Lipschits, Oded, and David S. Vanderhooft

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


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The study of stamped jar handles from Judah, starting from those of the Iron Age (e.g., LMLK, rosette), continuing with those of the Babylonian and Persian Periods (e.g., MWSH, YHD), and up until the Hellenistic period (e.g., YHD, YRŠLM), has been the focus of much research from the very beginning of modern archaeological research in the Holy Land. In the volume under review, Oded Lipschits of Tel Aviv University and David Vanderhooft of Boston College provide a comprehensive, state-of-the-art summary and overview of the very interesting phenomenon of the YHD stamped jar handles. This work, which is a clear outgrowth of both of the authors’ field expertise and previous publications, provides the scholarly community with an excellent handbook, updated to 2008, which in my opinion will serve as the standard work for many years to come. Not only have the authors conducted an exhaustive compilation of all known YHD stamped handles up to 2008 (with a very detailed listing of information); they have provided an extremely comprehensive discussion of previous research, new data, and, most importantly, a robust and on the whole very convincing summary of this interesting topic.

Based both on previous research but particularly on Lipschits’s recent excavations at Ramat Rachel near Jerusalem, which is the source of a very large percentage of known
YHD stamped handles, they present the following chronology schema for the YHD handles.

The YHD stamped handles can be divided into three distinct stages, spanning the Persian and Hellenistic periods: (1) the earliest group, with a rather large number of types, dates to the fifth century B.C.E.; (2) the “middle group” dates to the late fifth and fourth centuries B.C.E., and they connect this group to the changes in the Persian Empire following the loss of Egypt in the late fifth century B.C.E.; both of these earlier groups employ the Aramaic alphabet; (3) in the “late group,” which dates to the Hasmonean period, to the second century B.C.E., there is a return to the Old Hebrew alphabet (as seen as well in the Hasmonean coins).

The dating of these three groups is now firmly based on clear-cut archaeological evidence (well-dated stratigraphic contexts, particularly from Jerusalem and Ramat Rachel) that dovetails well with the paleographic dating of the scripts employed in these seals. One can safely retire alternative suggestions on the dating of these groups, some of which have been around from the very beginning of modern research.

In addition, the authors suggest that the YHD stamps can be connected to the administrative practices conducted in the region of Jerusalem during these periods. In particular, they believe that this can be seen as a continuation of the administrative practices of the Iron Age Judahite kingdom, as exemplified in the LMLK and rosette stamped handles. This point, in my opinion, is not totally convincing; while there might be some continuity in these practices, it should be remembered that while the LMLK and Rosette handles were produced, almost without exception in the Shephelah region during the Iron II-III, the YHD jars, both in the Persian and Hellenistic periods, were produced in the immediate vicinity of Jerusalem. While one could argue that there was continuation in the idea with a change in the production locale, I believe this still needs to be demonstrated.

Another point that the authors espouse is that one of the functions of these jars: in particular as related to their popularity at Ramat Rachel, they were a method for first the Judahite kingdom, then the Persian-controlled administration of the province of Judah, (Yehud) to collect taxes that were then sent to the imperial power in control. This ties in with Lipschit’s understanding of the role of the site of Ramat Rachel in the late Iron Age and Persian periods as an administrative center built under the influence, and to provide taxation, for the imperial powers that existed during this period (first the Assyrian Empire, then Babylonian and the Persian). Once again, the lack of any clear-cut archaeological and/or textual evidence of this specific role for the site of Ramat Rachel, while not making this suggestion impossible, still requires further proof to accept this.
An interesting point that should be stressed is the effect that this study will have on two issues: (1) on the ongoing discussion on the desolation or lack thereof of the “land” following the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem; (2) on the recently risen vigorous debate on the role, size, and character of Jerusalem during the Persian Period. I. Finkelstein has recently argued in a series of studies that Jerusalem during the Persian period was of minimal size and importance. The large amount of YHD stamps from the city perhaps makes his assumption somewhat hard to accept.

All told, this is an extremely important volume, one that in my opinion will serve for many years for all discussions on the YHD handles in particular, but for many issues relating to the Persian and Hellenistic periods in Judah and the surrounding regions. The high quality of the publication and the profuse data that it offers make it a model for other publications of this type.