Three Epigraphic Finds from Tall Jalul, Jordan

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The 2009 excavation season at Tall Jalul, Jordan, unearthed three inscribed objects: (1) half of an unusual stamp seal with Hebrew script and part of a scene that may consist of a worshipper in front of a stand, (2) an Ammonite ceramic bulla, and (3) a fragment of an Ammonite ostraca. All three were found in Field D, but not in clear stratigraphic contexts. However, palaeographic analysis suggests the rough dating of these inscriptions: seal—eighth-seventh centuries B.C.; bulla and ostraca—seventh-sixth centuries B.C.

HALF OF STAMP SEAL

A broken stamp seal (fig. 1) was found at Tall Jalul, Jordan, in Square 1 of Field D on May 27, 2009. It came from the top 50 cm of the locus designated “North Balk Removal” (Pail 311, containing pottery mostly from the late Iron II/Persian period), and so lacks a precise stratigraphic context. It is carved from white quartz that has a few black streaks. The reverse side is convex and simple (not shaped like a beetle or containing any other details). The seal is broken along the line of the string hole. The fragment measures 1.8 cm high by 1.9 cm wide.

The inscription is shallowly etched into the flat obverse side. Due to the light color of the stone, it is barely visible to the naked eye. Orientation of the letters indicates that we have the bottom part of the seal. At first there appeared to be two lines of writing, but closer examination finds that the partly preserved upper register contained iconography rather than letters. The preserved text reads as follows:

Transliteration:

Line 1: lmnh

Translation:

Line 1: belonging to Maneh/Menah

The common formula made up of the possessive preposition / plus what appears to be a personal name indicates that the lower portion of the seal contains the name of its owner. The name lmnh does not appear among extant Ammonite personal names (Jackson 1983a; 1983b). However, a similar name comes from Amarna: ma-ni-e, Egyptian for “shepherd” (Hess 1984: 110). Another possible derivation, perhaps closer, is Ugaritic mny, “pay, allot, mark out” (Grøndahl 1967: 159). The Arabic cognate mny is found in Nabataean with the meaning “to reward” (Negev 1991: 39) and in South Semitic as “assign/apportion” or “mature” (Ryckmans 1934–135: 1: 128).

1 Randall W. Younker of Andrews University is director of the Tall Jalul excavations, which operate under the auspices of the Madaba Plains Project. Field D is supervised by Jennifer Groves. We are grateful to Professor Younker for assigning publication of these finds to us, and to Larry Herr and Christopher Rollston for contributing valuable suggestions. We would also like to thank Erika Fortin for the photographs of the objects.

2 Nor is it yet attested as a name in Phoenician (Benz 1972), Amorite (Huffmon 1965), Palmyrene (Stark 1971), or Hebrew (Koehler and Baumgartner 2001; Noth 1928). In Hebrew, the root mnh has several possible meanings, such as “time”; “share, portion” or “fate”; a measuring unit, “mina”; and, as a verb, “to divide, count, apportion, appoint” (Hoefijzer and Jongeling 1995: 657–58; Koehler and Baumgartner 2001: 599).
Many Northwest Semitic seals contain the formula belonging to X son of Y or simply X son of Y (Gogel 1998). Our seal inscription simply reads belonging to X, not followed by son of. With the top register in such a fragmentary state, there are few clues about what could have preceded belonging to X, but the evidence points to an iconographic portion. According to Hestrin and Dayagi-Mendels, iconography on seals helped to identify the owner, and therefore iconographic seals often omitted the father's name (Hestrin and Dayagi-Mendels 1979: 56). This strengthens the possibility that there was an iconographic register on the upper face of this seal.

The authors propose that the script of the inscription is Hebrew. There are virtually no close parallels between the Ammonite or Moabite script of known seals and this one, but similarities with Hebrew seal inscriptions are striking (cf. Herr 1978).

In the seal impression (see fig. 1b–d), the lamed inclines to the right (upward; downward toward the left). The baseline is flat and the lower part of the letter is shaped like an angular hook. Herr describes this as a perfect Hebrew form (Herr 1978: 91), and there are several parallels for this kind of lamed in Hebrew seals (Avigad 1997: 186, fig. 447; Herr 1978: fig. 70), but it is not seen in Ammonite or Moabite (cf. Avigad 1997; Herr 1978). By contrast, the main stroke of an Ammonite lamed would be vertical at a 90° angle (Herr 1978: fig. 43), and the bottom part of the letter could be rounded like a hook or horizontally straight out, as in our letter “L.”

The mem inclines to the right, but not to the same degree as the lamed. The small upper strokes of the mem are parallel to each other and close together. The long downstroke, slanted down to the left, curves at the bottom more radically to the left, in typical Hebrew fashion. By contrast, the Ammonite mem is not slanted; the downstroke goes straight down. Also, the upper strokes are typically not parallel (Herr 1978: figs. 44, 71). In Moabite, the head strokes can be parallel but appear commonly at a 90° angle, not slanted as in our seal (cf. Avigad 1997: fig. 1006). The head of the mem also tends to be larger in Moabite (Avigad 1997: 372; Herr 1978: 154).

The nun shows the same characteristics as the mem, with almost the same degree of inclination, parallel upper strokes, and the bottom of the downstroke curved radically leftward. Again, this is typical of Hebrew, whereas Ammonite examples of nun are not slanted and the downstroke goes straight down without curving (Herr 1978: figs. 44, 71). Even though the Moabite nun has a curved downstroke, its head is usually larger and its strokes are at a 90° angle like the head of the mem (cf. Avigad 1997; Herr 1978).

The main stem-stroke of the he inclines (upward) to the left at a 45° angle, with the three short strokes of the upper part parallel to one another and close together, going down from the main stroke at a 45° angle. As in some examples of Hebrew seals (cf. Herr 1978: fig. 66), the upper strokes of our example do not cross the main stroke to the right. The letter he on Ammonite seals most commonly has only two short strokes, sometimes extending past the main stroke to the right. Like the other Ammonite letters, it is less slanted than the Hebrew (Herr 1978: 71; figs. 42, 66).

The closest Hebrew parallels for our letters are from the seventh century B.C., suggesting a date in that century. After the second half of the seventh century, he has the uppermost short stroke going through the
main stroke, unlike in our example, where all upper strokes end at the main stroke.

Herr points out that whereas the patronym commonly appears in Hebrew seals of the seventh century (Herr 1978: 82), the single name was characteristic of the eighth century, as was the presence of iconography (Herr 1978: 82; Hestrin and Dayagi-Mendels 1979: 56; Sass 1993: 198). If the Hebrew identification of our seal is correct, this places it between the eighth and seventh centuries B.C. Interestingly, the Bible records that King Jotham of Judah (eighth century B.C.) conquered the Ammonites and exacted tribute from them (2 Chr 27:5). Such an event could explain the presence of a Hebrew seal in Ammonite territory about that time, but it could have arrived there through other circumstances.5

In terms of likely iconography above the single line of text, the partial depiction may be reconstructed as a cult scene with a man standing in profile in front of a stand. Preserved are what appear to be the bottom parts of two legs and feet facing right (in the impression), and what could possibly be a stand, or an ankh sign. A thin line connects the legs in what may be interpreted as the hem of a long garment (see fig. 1c).

The kind of scene just described is a common motif in Northwest Semitic seals, but according to Sass, there are no known Hebrew seals of a worshipper before a stand, plant, altar, or divine symbol (Sass 1993: 231). Seals with a person walking or standing in profile while holding a staff in one or both hands do occur (Sass 1993: 229), although human or anthropomorphic figures are present in less than 5% of extant Hebrew seals.5 This may be our first example of a Hebrew seal with a worshipper in front of a stand, reflecting a cultic practice that would be foreign to normative biblical religion.

BULLA

A tiny but complete bulla (fig. 2) was discovered in Field D, Square 10, on June 10, 2009, during removal of the north balk (Pail 1, mostly late Iron II/Persian).

Made of very dark gray clay, it measures approximately 1.6 cm high by 1.9 cm wide. The impression left by a papyrus scroll and the string that once tied it to the scroll can be seen on its back surface. The bulla has no discernible iconography but contains two lines of Ammonite writing separated from each other by a double line.

The text is as follows:

Transliteration:

Line 1: l 'ms5
Line 2: bn ynhm

Translation:

Line 1: belonging to ḤAmasa
Line 2: son of Yenahem

This seal impression identifies the owner by his name and that of his father. The Ammonite name Ḥms, vocalized ḤAmasa, is the hypocoristic form of

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4 See, e.g., a Moabitic seal found in Amman (Abu Taleb 1985; cf. discussion in Rollston in press).

5 See, e.g., (1) the seal of Shebanyau, servant of Uzzah, which depicts a person in profile, who has a stick in one hand and seems to be gesturing with the other; (2) the seal of Ḥwzn, which has a person in profile with a long robe and holding a staff; and (3) the bulla of Yeqamyaḥu, which portrays a person in profile with a long robe (Avigad 1997: figs. 3, 189, 527). Unfortunately these three seals are unprovenanced.
the theophoric name 'ms'! (perfect aspect verb 'ms + divine name ?). Vocalized 'Amas' ili, it means "(The god) 'Il has carried" (Aufrecht 1989: 372).

The root 'ms' is attested in personal names in various other ancient Semitic languages, including Phoenician, Punic, Ugaritic, Aramaic, and Aramaic (Benz 1972: 172; Gröndahl 1967: 109; Kornfeld 1978: 67).

In Ammonite, it is attested as the theophoric name 'ms'il in three seals (Jackson 1983a: 515).

The name 'ms²', 'Amašā (spelled with šīn instead of samek), is attested in the Hebrew Bible for men of different time periods (2 Sam 17:25; 19:13 [Heb. Verse 14], etc.—general of Absalom and David; 2 Chr 28:12—time of Ahaz). It is a shortened form of 'msyih, Amasiah (2 Chr 17:16—time of Jehoshaphat; with samek), meaning "YHWH has carried (protectively)") (Noth 1928: 178–79). Another shortened form is 'msws, Amon, Amos (Amos 1:1, etc.).

The Ammonite name ūnḥm (pri'el imperfect verb), vocalized Yenahem, means "He will comfort" (Aufrecht 1989: 369). It is related to mnhm, Menahem, the participial name of the same root, which means "Comforter." The name mnhm is found in Ammonite inscriptions (Aufrecht 1989: 369) and in the Hebrew Bible (2 Kgs 15:14–23—king of northern Israel; cf. Aufrecht 1989: 369; Noth 1928: 222). While the form ūnḥm is found as a verb in Job 29:25, it does not appear as a personal name in the Hebrew Bible or in Hebrew inscriptions uncovered thus far (Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 2005). However, it does appear in two Ammonite seals, in Ugaritic, Aramaic, and Amorite (Jackson 1983a: 513; Gröndahl 1967: 165; Kornfeld 1978: 54; Huffmon 1965: 53, 237).

The script of our bulla can be identified as Ammonite (see fig. 2c). The development of the letter otherwise resembles a dalet or pe, but the context (in bn, "son") indicates that it should be a bet. The bet has only one cross stroke, near the top, as in Ammonite seals after the middle of the sixth century B.C. (Herr 1978: fig. 43).

The palaeographic evidence presented above identifies the script of the bulla as late seventh-century or sixth-century B.C. Ammonite.

FRAGMENT OF OSTRACON

A partially preserved ostracon (fig. 3) was found on May 29, 2009, during washing of pottery from locus "East Balk" of Square 2, belonging to Field D (Pail 185, mostly late Iron II). Since it was not found in situ, dating is dependent on palaeographical analysis. The small fragment measures approximately 1.6 cm in height by 1.8 cm in width and has a surface color of light reddish brown (2.5YR 7/3 in the 2000 Munsell Chart).

Four letters inscribed on the inside of the sherd are partly or wholly preserved. The ink is gone, leaving the distinctive original color of the ceramic a pinkish

6 Later the 'ayin becomes open at the top. The change first occurs in Aramaic and Phoenician at the end of the eighth century B.C. (Yardeni 2002: fig. 1). According to Herr, the change occurs in Aramaic ca. 700 B.C. (Herr 1978: 55); however, the open 'ayin appears alongside the closed one in Ammonite inscriptions such as the Amman Citadel Inscription (ninth century B.C.) and the Deir 'Allā Inscription (eighth century B.C.; Cross 2003: 96).
white (2.5YR 8/2 in the 2000 Munsell Chart), slightly lighter than the rest of the sherd, in the shape of the letters under the areas where the ink had been. Only these secondary shapes make it possible to read the inscription.

The text is as follows:

Transliteration:

Line 1: \( ^\ast bn \ldots \)
Line 2: \( ^\ast \ldots \)

Translation:

Line 1: \( ^\ast \) son of \( \ldots \)
Line 2: \( ^\ast \ldots \)

The open 'ayin of the first line is only partially preserved. The bet, open at the top, is plainly visible and is comparable to this letter on Hesban Ostraca 5 and 6. The nun is curved instead of going straight down. The 'ayin of the second line is clear, but there are no traces of any other letters next to it. Open at the top, it is similar to the 'ayin in line 2 of Hesban Ostracan 5 (Cross 2009: 44).

Due to palaeographic affinities with the Hesban ostraca, which preserve Aramaic features, such as 'ayin and bet that are open at the top (Cross 2009: 44–45; Naveh 1982: 92), it appears that the script of our ostracan is also based on that of Aramaic. However, the reading \( bn \), "son of," indicates that the language of this inscription would be Ammonite rather than Aramaic, which would read \( br \). So this is another example of the well-attested Ammonite use of Aramaic script, in this case probably during the seventh–sixth centuries B.C. (Cross 1969: 14; 2009: 45; Naveh 1971: 28).\(^7\)

\(^7\) According to Naveh, "The Ammonites, who spoke a Canaanite dialect akin to Hebrew, Moabite and Edomite, used the Aramaic script at least from the ninth century onward" (Naveh 1971: 28).

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