Reconstruction of the sealed basketry surface.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The basketry-box sealing seems to be yet another Israelite object that reached Judah either during the reign of Queen Atalya in the

ninth century BCE, or in the hands of a refugee during the last decades of the eighth century BCE—at the time of the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel by the invading Assyrian army, or just before it. The refugee

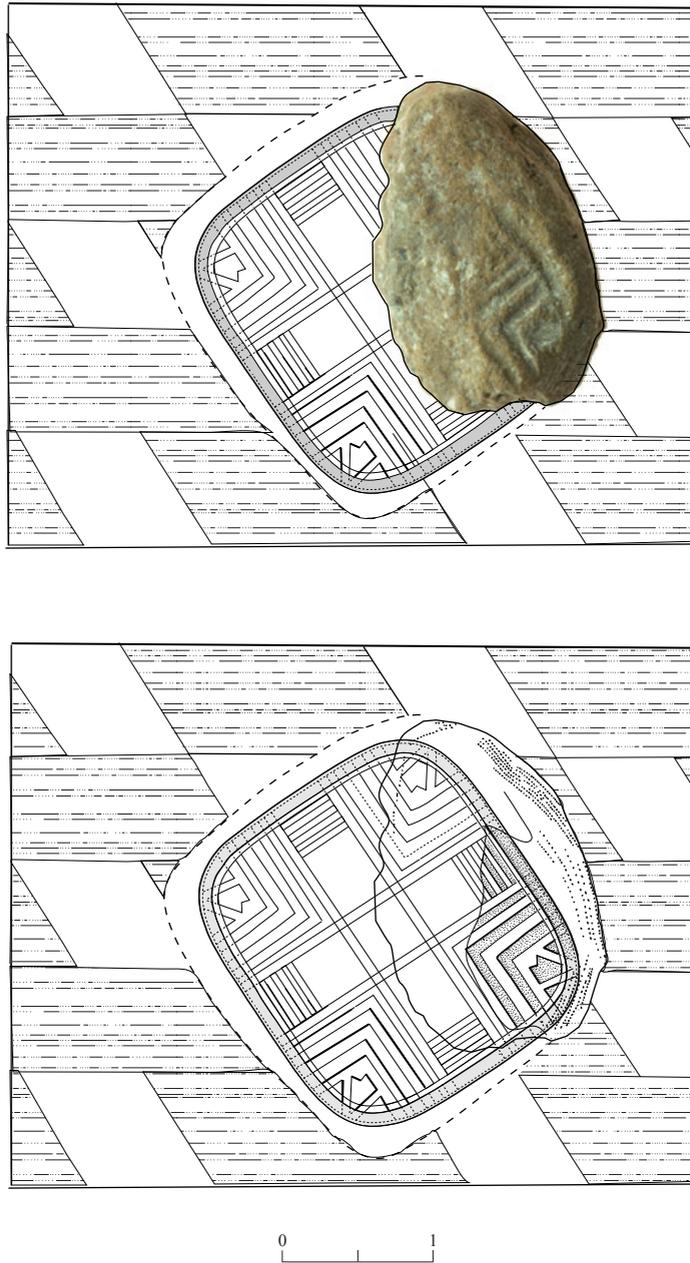


Fig. 7. Reconstruction of the angle at which the sealing was attached to the basketry.

who crossed the eighth century BCE border may have come from sites such as Tell en-Naṣbeh or Gezer, and not necessarily from

cities in the north, such as Samaria or Tel Dan (For the border between Judah and Israel, see Kallai 1960).

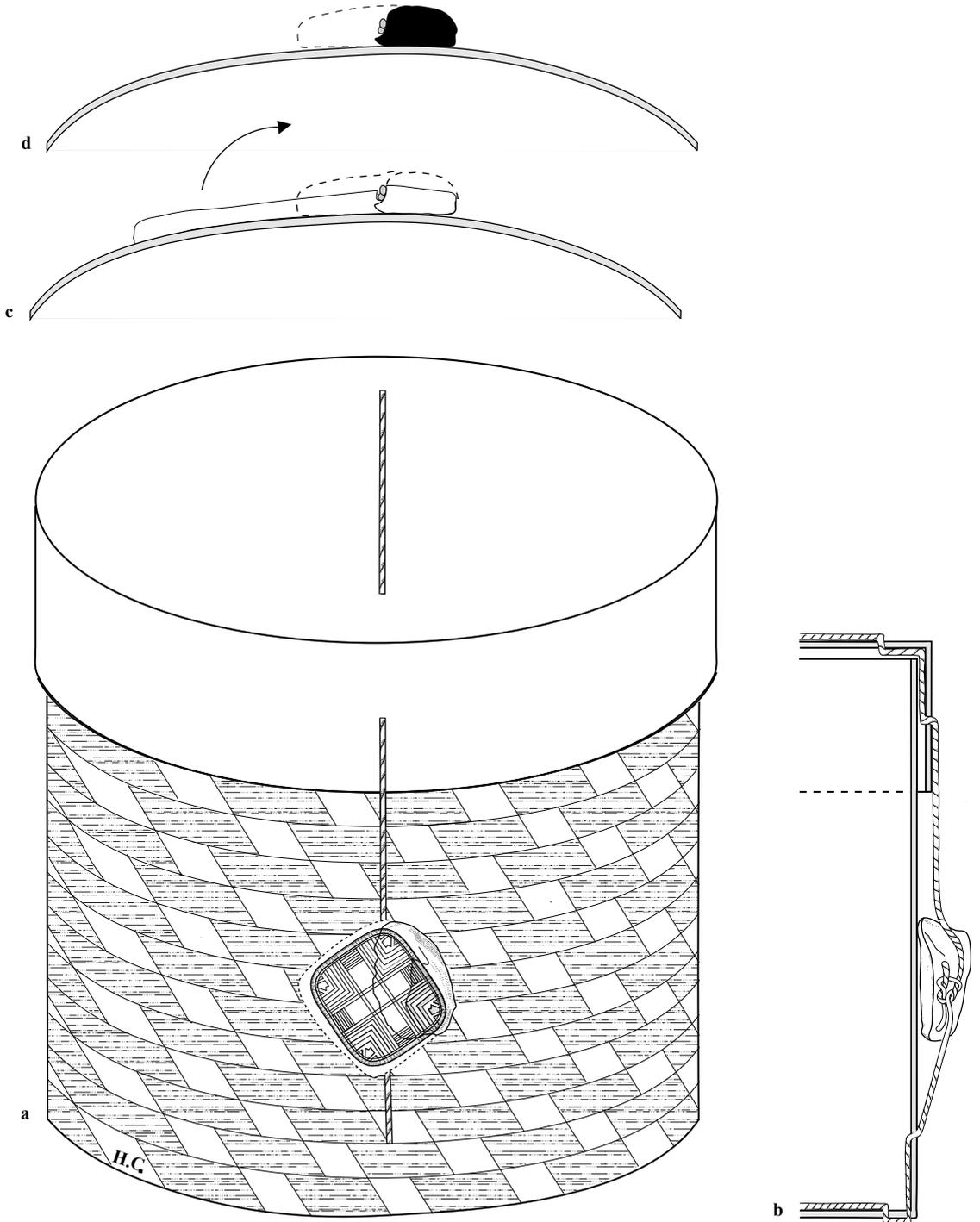


Fig. 8. Reconstruction of the cylindrical basketry-box, the way it was closed, and the sealing technique.

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NOTE

¹ Permit No. A-5432.

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