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Book Review: The Yehud Stamp Impressions: A Corpus of Inscribed Impressions from the Persian and Hellenistic Periods in Judah

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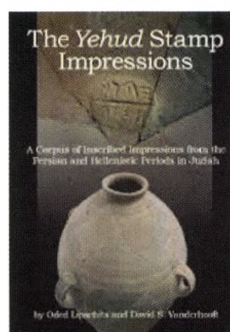
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The *Yehud* Stamp Impressions: A Corpus of Inscribed Impressions from the Persian and Hellenistic Periods in Judah



By Oded Lipschits and David S. Vanderhooft. Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2011. Pp. xvi + 796 + illustrations. Hardcover. \$99.50. ISBN 978-1-57506-183-2.

In the world of archaeology, excavators often parade their discoveries of grand architectural structures in hopes of attracting favorable publicity, volunteers, and, ultimately, funding to support continued fieldwork. But what happens when, alongside these dramatic discoveries, excavation produces more mundane findings such as impressions on jars, often containing merely three letters: Hebrew *yod*, *he*, and *dalet*? In *The Yehud Stamp Impressions: A Corpus of Inscribed Impressions from the Persian and Hellenistic Periods in Judah*, Oded Lipschits and David S. Vanderhooft attempt to highlight the seemingly mundane as an opportune window to the social world of Yehud. Their stated objective:

This work thus offers, in the first place, a full catalogue of all published and unpublished *yhwd* stamp impressions, together with photographs and complete archaeological and publication data for each stamp impression.... In addition to the primary task of publishing all of the impressions in catalogue form, this study also proposes a revised typology that organizes the *yehūd* stamp impressions. (xv)

True to its title, the volume is more descriptive than analytical of the 582 impressions covering the Persian and early Hellenistic periods, with an overwhelming 470 impressions from Ramat

Rahel and Jerusalem. Collectively, these impressions provide a significant resource in studying the economy, administration, and networks of Judah of this period.

The work begins with four brief preliminary chapters. “The Introduction” gives an obligatory history of research on *yehūd* stamp impressions, dividing into three main phases: (1) 1900–1950s; (2) 1950s–1980s; (3) 1980s–2009, with the last ten years producing 243 new impressions. Chapter B, on “Geopolitical and Archaeological Considerations,” reopens questions regarding borders and political relations according to the distribution of impressions. The authors discount previous attempts at using the spatial distribution to substantively contribute to the understanding of political borders of Yehud. But as administrative markers, the concentration of finds at Ramat Rahel and Jerusalem points to those two loci as the main administrative centers, with secondary centers at Tell en-Naṣbeh, Jericho, Nebi Samwil, and En Gedi. Chapter C, on “The Paleographical Framework for the *Yehūd* Stamp Impressions,” assumes Naveh’s (1970) chronology for the development of Aramaic script. The authors describe the various forms of their letters in the impressions, determining that their scripts fit within the known patterns of Aramaic paleography. The next chapter, on the “Toponym *Yehūd* and the Title *phw*,” follows the generally accepted ideas that the Persian Empire officially recognized the small province, and that *phw* confirms the present understanding of this title to the highest-ranking official of this province. Chapters B–D give helpful context to the descriptive details for the ensuing catalogue of stamp impressions.

After these introductory chapters, the book goes into its substantive portion: three broad chapters covering the impressions from defined chronological periods. Each of these chapters lists the types of impression according to the inscription along with an assortment of accompanying data, including photographs with a scale measurement, hand-drawings, then a chart with discovery, site, impression characteristics, prosopography, and paleography, when applicable.

The first of these three chapters, “The Early Types,” contains 128 impressions. This subset does not have any absolute dating, but the chapter places these impressions from the late sixth through fifth centuries B.C.E. Within this category, the authors list twelve different subtypes, primarily according to the object of a *lamed*-inscription. The greatest number (55) of these impressions are simply *yehūd* (יהוד), almost exclusively from Ramat Rahel. Given the paucity of secure stratigraphic information, the chapter relies heavily on scribal characteristics such as paleography, scribal marks, and even onomastics to place the collection within this particular diachronic period. Lipschits and Vanderhooft suggest that “[t]he early stamp types show considerable uniformity in their Aramaic lapidary script,

significant diversity in content and relatively restricted distribution” (252).

The next chapter contains 312 impressions, chronologically categorized as “The Middle Types,” from the fourth and third centuries B.C.E., with at least sixteen subtypes according to shape, paleography, style, and orientation. The majority of these impressions appear in Ramat Rahel (60 percent), followed by the City of David (19 percent). As with the Early Types, stratigraphy is not dependable, so dating relies primarily on paleography. The diachronic development of these seals is minimal, showing administrative continuity from the Persians, the Macedonians, the Ptolemies, and the Seleucids.

“The Late Types” catalogue 142 impressions, which the authors date to the second century B.C.E., this time with firm stratigraphy. Jerusalem (61) emerges as the dominant administrative center for this period in place of Ramat Rahel (22 percent). In addition, this period sees no sealings from secondary administrative centers of Tell en-Naṣbeh, Nebi Samwil, En Gedi, and Jericho. This distribution signals the rise of the Hasmonean administrative system in place of the old Persian system.

The book appropriately ends with a summary and synthesis. The authors place the *yehūd* impressions over a lengthy history of sealings, beginning with the eighth-century *lmlk* inscriptions, in helping understand the complexity of administration, distribution, and storage. These impressions also show important aspects such as the change from Hebrew to Aramaic script and the highly centralized nature of redistribution (only seventeen major types over nearly five centuries!) This chapter suggest a scenario when jars were produced near Ramat Rahel/Jerusalem, filled at agricultural production centers, then sent to the storage sites.

The authors have commendably produced an accessible volume with great alacrity only a year after the final season of Ramat Rahel excavations (the volume includes impressions from as late as the winter 2009 excavations). The book is comprehensive in its inclusion of all seals published, including published reports and articles as well as unpublished excavation notes and dissertations. By readily displaying the details of each of these stamp impressions, the authors provide a unique set of data for better understanding of the social world of Yehud. Such a long diachronic look at these impressions helps identify major shifts such as the deliberate scribal changes at the end of the fifth century B.C.E. or the movement from Ramat Rahel to Jerusalem by the second century B.C.E. This catalog will also provide a nice bridge for the forthcoming excavation reports on Ramat Rahel.

But whereas the volume appears to want to objectively describe and report on this vast collection of sealings, at points the authors make questionable interpretations on their data.

Two particular examples stand out. First, the authors interpret the sealings to defend their own understanding of imperial tax collection and distribution. They describe the distribution of stamp impressions to outline the primary and secondary administrative districts of Yehud as an office of imperial taxation under the aegis of greater empires. But the distribution of these impressions can only prove that products moved and were accounted for at administrative centers. By itself, this distribution cannot determine the degree of autonomy by which this product moved. Exchange of goods can be untraceable to modern excavation, so quantitative questions in regard to the relative significance of this distribution through *yehūd* impressions remains ambiguous. Of course, Lipschits and Vanderhooft's interpretation of Ramat Rahel as an imperial tax station for the Persian Empire may have merit, but conclusive interpretation must await further discussion with the content of forthcoming excavation reports from Ramat Rahel.

Second, the overreliance on paleography for the Early and Middle Types requires more judicious consideration. Although the catalog contains hundreds of samples, the actual inventory of letters is quite limited, primarily centering on the *dalet*, *he*, *waw*, and *yod*. It is questionable whether such a limited sample can confidently classify these sealings, particularly when the organization of the entire volume revolves around chronology. For example, certain paleographic features that do not readily correspond to their chronology are dismissed as "archaic" (68). The problem is compounded when drawing paleographic comparisons to Persian Yehud coins (e.g., 69, 255), which is an exceedingly insufficient sample size, appear on different media, reflect different political purposes, and have more altered shapes through the usage and wearing of dies.

Regardless of these shortcomings, the scholarly community welcomes this timely volume. Lipschits and Vanderhooft wisely center this early publication on these many *yehūd* impressions, so readers can see that this collection of seemingly mundane sealings provides an unparalleled window into the complex administrative and economic life of Judah during Persian and Hellenistic era, perhaps more valuable than the palatial architecture, palmette capitals, or the royal water systems of Ramat Rahel.

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