



A Clay Pendant with an Impression of a Phoenician Seagoing Ship from Tel Abel Beth Maacah

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ABSTRACT

Among several prestigious finds uncovered in a large casemate structure on the acropolis of Tel Abel Beth Maacah, dated to the Iron IIA, was a small clay pendant impressed on its bottom with a ship motif. Close examination of the pendant and the impression suggests its affinity to Phoenician culture. The pendant is shaped like an Egyptian lotus flower and the impression appears to depict a Phoenician seagoing commercial ship. Seal impressions from roughly contemporary contexts at Tel Akko and Jerusalem form the closest parallels. The pendant, likely the possession of a member of the city's elite, is yet another indication for the close commercial and cultural relationship in Iron Age IIA between Abel Beth Maacah and the Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon, located 35 kilometers to the west.

KEYWORDS: Tel Abel Beth Maacah, pendants, seal impressions, Phoenician ships, lotus-shaped objects



Figure 1. Tel Abel Beth Maacah, looking east.

INTRODUCTION¹

Tel Abel Beth Maacah (Tell Abil el-Qameh) is located on the modern border between Israel and Lebanon, 6.5 kilometers west of Tel Dan, 35 kilometers north of Hazor, and 35 kilometers east of Tyre and Sidon

(Fig. 1).² Excavations yielded robust remains of an Iron IIA occupation sequence throughout the site. A large casemate structure and related buildings dominated the upper, northern part of the mound

¹ We dedicate this paper to Ilan Sharon in appreciation of his important contribution to the study of Phoenician culture and history in the southern Levant and beyond.

² The excavations at Tel Abel Beth Maacah are co-directed by Naama Yahalom-Mack and Nava Panitz-Cohen of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Robert Mullins of Azusa Pacific University, Los Angeles.



Figure 2. a) The citadel in Area B; b) the pendant when found; c) the find spot of the pendant.

during this time. Among the finds from this building was a small clay pendant that is the subject of this article (Fig. 2).

DESCRIPTION (FIGS. 3–4)

Reg. No. 67284, Locus 6743, Square G/20, Area B, Stratum B-4 (found in 2018)

Material: Clay.

Dimensions of the Pendant—H 24.5 mm, Base D 19–18 mm.

Method of Manufacture: Hand forming, perforating, impressing and firing.

Workmanship: Good.

Technical Details: Pendant—Perforated at the narrow end by means of pulling a narrow rod; *Impression*—On the wide end (base); stamped originally by a seal with a hollowed-out engraving.

Preservation: Almost complete; top is broken at perforation; scarred at the base (right side).



Figure 3. Photograph of the pendant and the modern impression on fimo (lower right). Photo by Tal Rogovski.

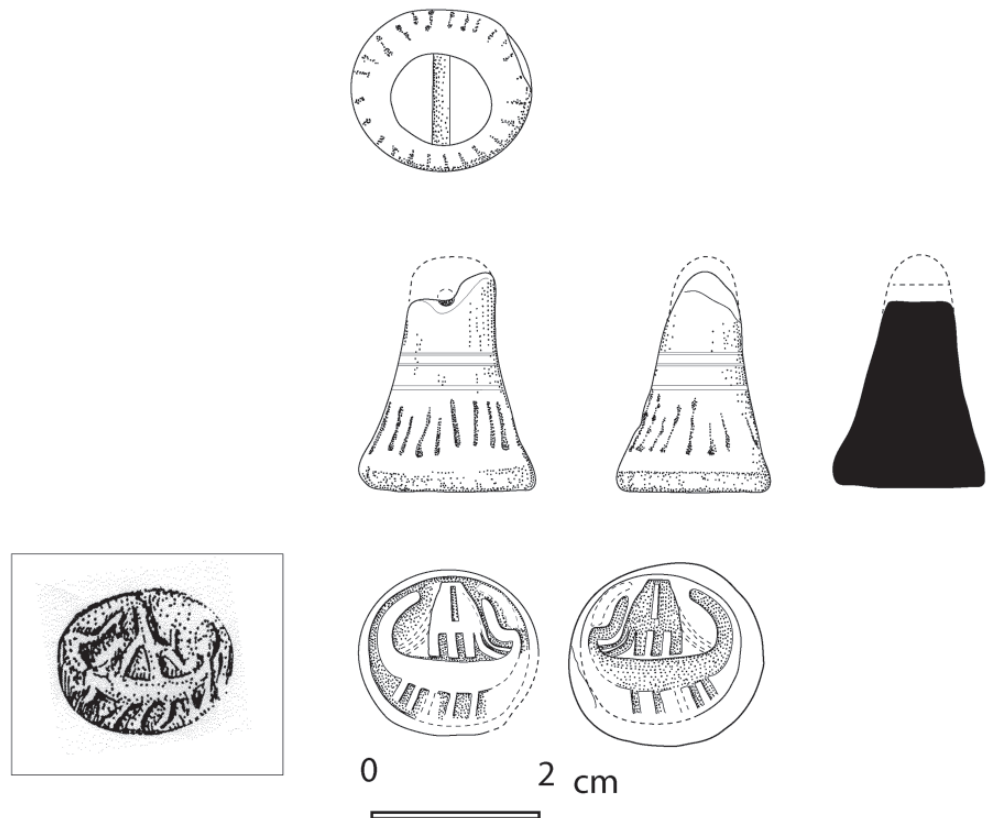


Figure 4. Drawing of the pendant and the impression on fimo (lower right). Drawing by Carmen Hersh.

Shape and Function: At first glance, the object looks like a hand-formed, conical stamp-seal (“Konoide Typ I” of Keel’s typology - Keel 1995: 100–101, §§246–249, ill. 169). A more meticulous examination of such items made of clay that were included by Keel (1995: 101, §249) under that suggested type show that none are actually stamp-seals. Those from Gezer (Keel 2013: 398–399, No. 539, with previous bibliography) and Tell el-‘Ajjul (Keel 1997: 514–515, No. 1206), were themselves stamped,³ as is also the case with the object from Abel Beth Maacah.⁴

The general shape of the Abel Beth Maacah item is reminiscent of a lotus flower. The object is decorated with an incised pair of horizontal parallel lines and an additional parallel line underneath them where the object tapers. Below these lines are roughly vertical, asymmetric lines. All of these appear to represent a suspended lotus flower. The latter are often portrayed with pointed leaves emerging from a set of horizontal lines. One such example is a Middle Kingdom wooden mirror handle from Qau (Brunton 1930: Pl 6: 24.), and two handles of a wooden bowl from the tomb of Amenemhät at Thebes (Mond and Emery 1929: 52, Fig. 3), both in Egypt.

Base Design: In an oval area without a frame, a ship with a crescentic hull is depicted. The high prow (on the left) is curving inboard, while the stern (on the right)⁵ also slightly curves inwards, but immediately turns up. A steering oar is missing, perhaps due to a large scar on the right edge. Above the ship’s hull are three vertical poles, possibly the railing. Above the railing is an open trapezoidal sail, while the mast is hinted at by a deep vertical line that “bisects” the open sail. The rigging is represented by a diagonal rope on each side. Five oars are seen in the water, and it is due to their number that the vessel is identified as a seagoing ship.

Parallels: There are two close iconographic parallels to the Abel Beth Maacah ship; both are seal impressions from the southern Levant. The first is a stamped jar handle from Tel Akko (Conrad 1999), and the second is a stamped sealing (perhaps a document sealing or a bulla) from the “rock-cut pool” located near the Gihon spring on the eastern slope of the City of David, Jerusalem (Reich,

Shukron and Lernau 2007: 34, No. 5 = Keel 2017: 408–409, No. 287). See Fig. 5a–b respectively.

All three ships portray the stern in the same manner as curving inboard and then turning up.⁶ Likewise, a hitherto unnoticed railing is also observed on both parallels.⁷ The main difference between the Abel Beth Maacah impression and its parallels is that the former has an open sail, while on the parallels, only the mast is seen. The parallel ships were generally identified as Phoenician, but of different types. That from Akko was identified as a commercial ship (Conrad 1999: 40–41), while the ship from Jerusalem was identified by Keel as a ‘Hippos’ (Keel 2017: 408–409, No. 287).⁸

Origin: Phoenician. The pendant mimics an Egyptian lotus flower, and thus points to an affinity to the highly Egyptianizing Phoenician material culture and iconography. The depicted ship also appears to be a Phoenician type (see below).

Find Context and Date: The pendant was found in Locus 6743, a semi-circle of stones built against and outside the northern wall of the casemate-like building in Area B, possibly serving as a shallow bin (see Fig. 2c). Based on pottery typology and ¹⁴C analyses, the citadel was dated between the late tenth to ninth centuries BCE. The pendant is dated to the ninth century BCE on the basis of its stratigraphy.

DISCUSSION

The Abel Beth Maacah impression belongs to a small iconographic group, and each new member justifies a renewed discussion that helps to refine the definition and understanding of this group. Regarding the three impressions from Abel Beth Maacah, Akko and Jerusalem, several questions emerge:

1. What does the unique “in-turning” shape of the stern signify?
2. What is the specific type of these ships?
3. What is the time span for the production date of the seals that made these impressions?
4. Why are these ships identified as Phoenician? Is every impression with this motif automatically to be identified as Phoenician?

³ These are Canaanite MB IIC Sample Sealings; cf. Brandl 1993: 130–131, No. 2; 2009: 670–671, No. 33.

⁴ Objects from Beth Shemesh (Keel 2010: 286–287, No. 162) and Tell es-Safi (Keel 2013: 94–95, No. 3), although lacking a typical conical shape, support the identification and function of the Abel Beth Maacah object as a pendant.

⁵ The description refers to the impression, and the sides follow the viewer’s perspective.

⁶ This component is clear in the photo of the Jerusalem impression, as well as in the photo of the Akko impression (Conrad 1999: Pl. 5:1).

⁷ This unnoticed addition on the impression from Jerusalem is clearly seen on the photographs. The alleged railing on the Abel Beth Maacah impression does not extend over the entire length of the ship.

⁸ Here, the Akko ship is identified for the first time as a parallel to that from Jerusalem.

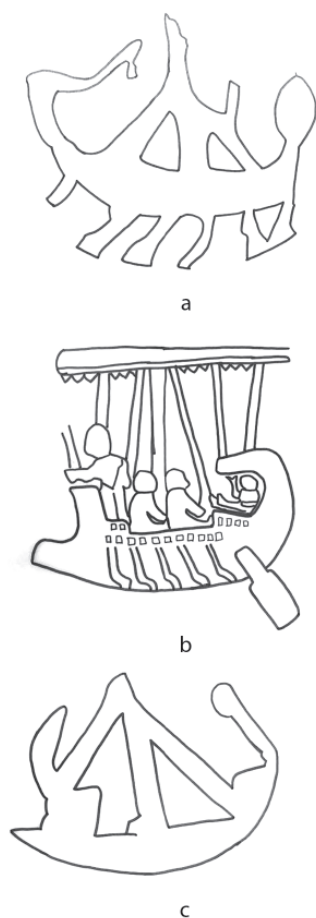


Figure 5. Schematic depiction of Phoenician ships (not to scale): **a.** seal impression from Akko (after Akko:Keel 1997: 623, No. 258). **b.** ship depicted on the Karatepe gate relief (after Özyar 2013: Fig. 14). **c.** Seal impression on a jar handle from Tell Tweini (after Bretschneider and Van Lerberghe 2008: ill. 39). Reproduced by Stephanie Susnow.

The “In-Turning” Stern and the Identification of the Ships

Conrad (1999: 37) identified the in-turning stern on the Akko impression as the back-turned head of a bird, either a duck or a goose, while Keel (1997: 622–623, No. 258) described it as an oversized stern. This part was overlooked, as already mentioned above, by the publishers of the impression from Jerusalem, perhaps since it was immediately below a bulge. It is only after viewing the considerably larger depiction of a ship on the Karatepe gate relief (see below and Fig. 5c), does it become evident that the “in-turning” stern is, in fact, a wide roof protecting the helmsman, i.e., the person who steers the ship using a long oar.

The relief excavated at Karatepe/Arslantaş, depicting a naval battle, is carved on a basalt orthostat that was located on the left side of the North Gate’s

right chamber (Özyar 2013: 128–129, Fig. 14, Slab No. 19). Özyar, who reviewed the relief, identified the “in-turning” part as a curved part of the stern which, in his words, was “curved like a bow” (Özyar 1998: 99; Çambel and Özyar 2003: 84). The same approach is found in Winter’s description, where it is claimed that the ship has an “...inward-curving stern” (Winter 1979: 120).

Wachsmann (1998: 186–187, 190, Fig. 8.53), who was perhaps misled by the earlier drawing of the ship (e.g., Özyar 1998: 99, ill. 1; Çambel and Özyar 2003: 86, ill. 114a), identified the “in-turning” part as an inboard-facing bird head, and even added an eye to it in the reconstruction. This addition was perhaps inspired by later jug-paintings of Cypriot ships that were dated to the seventh century BCE (Wachsmann 1998: 183, Fig. 8.41). This suggestion may be ruled out when closely viewing the large photograph published by Özyar in an article devoted to the Karatepe ship orthostat (Özyar 1998: 97–106, Pl. 4). In this depiction, one can see that the outline or silhouette of the upper part of the stern is straight and diagonal,⁹ without the typical convexity of a bird’s head, and the expected tapering to its beak.¹⁰ Moreover, where a bird’s eye was identified, there is a huge trapezoid element, which appears to be a technical component, aimed at attaching the roof to the stern. It is suggested that the “in-turning” part represents a roof, based on the length of the component which extends no further than the platform on which the helmsmen is sitting. The size of the helmsman on the Karatepe relief, who is sitting higher than the oarsmen, was perhaps reduced on the seal, in order to fit him into the space under the roof.

There is broad scholarly consensus about the identity of the warship carved on the Karatepe orthostat as Phoenician rather than Cilician (e.g., Özyar 1998: 98). As such, the roofed platform of the helmsmen appears to be a characteristic component of Phoenician ships. This is further supported by the identification of a much-earlier seal impression stamped on the handle of a so-called Canaanite jar excavated in a Late Bronze IIB level at Tell Tweini, ancient Gibala, that is located on the Syrian coast (Bretschneider and Van Lerberghe 2008: 33, 38, ill. 39; 2010: 33, 38, ill. 30). Most recently, Knapp (2018: 125, Fig. 27) correctly identified this as a 13th century BCE ship, possibly a galley, based on the clear battering ram depicted on the left side (see Fig. 5d). At the stern, an elevated platform may

⁹ Compare the most recent drawing (Özyar 2013: 130, Fig. 14) with that of an earlier version (Çambel and Özyar 2003: 86, ill. 114a).

¹⁰ This is also clear on the reduced photos in Orthmann 1971: Pl. 17: A/23 and Winter 1978: Pl. 16c.

be also identified. While the stern itself is curved in-board, without an additional component, it is slightly thickened, and the fact that it ends on line with the platform suggests that it may also depict a helmsmen's roof. This suggests that ships along the northern Levantine coast, subsequently part of the Phoenician realm, included this component as early as the Late Bronze Age II.

Such a component may be identified on both the Abel Beth Maacah and Akko impressions. We propose that it also occurs on the impression from Jerusalem, although less pronounced than in the other seals; below the break, the stern turns in-board sharply and may represent such a roof. While the helmsman is missing, his position there is represented by the steering row, which is depicted as protruding above deck and diagonally positioned.

Thus, the appearance of the component defined as a roof-shelter attached to the stern of the ship that is depicted on these three seal impressions is the "smoking gun" that clearly discloses the Phoenician identity of the ships.

Since the ships depicted on the Akko, Jerusalem, and Abel Beth Maacah seal impressions are lacking a battering ram, as in Karatepe and on the abovementioned impression from Tell Tweini, it seems that all three represent seagoing, commercial ships.

The Production Date of the Seals That Made the Impressions

The find context of the stamped handle from Tel Akko has been dated to the eighth-seventh centuries BCE (Conrad 1999). Conrad wrote that it was found on a floor line of Stratum VI that was observed in the side wall of an early Persian period pit of Stratum V that penetrated into Stratum VI and below it. The other sherds from the pit were identified as of the Persian period, but the clay of the handle better fits the Iron Age II. Additional information was given in the corpus of Keel, who mentioned the appearance of the early type of mortarium (with a flat base) together with this stamped handle, leading him to date the impression to the seventh century BCE. Subsequently, it was found that the early type of mortarium can be dated to the eighth century BCE, allowing us now to safely date the Akko impression to the eighth century BCE (Brandl and Itach 2019: 216, n. 1).

The stamped sealing from the "rock-cut pool", located near the Gihon spring in the City of David, Jerusalem, has been dated by the excavators to the ninth/eighth centuries BCE. In Keel's corpus, it is dated in general to the Iron Age IIB, and more specifically to ca. 830–700 BCE, although Locus

2020 in which it was found was dated to "...before ca. 800" (Reich, Shukron and Lernau 2007: 34, No. 5; Keel 2017: 408–409, No. 287).

As noted above, the Abel Beth Maacah impression is dated stratigraphically to the Iron Age IIA, most probably to the latter part of the ninth century BCE.

It therefore seems that the time span for the three impressions is the ninth to eighth centuries BCE. As far as we know, no seals that could have made these impressions have been found.

The Phoenician Origin of the Impressions

In both the case of the Akko and of the Abel Beth Maacah items, the suggested origin is quite clearly Phoenician. Akko was a site in southern Phoenicia during the Iron Age II, while Abel Beth Maacah — which may have belonged to the Israelite kingdom during this time (Yahalom-Mack et al. 2021)— is located only 35 km from the Phoenician coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon. Excavations at the site revealed a large component of Phoenician elements in the material culture, mainly ample Phoenician pottery, some of which was truly exquisite (e.g., Panitz-Cohen, this volume), pointing to close connections between Abel Beth Maacah and the Phoenician cities. Abel Beth Maacah may have filled some of the subsistence needs of the latter cities that lacked abundant agricultural hinterlands. A large number of ovens unearthed in the lower city of Abel Beth Maacah in Area A, that appear to have operated simultaneously, may be taken as evidence for industrial food processing in the Iron IIA, some of which may have been destined for the Phoenician coastal cities. The high status of the residents of the casemate citadel on the upper mound, where the pendant was found, appears to indicate close ties between the elites, as well as the merchants (Yahalom-Mack, Panitz-Cohen and Mullins 2018).

The case with the impression from Jerusalem, which has no borders or direct involvement with Phoenicia, is more complicated. The publishers of this impression suggested that the city of Samaria, the capital of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, which had close political, cultural and economic ties with the Phoenician coastal cities, were also closely tied with Jerusalem during the days of Queen Athaliah,¹¹ but they did not exclude the alternative option of direct contacts also with one of the cities in the Phoenician coast, such as Sidon (Reich, Shukron and Lernau 2007: 37).

¹¹ For additional northern Israelite finds in Jerusalem from the same period, see Brandl 2012a; 2012b; 2015; 2017.



The Significance of the Abel Beth Maacah Pendant in Context

The use and significance of this object is rather enigmatic. On the one hand, the object, made of clay (and not stone), was stamped rather than manufactured as a stamp. If used as a stamp, it would have produced a negative impression, which is not typical. On the other hand, if worn as a pendant, the motif itself would not be visible, since it appears on the bottom. The explanation for this apparent anomaly could be that it, in fact, was not meant to be worn and was used otherwise. Alternatively, it was meant to imitate a stamp and bestow a measure of prestige on its owner. This, in turn, suggests that the pendant was not a local product and was acquired from elsewhere, perhaps, from one of the cities on the Phoenician coast, in light of the impression's maritime theme.¹²

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The Abel Beth Maacah clay object is identified as a lotus-shaped, Phoenician pendant that bears an impression of a Phoenician seagoing, commercial ship. The ship is identified as Phoenician based on

the unique shape of the stern which is identified here as the elevated roofed seat of the helmsman. This component was identified on war ships such as those depicted on the Karatepe stone relief and the Tell Tweini impressed handle, but also on impressions of seagoing commercial ships depicted on artifacts from Akko and Jerusalem which are contemporary with the pendant from Abel Beth Maacah. It thus appears that the unique stern appears on both types of Phoenician seagoing ships: the warships and the commercial ships.

The identification of the pendant from Abel Beth Maacah as Phoenician adds to the impression that the site had a close cultural and probably commercial relationship with the Phoenician coastal cities during the Iron IIA.

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¹² Petrographic analysis was not conducted due to the small size of the artifact and the damage that would be incurred.

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