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The *yršlm* Stamp Impressions on Jar Handles: Distribution, Chronology, Iconography and Function

EFRAT BOCHER AND ODED LIPSCHITS

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The *yršlm* stamp impressions are the final link in a long chain of a Judahite-Yehudite-Judean administrative tradition of stamping handles or bodies of storage jars. With its cessation, the system that functioned for 600 years under Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Ptolemaic and Seleucid rule from the 8th century BCE through to the establishment of the Hasmonean kingdom, fell into obsolescence. This paper presents an updated corpus of the *yršlm* stamped jar handles. The authors discuss the following issues: distribution and chronology of the finds; their connection to the late *yhwd* stamp impressions; the reason why the administrative system in Judea began using iconographic symbols hundreds of years after employing only script on the stamped jar system; the meaning of the pentagram symbol utilized in these seals; and the function of the stamping system in the Hasmonean kingdom in the 2nd century BCE.

KEYWORDS *yršlm* stamp impressions, *lmlk*, rosette and *yhwd* stamped jar handles, Jerusalem, Hasmonean period, Judahite administration

The process of stamping jar handles was carried out in Judah-Yehud-Judea for over 600 years, from the end of the 8th century BCE through to the establishment of the Hasmonean kingdom. Although examples of jars stamped with seals are well known from different periods and regions, no comparable parallels exist in the ancient world. Examples that we do have are sporadic; were produced by individual seals, or by a few seals of a single type used in one area for a very short period; occur in small numbers; and exhibit no continuity from one case to the next.

The Judahite tradition of stamping or incising jar handles began with the early *lmlk* stamp impressions at the end of the 8th century BCE. It was followed by the late *lmlk* stamp impressions in the early 7th century; the incised concentric circles in the mid-7th century; and the rosette stamp impressions at the end of the 7th and the early 6th centuries

BCE (Lipschits, Sergi and Koch 2010; 2011; Koch and Lipschits 2010).¹ The continuity in the manufacturing of royal storage jars,² and the use of royal emblems stamped on their handles (Lipschits, Sergi and Koch 2010: 7–10), indicate that the different stamps are all part of the same administrative system that probably carried the same function for about 140 years until the 586 BCE Babylonian destruction.

The same administrative system continued under different geo-political conditions for an additional 450 years, during the Babylonian period (the *mwwšh* and lion stamped handles; Lipschits 2011: 61–63), the Persian and the early Hellenistic periods (the early and middle types of the *yhwđ* stamped handles; Lipschits and Vanderhooft 2011) and until the late Hellenistic period (the late *yhwđ* stamp impressions; Lipschits and Vanderhooft *ibid.*). Throughout these 600 years, Judah–Yehud–Judea was a land under the rule of great empires—first as a vassal kingdom and then (after 586 BCE) as a province. The *yršlm* stamp impressions, the subject of the current paper, must, therefore, be understood within this long-term system.

Changes did occur in the form and content of the Judahite seals over this long period of time. In its early phase, the *lmlk* stamp impressions routinely combined figurative and graphic elements. By the 7th century figurative elements became more prominent. In the 6th century BCE, the lion became the principal element of the seal. It was in the early Persian period that the figurative element disappeared entirely and the seals began to feature script only (Lipschits and Vanderhooft 2011: 758–759). The next major change came with the *yršlm* stamp impressions, with the letters *y*, *r*, *š*, *l* and *m* in ancient Hebrew script etched between the vertexes of the pentagram.

The *yršlm* stamp impressions were the last link in the long chain of the administrative stamping tradition. Still, they are particular in the sense that after more than three centuries the figurative element reappeared, and the script, which had been Aramaic since the 6th century BCE, once again became Hebrew (Lipschits and Vanderhooft 2011: 758–759).

Past research

In his excavation at Gezer, Macalister (1906: 264) was the first to find a *yršlm* stamped handle. Based on other finds from the Gezer excavations, he dated it to the 3rd century BCE.³ Aharoni's dating of the many *yršlm* stamped handles he unearthed at Ramat Raḥel

¹ The division between “before Sennacherib” and “after-Sennacherib” *lmlk* stamp impressions had already been suggested by Grena (2004: 337), based on 13 *lmlk* jar handles from 7th century “Babylonian Attack” strata in Jerusalem, Arad, Lachish, Timna and Horvat Shilha. See Ussishkin 2011 contra this division, but see Lipschits 2012 in response, and cf. Finkelstein 2012.

² See already Vaughn 1999: 148–150; Shai and Maeir 2003; Gitin 2006; Sergi, Karasik, Gadot and Lipschits 2012, with further literature.

³ Macalister's suggestion was not well received by Albright (1926: 99–101), Duncan (1931: 140) and Vincent (1956: 614), all of whom argued that the stamp impression should be dated to the 5th century BCE. This date was partially based on Albright's misreading of the text on the stamp impressions as *šlmyh*, whom he identified with the priest and one of the treasurers whom Nehemiah (13: 13) had assigned to oversee the valuables of the Temple.

was similar—the end of the 4th or the 3rd century BCE.⁴ Saller (1957: 192–193) followed Aharoni’s proposal, and suggested an early Hellenistic date for the single *yršlm* stamped handle he found at Bethany.⁵

Based on the same material from Ramat Raḥel, Garbini (in Aharoni 1962: 61–69) suggested a later date for the *yršlm* stamped handles—the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE. His theory was founded on paleographic observations (distinction between Aramaic script in the Persian period and ancient Hebrew script in the Hellenistic period),⁶ and on the identification of Hellenistic pottery (mostly lamps) together with the stamp impressions at Bethany and Ramat Raḥel.

Lapp was the first to suggest a more accurate date. Discussing the Ptolemaic stamped handles from Judah he proposed to date the *yršlm* stamp impressions, together with the *tet+yhd* stamp impressions (on which see Lipschits and Vanderhooft 2011: 657–757) to the years 257–221 BCE—the time of Ptolemy III Euergetes and the high priest Onias II (Lapp 1963: 35).⁷

An even lower date for the *yršlm* stamp impressions was suggested by Avigad (1974: 57–58; 1976: 27), based on comparison between the pottery from his excavations in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City of Jerusalem and pottery discovered by Lapp at Beth-Zur (see Lapp 1968: 72). This pottery was dated to the 2nd century BCE, but Avigad (1974: 58) noted that “this does not necessarily indicate the *terminus post quem* of the Jerusalem stamps, which may go back to the 3rd century BCE. The same applies to the *tet+yhd* stamps, which always appear together with the *yršlm* impressions”.⁸ The new study of the pottery and stamped handles from the Jewish Quarter excavations (Reich 2003: 258; Geva 2007: 92–103, and cf. Tal 2006: 315) lent further support to the dating of the *yršlm* stamp impressions in the second half of the 2nd century BCE—the beginning of the Hasmonean rule. Geva (2007: 100–101) noted the difficulty of accepting the dating of the *yršlm* stamp impressions to the Seleucid period. Despite the fact that Antiochus III approved Jewish autonomy under the Seleucid regime and allowed freedom of religion under the leadership of the high priest, it is unlikely that the Jews would have used Hebrew script on a seal bearing the city’s name; such a practice would have been perceived as the act of an independent nation. Therefore, according to Geva, too, the stamp impressions

⁴ Aharoni suggested a few different dates within the range of the 4th–3rd centuries BCE (1962: 29; 1956: 149–150; 1955: 172–171). Most of the Ramat Raḥel items were found in a waste pit, which also contained *yhwd* stamped handles that Aharoni dated to the 4th century BCE.

⁵ At Bethany too the single *yršlm* stamped handle was discovered in a pit alongside a *yhwd* stamped handle and mixed pottery assemblage from the Persian and Hellenistic periods.

⁶ On the return from Aramaic to ancient Hebrew script in the Hellenistic period, see summary in Lipschits and Vanderhooft 2011: 593.

⁷ This theory was based on the idea that the *yršlm* pentagram symbol was the same as that of the high priest at Qumran, mentioned in the Qumran writings and the pseudo-epigraphic literature.

⁸ Lapp (1978: 112) agreed with Avigad and revised his dating of the *yršlm* stamp impressions to the second half of the 2nd century BCE, adding an argument from his excavations at Tell el-Ful, which was at its peak during this period. Similarly, Ariel and Shoham (2000: 161) noted that in the City of David excavations the majority of the *yršlm* stamp impressions were found in the context of Layer 7 (which date to the Hellenistic period) or in later layers.

should be dated to the early Hasmonean period, and should be regarded as an extension of the late *yhwd* types (according to Vanderhooft and Lipschits 2007a). In other words, the *yršlm* stamp impressions continued the administrative system that had operated prior to Hasmonean rule.

The study of the function of the *yršlm* stamped jars followed the chronological debate. Albright (1926: 101) had argued that the jars were used for transporting offerings to the Temple. Sukenik (1933–1934: 5–7) was the first to read the impressions correctly (i.e., *yršlm*). Accordingly, scholars suggested that the stamped jars had been used as containers for agricultural products (wine and oil) collected as part of the tax system in Judea. Aharoni (1956: 149–150) proposed that the stamped jars had been used for gathering taxes on behalf of the Greek polis regime, while Lapp (1963: 35–33) argued that the *yršlm* jars had been used by the high priest to gather taxes on behalf of the Temple, unlike the *yhwd* stamped jars that had been used for collecting taxes for the ruling empire. Cross (1969: 20–21), followed by Stern (1982: 207) and Avigad (1974: 58) theorized that the stamp impression system in Judea indicated areas of grape cultivation. Christoph (1993: 193–196) claimed that the role of the *yršlm* impressions was commercial rather than administrative (cf. Tal 2006: 315). Ariel and Shoham (2000: 161) argued that because the name of the capital city appears on the stamp impressions, rather than the name of the province, the jars must have been stamped in or for use within Jerusalem. Geva (2007: 101) noted the limited area in which the stamp impressions were found and suggested that they were used in the vicinity of Jerusalem in the context of the Hasmonean rebellion.

The study of the typology of the *yršlm* stamp impressions was less developed than the discussions on the paleography, chronology and function of this system. Aharoni (1964: 170–171, Fig. 18) was the first to propose a typology of the impressions based on the characteristics of the letters. Likewise, Lapp (1963: 28) argued that there were only two types of *yršlm* impressions, created by two seals. Richardson (1968: 14) claimed that Lapp missed a dot in the centre of the pentagram as well as differences in the appearance of the shin.

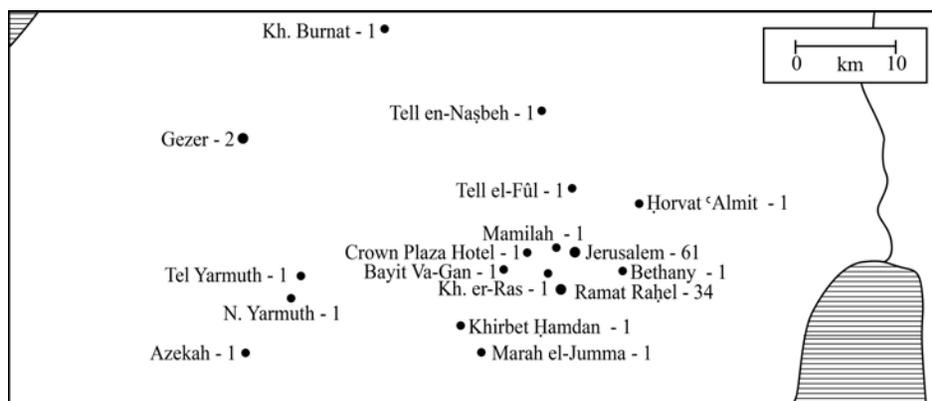


FIGURE 1 Distribution of the *yršlm* stamped handles.

In fact, since Lapp's presentation of his typology and Richardson's critique of it, no serious effort has been made to gather the whole body of *yršlm* stamp impressions, classify them by type, analyze their distribution within stratigraphic context or discuss their symbolic significance. This gap in the research was filled by the MA thesis of Bocher (2012), which forms the basis of this article.

The corpus

To date, 111 handles bearing *yršlm* stamp impressions have been found; most of them are published or mentioned in excavation reports. One hundred and two handles were found in Jerusalem and its environs (92% of the total finds): 61 within the area of the 2nd century BCE city of Jerusalem;⁹ 34 at Ramat Raḥel,¹⁰ and one each at Mamilah (Amit 2009a: 65–80, Fig. 6, 2009b: 103, Pl. 11: 6), the Crown Plaza Hotel and the Bayit Va-Gan neighborhood (D.T. Ariel, personal communication), Khirbet er-Ras (Y. Gadot, personal communication), Bethany (Saller, 1952–1953: 6; 1957: 12–13, Fig. 36, Table 111), Khirbet Ḥamdan and Marah el-Jumma (Lipschits and Amit 2011: 179–197).

In the region of Benjamin only three *yršlm* stamped handles were discovered: one each at Tell el-Ful (Lapp 1978: 113–122, Table 1:31, Photo 186), Tell en-Nasbeh (McCown, 1947: 164), and Ḥorvat 'Almit (Dinur 1986: 18–19). In the lowlands, only five *yršlm* stamped handles were found (about 4.5% of the total): two at Gezer (Macalister 1912: 209, Table 359), and one each at Tel Yarmuth (Richardson 1968: 12–13, Figs. 1–2), Nahal Yarmuth (Farhi 2001: 176, Photo 262), and Tel Azekah (Tell Zakkariyah; Bliss and Macalister 1902: 122–123, Table 54–56). Only one *yršlm* stamp impression was discovered outside of Judah—at Khirbet Burnat in the western Samaria Hills (Torga and Gendelman 2008: 5, Fig. 5: 15).¹¹

Date

Based on finds from the excavations in the Jewish Quarter in Jerusalem and in the City of David (see above), scholars now concur that the *yršlm* stamp impressions date to the second half of the 2nd century BCE. The idea of linking the production of the *yršlm* jars to the Hasmonean revolt has led to a date at the beginning of the Hasmonean administration (Geva 2007: 101). The actual number of handles that can

⁹ For the stamped handles discovered within the area of the 2nd century BCE city of Jerusalem, see Macalister and Duncan 1926: 188, Fig. 5, Table 203, 7; Crowfoot and Fitzgerald 1929: 68; Duncan 1931: 140–141, Table 140; Amiran and Eitan 1970: 64–68; 1973: 213–218, Pl. 42, No. 5; Avigad 1974: 56; 1983: 78, Pl. 54–55; Ariel and Shoham 2000: 161–163, Pl. 123–144; Reich 2003: 256–257, Pl. 7.1–7.2. Two more *yršlm* stamped handles were found in excavations of the 'first wall' of Jerusalem, but they have not yet been published (J. Finkelstijn, personal communication).

¹⁰ Aharoni 1956: 149–150, Fig. 18, Pl. 3: 25; 1963: 29, Pl. 31:1; 1964: 20; Lipschits *et al.* 2009: 58–77.

¹¹ It should be noted that in Monte Poluzzo in western Sicily a round stamp impression on a jar handle with a pentagram was found, which is remarkably similar to the *yršlm* stamp impressions (Morris, Jackman and Black 2001: 254–262).

be used to garner a date based on archaeological considerations is meagre: six *yršlm* stamped handles were found in surveys or were described as surface finds, 32 were excavated in mixed loci and fills, 39 handles were published without archaeological details, and from the stamped handles that were excavated in a clear provenance, many come from excavation areas in the City of David and in the Jewish Quarter that have not yet been published.¹²

A new and important archaeological argument for the date of the *yršlm* stamped handles to the early Hasmonean period comes from the pottery analysis of the renewed excavations at Ramat Rahel. It seems that no pottery from the early Hellenistic period was found at the site, indicating that it experienced a settlement hiatus during this period, and thus probably explaining the nearly total absence of Type 16 (ligature-*yh*) of the *yhwd* stamp impressions (according to Lipschits and Vanderhooft 2011). In the late Hellenistic period (Layers 4a and 4b), the site regained its former function (Lipschits *et al.* 2011: 37–40), and since 31 *yršlm* stamped handles were excavated there, together with pottery from the late Hellenistic period, it seems safe to connect it with the administration of the Hasmonian kingdom, probably in the second half of the second century BCE (and see further below).

Typology

Based on all the relevant published material, and especially on 55 stamped handles located in the Israel Antiquities Authority storehouses, the Israel Museum, the Rockefeller Museum, the Hebrew University and Tel Aviv University, a new and detailed typology of the *yršlm* stamp impressions is suggested below. This typology is based on the exact measuring of the size of the impressions, the size of the different elements in the impressions and the distances between them,¹³ as well as on the letters in the inscriptions, the stylistic differences of the pentagram and elements added to the pentagram, such as the dot in the centre.

Based on this study, the *yršlm* stamp impressions can be divided into six types and two sub-types.¹⁴

¹² In the City of David, seven handles bearing *yršlm* stamp impressions were found in Strata 5–6, dated to the Early Roman period, and 12 handles were found in Stratum 7, dated to the Hasmonean period (second half of the 2nd century BCE and the 1st century BCE). All the handles, excluding one (from L137), were found in excavation areas that have not yet been published. In the Jewish Quarter seven *yršlm* stamped handles were found in excavation areas not yet published. Area C yielded three stamped handles; according to Reich (2003: 258) these were found in the Hellenistic layer.

¹³ The possibility of precisely measuring the impressions and the different elements within them depends on the quality of the impression: stability of the stamp during imprinting and status of clay during stamping when the handle was attached to the jar. In many cases fingerprints are visible near or even on the stamp impressions, and there are indications of wiping done with a wet cloth, either on the handle around the impression, or on the impression itself.

¹⁴ It is likely that among the stamp impressions that have not been examined there are additional types and sub-types.

Type A

The impression is ca. 1.7–1.8 cm in diameter, slightly elliptical, with no dot in the centre of the pentagram. The pentagram's vertexes are not symmetrical, are relatively thick and are sometimes cut off by the external frame of the seal. The letters are written in negative and are aligned clockwise. This type has the most known impressions, with 16 stamped handles originating from various excavations in Jerusalem and at Ramat Raḥel.

Type B

The impression is ca. 1.8 cm in diameter. It is slightly elliptical, with a dot in the centre of the pentagram. The edges of the pentagram are thick, relatively coarse and slightly convex. Some of the pentagram's edges cross the circular frame of the seal. The letters are written in negative and are aligned clockwise. Nine stamp impressions can be attributed to this type; they originated in Jerusalem, Ramat Raḥel, Nahal Yarmuth and Marah el-Jumma.

Type C

The impression is ca. 1.7–1.8 cm in diameter. It is circular, with a dot in the centre of the pentagram. The vertexes are symmetrical and delicate, and they generally do not cross the external frame of the stamp impression. The letters are written in negative and are aligned clockwise. Eleven stamp impressions can be attributed to this type; they were found in Jerusalem, Ramat Raḥel and Kirbet Ḥamdan.

Type C1

Stamp impressions 1/5954 from the Jewish Quarter and L142 from the City of David are smaller, both in diameter and in the distance between the edges of the pentagram. This type is similar to Type C, but the impression is sunken and is not protruding as most stamp impressions are. Type D1 too (below) is a sunken impression, and it is possible that the seals in both these types were carved with protruding symbol and letters, and that in both cases the letters are not in negative.

Type D

This type is a bit smaller (ca. 1.6 cm in diameter) and is characterized by a dot in the centre of the pentagram. The edges of the pentagram are symmetrical and all vertexes touch the external frame of the seal. All letters were written in negative, except for the letter *yod*, which was most likely engraved negatively in the seal, and because of this, is written in the correct direction on the impression. The letters are aligned clockwise. Five stamp impressions belong to this type; all were found in Jerusalem and Ramat Raḥel.

Type D1

The impression is quite similar to Type D, but like type C1 it is sunken. The sole item attributed to this type was found in the Ophel excavations.

Type E

Only one example of this type was found (in the City of David). This is the largest of the *yršlm* stamp impressions (2.4–2.6 cm in diameter); its shape is slightly elliptical, and the pentagram does not have a dot in the centre. The edges of the pentagram are large and thick; some of the edges touch the circular frame of the seal. Despite the large area, the letters are small; they are written in negative, and are aligned clockwise.

Type F

A round type, prepared in a relatively crude manner. As a result, most of the stamp impressions of this type are illegible. It is ca. 1.8–1.9 cm in diameter. It does not have a dot in the centre of the pentagram. The edges of the pentagram are coarse and thick, and most cross the circular frame of the seal. The letters are written in negative and are aligned clockwise. The letter *lamed* in this type is unique; it appears upside down and its sharp angle faces the centre of the pentagram. Six of the known stamp impressions can be attributed to this type, all of which were found in excavations in Jerusalem and at Ramat Raḥel.

Discussion

Site distribution and possible function

As already mentioned above, 102 of the 111 *yršlm* stamped handles (92% of the total corpus) were discovered in and around Jerusalem, testifying to some affinity with the capital city. Most handles are concentrated in two central gathering sites (Jerusalem and Ramat Raḥel), a situation unparalleled in any of the various early and middle *yhwd* types (cf. Lipschits and Vanderhooft 2011: 11–22), in which large numbers of jars were found in a greater diversity of sites, which seem to have functioned as either secondary administrative or production centres. Only with the late types of the *yhwd* stamp impressions can a similar situation be observed: Out of 142 stamped handles of Types 16 and 17, 86 handles were discovered in Jerusalem and 31 at Ramat Raḥel (about 82% of the total corpus), while at all the other sites only one handle was discovered, except for Gezer, which yielded two stamped handles of Type 16 and three of Type 17, and Bethany, which yielded two stamped handles of Type 17.

The distribution of the *yršlm* stamped handles in Jerusalem proper—the City of David with 45 stamped handles and the Western Hill with 10 handles—alludes to the growing importance of the latter sector during the 2nd century BCE (Geva 2003: 526–535; Reich 2003: 259). Lipschits and Vanderhooft (2007b) describe a similar phenomenon concerning the later *yhwd* stamp impressions (see below).

During the second half of the 2nd century BCE, Ramat Raḥel evolved from an administrative centre to a Jewish village, perhaps with an adjacent Hasmonean fortress (Lipschits *et al.* 2011: 37–40). The sheer volume of *yršlm* stamped handles found at this site indicates that it still had an administrative function. It is noteworthy, however, that in the nearby Rephaim Valley, which constituted Jerusalem's agricultural hinterland throughout



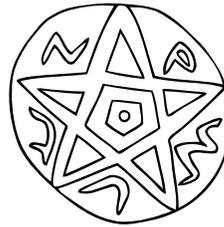
Type A



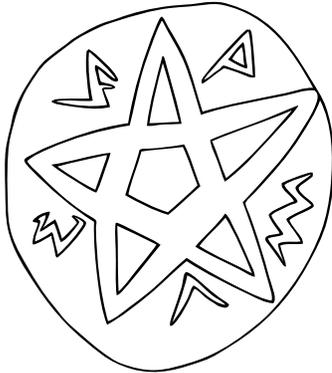
Type B



Types C-C1



Types D-D1



Type E



Type F



FIGURE 2 Schematic drawings of *yršlm* stamp impression types (drawing by Rodica Penchas).

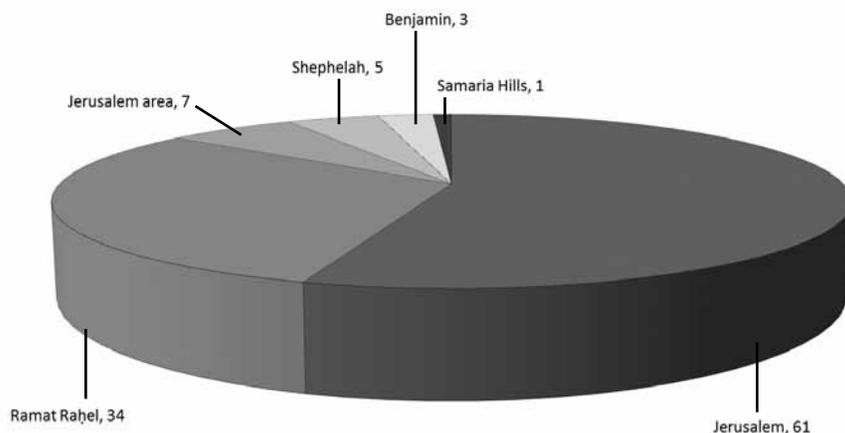


FIGURE 3 Site distribution of the *yršlm* stamped handles.

history,¹⁵ only one *yršlm* stamped handle has been found. It seems that even at sites in the Rephaim Valley dated to the Hellenistic period there is no evidence for finds from the Hasmonean era.¹⁶ This suggests that at this time the agricultural hinterland of Jerusalem developed north of the city. The obvious explanation should be related to the dissolution of the administrative centre of Ramat Raḥel (Gadot 2011: 58).

It may be suggested that during this period, the residents of Judea enjoyed a period of tax exoneration (I Maccabees 10: 29–31; Applebaum 1986: 76); for the first time in hundreds of years Judea was not a vassal of any empire or foreign regime. This fact may also have resulted in a distinct function for the *yršlm* stamped jars, distinguishing them from other stamped jar types that had denoted the levies and taxes paid to the various empires that had ruled Judah-Yehud-Judea—from Assyria up until the Seleucid regime (Lipschits, Sergi and Koch 2010: 7).

Although Judea did not have to raise taxes to be paid to a foreign empire during the period of the *yršlm* handles, the use of stamped jars continued, even if for a short period. According to I Maccabees 14, at the national assembly that met in Jerusalem, the task of restoring and refurbishing the Temple, as well as of governing the regions outside Jerusalem, was given to Simon Maccabaeus (Applebaum 1986: 76). The assembly also addressed the need to increase agricultural production, summoning representatives of the field labourers as delegates. It can, therefore, be suggested that the *yršlm* stamped jars were sent to Jerusalem and other sites connected to the city's development as donations to the Temple and to those assigned the task of restoration. According to the distribution of the stamped handles, it is also likely that the jars were manufactured near Jerusalem.

¹⁵ On this subject, see Greenberg and Cinamon 2006: 233–235; Lipschits and Gadot 2008: 88–96; Gadot 2011: 43–44, with further literature.

¹⁶ See Kloner 2000, Sites 4, 39, 69, 73, 99, 115 and 124.

The yršlm and the late yhw d stamp impressions

Late *yhw d* (Lipschits and Vanderhooft's Types 16 [*yh*-ligature]¹⁷ and 17 [*tet+yhd*]¹⁸) and *yršlm* stamp impressions have been found together in both excavations and surveys. Lapp (1963: 30), Avigad (1974: 57–58) and Geva (2007: 100–101) have all noted their identical archaeological context (usually together with 2nd century BCE Hellenistic pottery),¹⁹ and the similarity of the ceramic material of the handles on which they were impressed. The presence of many of these stamped handles on the Western Hill in Jerusalem, which was resettled in the 2nd century BCE and mainly in the Hasmonean period, lends crucial support for dating the *yršlm* and late *yhw d* stamped jars (Geva 2007: 98–99; Lipschits and Vanderhooft 2007c).

Sixty-five stamped handles from the 2nd century BCE (about 26% of the total finds of all types from the late Yehud and *yršlm* stamp impressions) were excavated at Ramat Raḥel (three *yh*-ligature, 28 *tet+yhd* and 34 *yršlm*). The small number of the stamped *yh*-ligature handles (Type 16), which is an exceptional case compared with all the different *yhw d* types, may indicate its earlier date—the first half of the 2nd century BCE, when there was a temporary settlement gap at Ramat Raḥel. The unique characteristics of this type—quadrangular like the Rhodian amphora stamps—may also serve as an indication of its period.

The *yhw d* Type 17, on the other hand, is far more similar—in terms of both material and style—to the *yršlm* stamp impressions. Both are round and exhibit writing in a circular manner, and both were found in the same archaeological contexts. These types form the first case in which more stamped handles were discovered in Jerusalem than at Ramat Raḥel, indicating the growing importance of the city as the destination of the agricultural products delivered in the jars (Lipschits and Vanderhooft 2007c; 2011: 762). In total, out of the 253 stamped handles bearing the various stamp impressions from the 2nd century BCE, 147 (about 58%) were collected in Jerusalem (109 in the City of David and 38 on the Western Hill).²⁰

The growing number of stamped handles found in Jerusalem (41 *yh*-ligature, 45 *tet+yhd* and 61 *yršlm*, not including some additional stamped handles excavated recently) demonstrate the gradual process of their rise in importance in the city's administration, reaching an apex with the *yršlm* stamp impressions. From these finds it is clear that during the 2nd century BCE, a settlement on the Western Hill had already developed. If, indeed, Type 16 of the *yhw d* stamp impressions dates earlier in the 2nd century BCE, then the handles excavated on the Western Hill indicate the early development of this area.

¹⁷ Fifty-five Type 16 stamped handles were discovered. Forty-one (75%) were unearthed in Jerusalem—23 in the City of David and 18 on the Western Hill. Only three stamped handles of this type were discovered at Ramat Raḥel and 11 at five other sites (Lipschits and Vanderhooft 2011: 11–22, 595–601).

¹⁸ Sixty-seven Type 17 stamped handles were discovered. Forty-five of them (56%) come from Jerusalem—36 in the City of David and nine on the Western Hill. Ramat Raḥel yielded 28 stamped handles and 12 more were discovered at seven other sites (Lipschits and Vanderhooft 2011: 11–22, 657–662).

¹⁹ For a comprehensive review of the finds and a discussion of the date of this material, see Geva 2007: 92–103; Lipschits and Vanderhooft 2011: 593–757, and cf. Avigad 1974: 57–58.

²⁰ City of David: 23 *yh*-ligature, 36 *tet+yhd* and 50 *yršlm* handles. The Western Hill: 18 *yh*-ligature, nine *tet+yhd* and 11 *yršlm* handles.

The significance and meaning of the pentagram

The pentagram or five pointed star is known by a variety of names—pentalpa, pentacle and Solomon's seal. In most ancient cultures, the schematic star has six vertexes (hexagram, the 'Star of David') or more, but it seems that the five pointed star appeared earlier (Costa 1990: 131).²¹ From its early history, the pentagram was a religious symbol that represented apotropaic or magical power; it generally appeared in the context of a hallowed place (Petrie 1914: 51; De Vogel 1966: 293). Starting in the Hellenistic period the pentagram began appearing frequently on such artefacts as coins (De Vogel 1966: 28–48), jars (Bon 1957: 492, Drawings 791, 838, 2145; Garland 1986: 244–247; Grace 1986: 555, 563), stelae (Bisi 1967: 98–101, Table 1: 25; Bell 2000: 251, n. 30) and seals (*ibid.*: 248, 253, Fig. 6).²²

Mainly due to the influence of Greek culture, and especially to Pythagoreanism,²³ the pentagram became a magical symbol used to ward off evil. The Pythagoreans were also the first to place letters between the star's vertexes, inscribing the Greek letters epsilon, gamma, epsilon, yuta and alpha, meaning health and hygiene, and also the name of the goddess Hygieia, whose depiction was used as a secret sign among members of the brotherhood (De Vogel 1966: 28–40; Fox-Devies 1976: 228–230; Costa 1990: 134–135). The Pythagoreans' use of the pentagram, even if as a secret sign, probably made it a popular symbol in the Greek world, and influenced its use in other areas and cultures.

The use of this symbol, as well as the written letters between the vertexes in the *yršlm* seals, can be understood as part of this influence.²⁴ Tal (2010: 42) argued that the adoption of the Greek spoken language was insufficient for the Hasmonean elite's need to establish a dialogue with the West; hence "they had to speak via Hellenistic symbols, meaning, symbols that Westerners would see as a testament to the past and be used as 'certification' for acceptance and acknowledgment" (*ibid.*: 42). The *yršlm* stamp impressions, thus, express an amalgamation of East and West, fitting perfectly into the material culture that developed in the Hasmonean period.

It is not clear if the pentagram was chosen as a result of its associations with the magical arts and its intimations of warding off evil spirits, or if it was selected randomly for its aesthetic traits, with no attention to its attributes (De Vogel 1966:

²¹ It appeared as early as the Sumerian period in Mesopotamia (Labat 1976: 138; Matthew 1992: 11, and Plate 1: 6; 13: 1) and in Egypt (Matouk 1971: 304; Faulkner 1988: 310).

²² Bon (1957) showed that the majority stamp impressions that feature a pentagram also exhibit the names of formal clerks. This may indicate that the pentagram served an administrative function rather than a commercial one. Tal (2006: 315) stated that the round shape of Hebrew and Phoenician stamp impressions differentiates them from Greek stamp impressions, which are mostly rectangular.

²³ On this sect, founded in the 6th century BCE by Pythagoras, who formed a philosophy that based the essence of existence on numbers, see De Vogel 1966: 28–40; Fox-Davis 1976: 228–230; Costa 1990: 134–135.

²⁴ Garbini (1962: 68), following Goodenough, claimed that the pentagram use on the stamp impressions was a mystical symbol that later appeared in Jewish art, and is directly connected to Pythagoreanism, but see Regev's critique (2008: 36) on this approach.

34).²⁵ Given the distribution of the impressions, which points to Jerusalem as the centre of the system, as well as the Hasmoneans' dedication to the rejuvenation of the capital and the Temple, we believe that choosing to combine the symbol of a protective shield with the city's name, etched in ancient Hebrew script, was deliberate.

With two notable exceptions—Tomb No. 1 in the Maresha East Cemetery, dated to the Hellenistic period,²⁶ and the 1st century CE wall painting of a pentagram, the points of which each contained another pentagram (discovered in Wadi Suweinit north of Jerusalem; Patrich and Rubin 1983)—this symbol rarely appears in Israel. It is noteworthy that the symbol does not appear on Hasmonean coins, even though it seems that the Hasmoneans adopted the lettering style that appears within the *yršlm* pentagram's points (e.g., coins from the reign of Alexander Jannaeus; Meshorer 1997: 32, 41–42).²⁷ One can compare the appearance of the pentagram on the *yršlm* seals to the Macedonian shield depicted on coins from Alexander Jannaeus' reign (Types 13 and 14). This shield displays a star with a dot at its centre, and its source is probably the symbol of the royal house of Macedonia. It is one of the most important motifs of the Hellenistic period, representing the ruling power (Stiebel 2011: 180).²⁸

Synthesis and summary

Viewing the *yršlm* stamp impressions as a complete corpus enables a better understanding of this administrative system, its date and function. The system was the last in a series in which administrative stamps were impressed on the handles or bodies of jars that were probably used for tax collection. The *yršlm* impressions comprise not only the last link in a long chain, but also the smallest one, both in terms of the number of handles stamped and in the number of types. Moreover, their geographical distribution is the most limited.

²⁵ In our opinion, art (including symbols), simple as it may be, should have attributes assigned to it, and in ancient cultures the more so (Eban, Cohen and Dennet 1990). Any art should serve ideas or the social functions beyond its aesthetic values (Gall 1998; Tilley 1999). Bourdieu (1979: 77–87) argued that symbols chosen by people serve a kind of communication, but they should be more than that. According to him, symbols are tools used to impart knowledge and construct reality, receive legitimacy and ideological domination. We agree with Regev (2008: 33) that it is reasonable to presume that some semantic baggage passes with the symbol when it is adopted in another culture.

²⁶ For the drawing see Jacobson 2007: 15–19, 60. On the different opinions concerning significant cultural influences indicated in the tomb wall drawings, see Tal 2006: 240. The origin of the pentagram here may be Sidonian, since another important inscription discovered in this tomb is that of Apolophanes son of Sesmius, leader of the city's Sidonean population.

²⁷ It is especially interesting that while the pentagram motif disappears, the writing tradition between the ribs or around the symbol was maintained.

²⁸ According to Stiebel this symbol has come to represent the might of the rulers of the Hellenistic world. Representations of it existed even in the Roman period, the rulers of which viewed Alexander Macedon as the world's greatest military leader. The presence of a dot in the pentagrams of some of the *yršlm* stamp impressions may indicate that these seals represent the Hasmonean rulers. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the pentagram was ever used in this fashion. Moreover, given the fact that not every type displays the dot and that the pentagram is a geometric symbol (as opposed to the schematic star), the two symbols cannot be given the same significance.

The dating of the impressions to the dawn of the Hasmonean dynasty, thus far based on excavations in Jerusalem, has been validated by the recent excavations at Ramat Raḥel, where a third of the *yršlm* stamped jars were found. The pottery evidence there indicates a settlement gap in the early Hellenistic period and renewed activity during the Hasmonean period.

The distribution of the *yršlm* stamped handles in Jerusalem—specifically their prevalence there—proves the rejuvenation of the city as an administrative centre. The distribution of the late *yhwd* types, which probably date to the first half of the 2nd century BCE, testifies to the development of the settlement on the Western Hill even before the *yršlm* system was initiated.

The *yršlm* stamp impressions were used to mark jars that served a specific function within the Hasmonean administrative system. This was the first time since the stamp system was implemented at the end of the 8th century BCE that Judea was not a vassal kingdom or a province but an independent entity. During the period in which the *yršlm* system was operative in Judea there was no need to raise taxes for ruling empires. This fact affected the distribution of the jars, and Jerusalem took a leading role with twice as many handles as Ramat Raḥel. It is likely that the principal function of the *yršlm* stamped jars was to aid in the reestablishment of the city and the enhancement of the status of the Temple.

Given the connection between the *yršlm* and the later *yhwd* stamp systems, it is clear that both systems were in use at the dawn of the Hasmonean period. Archaeologically, it is difficult to discern if there was a brief period during which the two systems were used together, or if the *yhwd* system was abandoned when the *yršlm* system was put in place. Historically, we believe that in the beginning of the Hasmonean period, when the rebellion reached its culmination and the independent state had not yet been established, the late *yhwd* types continued to be used, and that at the conclusion of the rebellion, when a new administration was established, the *yršlm* stamp system was introduced.

The nearly complete absence of *yhwd* Type 16 (*yh*-ligature) at Ramat Raḥel indicates that it is older than *yhwd* Type 17 and the *yršlm* systems, i.e., Type 16 was used at the time when the settlement of Ramat Raḥel was not yet developed, but the settlement on the Western Hill of Jerusalem was already thriving. It seems that *yhwd* Type 17 was introduced once the Hasmoneans seized power, and shortly thereafter the *yršlm* system was implemented. It should be noted, however, that this dating does not exclude the possibility that there were phases during which the different types of stamp impressions were used simultaneously.

The pentagram is a distinct Hellenistic symbol that only became significant in Judea with the introduction of the *yršlm* stamp impressions. There is no historical evidence that connects the use of the pentagram in Judea to the Pythagorean sect. Rather, the Hasmonean elite adopted certain aspects of Hellenistic culture, and it can be supposed that the symbol of the pentagram on the *yršlm* impressions was chosen for its associations with protection, which in this case was meant to be applied to Jerusalem and the Temple.

Accurate dating within the Hasmonean period cannot be established through archaeology. From a historical perspective, however, it is possible to date the *yršlm* stamp impressions from the days of Simon Maccabaeus to the days of Alexander Jannaeus. After

the death of his brother Jonathan, Simon rose to power, establishing the kingdom and managing its financial development (Rappaport 1995: 63). Simon saved Jerusalem from Typhon, conquered the Hakra, cleansed the city and built fortifications (1 Maccabees 13). It therefore seems probable that under his authority, a new system of stamp impressions could have been implemented. These events also correspond to the choice of an apotropaic symbol, such as the pentagram, to represent the protection of the reestablished Temple and capital city. In this context, the pentagram can be understood as symbolizing the Hasmonean dynasty, with Simon at its head, as protector of the city.

After the conquest of the Hakra, the national assembly gathered in Jerusalem and assigned Simon the task of restoring the Temple and administering the regions outside Jerusalem (1 Maccabees 14; Applebaum 1986: 76). Also addressed was the need to increase agricultural production. This provides additional historical background that supports the dating of the beginning of use of the *yršlm* stamp impressions to the days of Simeon.

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