

TWO STAMPED JAR IMPRESSIONS OF  
THE PERSIAN PROVINCE  
OF AMMON FROM TELL EI-'UMEIRI

by  
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Two seal impressions with identical inscriptions were found on the upper portions of two jar handles. The first (Object No. 1799; Figs. 1 and 2) was found in the topsoil of Field A (Square 7K62, Locus 2) above the northeast corner of the four-room building in the Field A public complex. It was impressed into the wet clay while the hand was moving to the right; note the slip marks on the left side of the impression and the pushed up clay on the right (Fig. 1). It measures ca. 1.8 cm long and 1.5 cm wide.

The second impression (Object No. 2028; Figs. 3 and 4) was found in the topsoil of the same Square in Field A (Square 7K62, Locus 4) above the northeast corner of the four-room building or the southern part of the northern building in the Field A public complex. It was ca. 1.9 cm long and 1.4 cm wide. All letters are flattened at the top. Perhaps the jar was wiped with a rag after the impression was made but prior to firing.

Both impressions carry the same inscription. However, because the space between the two lines is greater on No. 2028 than on No. 1799, and because the letters are slightly different, they were probably impressed by different seals. Although the letters on both impressions are relatively unclear, we are virtually certain that the reading for No. 1799 is correct (Fig. 2), while the visible traces on No. 2028 suggest the same letters made in similar ways. Both impressions are much clearer than the published photographs when viewed through a low-magnification binocular microscope under a variety of lighting configurations. Unfortunately, the high density of large non-plastics in the clay of the jars has confused the appearance considerably. Both impressions are to be preserved and housed by the Department of Antiquities of Jordan.

The forms of the letters on both impressions are similar (Figs. 1 and 3), reading *šb'/'mn* with three letters on each line. There does not seem to be a line separating the two registers. There are two ways to understand the inscription. The first is that all six letters spell a personal name, with *'mn*, "Ammon," the national name, standing for the theophoric element. This is the typical way of understanding normal seal inscriptions; but if so, the verbal element *šb'* is very difficult to understand. We may, therefore, suggest a second translation in which the first element, *šb'*, is a hypocoristic name with *aleph* based on *šwb* (or possibly *yšb*), and that the second word, *'mn*, refers to a regional identification. But before expanding on this reading we must first discuss the paleography.

It is clear that the script of both impressions is Aramaic. Both *sins* are made of three strokes with the center stroke slanting upward to the right (contrary to appearances on the photograph of No. 1799 (Fig. 1) which has been distorted by a non-plastic in the clay). This form of the letter does not occur in Ammonite inscriptions (Herr 1978; Figs. 37 and 45), but is common in Aramaic, especially of the 6th and 5th centuries (Herr 1978; Figs. 14 and 33). The *šin* of No. 2028 (Fig. 4) seems to lean further to the left than that on No. 1799.

The head of both *bets* is wide open, as is typical in Aramaic inscriptions of the 6th and early 5th centuries (Herr 1978: Figs. 2 and 23). The Ammonite open form is always more closed (Herr 1978: Figs. 34 and 42). The *bet* on No. 1799 seems to be slightly larger than the one on No. 2028.

The *aleph* is the typical star form found in both Aramaic and Ammonite script traditions (Herr 1978: Figs. 1, 23, 34, and 42). Our



Fig. 1. Photograph of seal impression 1799.

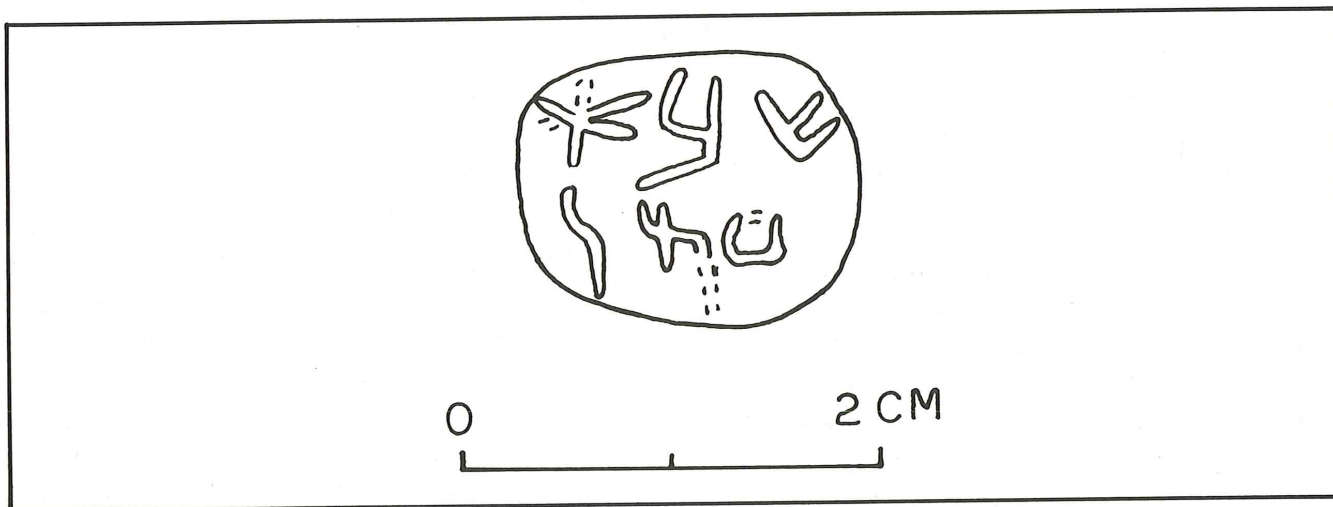


Fig. 2. Drawing of seal impression 1799.

particular form seems to display the lower horizontal stretching beyond the vertical (see especially No. 1799). The horizontal strokes on No. 2028 seem to be more parallel than No. 1799. (The vertical scratch to the left of the 'aleph on No. 1799 should not be confused with a stroke.)

Both 'ayins are squared and probably wide open at the top, although markings on both letters may suggest partial closing.

Under a binocular microscope, however, these appear secondary (scratches and ware imperfections). The squared 'ayin is well known in Ammonite seal scripts (Herr 1978: Fig. 44), but the letter is seldom open and, when it is, is usually round. The form fits best the Aramaic 'ayins of the late 7th to the 5th centuries (Herr 1978: Figs. 12 and 31).

The *mem* with a middle vertical stroke does not occur in Ammonite scripts (Herr

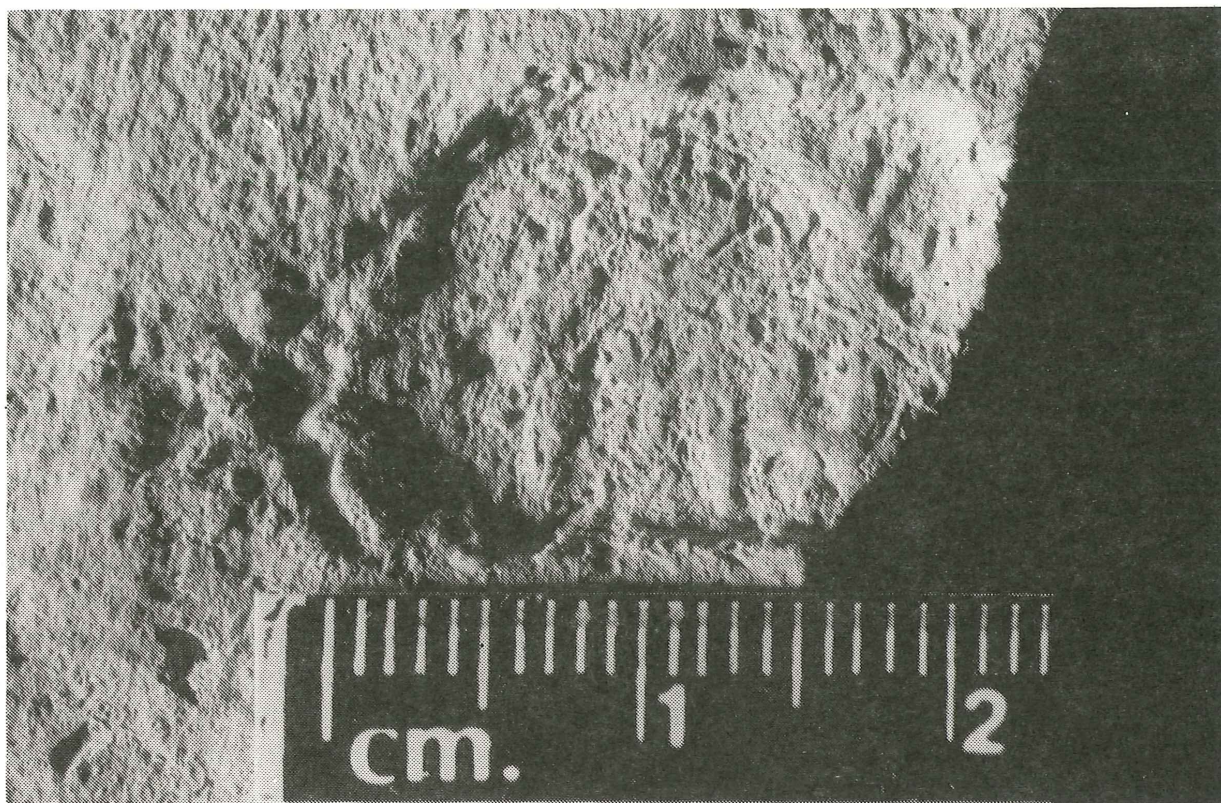


Fig. 3. Photograph of seal impression 2028.

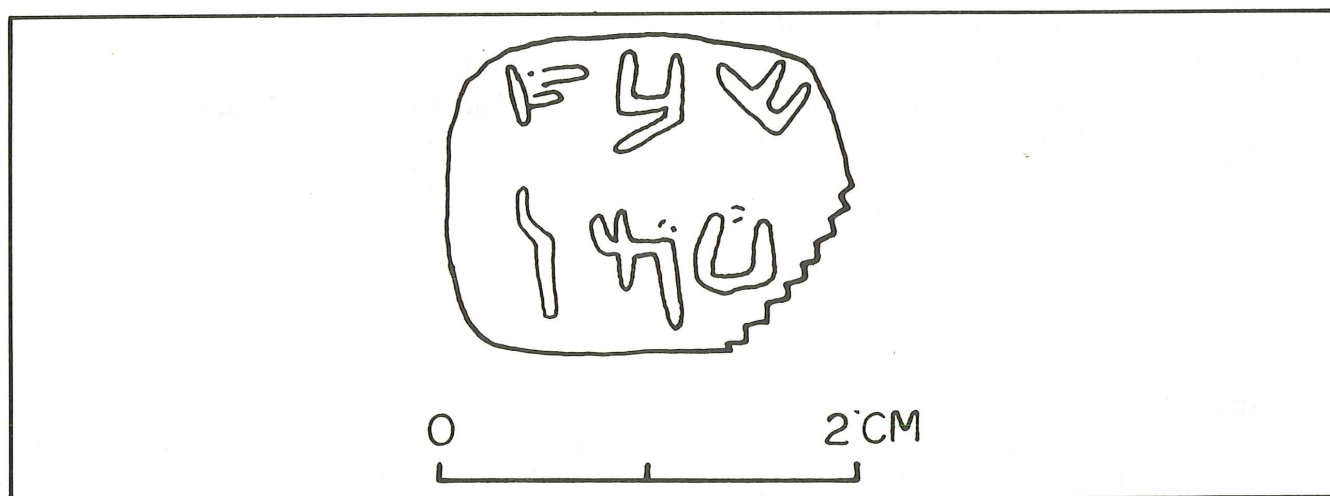


Fig. 4. Drawing of seal impression 2028.

1978: Figs. 36 and 44), but is an important form in Aramaic inscriptions of the 6th century (Herr 1978: Figs. 10 and 30). Later forms of 5th century Aramaic have a much shorter head, giving the letter a more vertical orientation.

The *nun* is similar to Ammonite forms of the late 7th and early 6th centuries (Herr 1978: Figs. 36 and 44), but is extremely frequent in the Arabaic tradition from the 7th

to the 5th centuries (Herr 1978: Figs. 11 and 30).

Most of the letters in the impressions have a relatively wide range of existence in the late 7th to early or mid 5th centuries in the Aramaic script. However, the *mem* can suggest a more limited time span in the 6th century, perhaps happiest in the second half of the 6th century. Moreover, the use of the Aramaic script on two impressions from an

Ammonite site favors a date after the mid 6th century, when the use of the Ammonite script seems to have ceased in favor of Aramaic (Cross 1975: 14). To our knowledge, this is the first time that phenomenon is witnessed on seal epigraphy.

Returning to the reading, we may suggest that, given the data and script of the impressions, we have found the first examples (to our knowledge) of Persian provincial seals for the province of 'Ammon. As such, they parallel the *yhd/yhwd* stamps from the province of Judah (Avigad 1976 and Stern 1982: 202-206; see also Cross 1969). If we may therefore use the analogy of the *yhwd* stamps for ours, we may suggest that the name on the first line *šb'*. "Shuba'," indicates either the governor or the treasurer of the Persian province mentioned in the second line. *'mn*, "Ammon" (see Stern 1982: 205-206 for the consensus view of the *yhwd* stamps). Because our paleographic analysis and that of Avigad on the *yhwd* stamps (1976: 21-24) independently came to precisely the same dates for these provincial stamps, it may be implied that both the *'mn* and *yhwd* stamps played similar roles at the same time in their respective Persian provinces. We are not as yet aware of an Ammonite provincial governor

named Shuba'. The only governor mentioned in the Bible is a Tobiah (Neh. 2,4,6, and 13), while Josephus mentions others also named Tobiah (*Antiquities* XII, 160-236).

As late as 1961 it was thought that Ammonite civilization ceased to exist in the mid 6th century and did not begin again until the Hellenistic period (Landes 1961:65). Our two seal impressions add to the emerging consensus for a Persian province of 'Ammon. They were most likely products of the Persian bureaucracy, perhaps associated with taxation. As far as we know, they are the only two "provincial" seals yet found in the Ammonite region. Because they were discovered in topsoil immediately above the public buildings at the western edge of Tell el-'Umeiri, we may suggest that the latest, early Persian phase of those public buildings functioned in association with the Persian provincial government.

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