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Identity writ small: seal imagery in Seleucid Palestine

IDENTITY WRIT SMALL: SEAL IMAGERY IN SELEUCID PALESTINE

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→ *here: short abstract in English*

In this short article we focus on three clay sealings, three of the 2043 found in two rooms of a large Seleucid administrative compound at the site of Kedesh, in northeastern Israel. Kedesh is an enormous ancient mound, first settled in the 3rd millennium BCE, and occupied sporadically until 1948. The administrative compound, which sits at the far southern end, was constructed around 500 BCE, when this region was under Achaemenid Persian rule. When the site and the wider territory passed from the Persians to the Ptolemies around 300 BCE, the new rulers appropriated the compound and made substantial changes in floor plan and function. They moved the entrance from the building's eastern side to its north, added an elaborately decorated reception room and multiple store-rooms, and inserted rooms with plastered measuring bins on the south side. After 197 BCE, when the entire region came into the hands of the Seleucids, the building's new owners made a few more modifications, among which was the construction of an archive complex in the northwestern corner.[1] It was in two rooms here that we discovered the clay sealings, nicely fired thanks to a deliberate episode of burning in or shortly after the structure's almost-final abandonment around 143 BCE.

From the vantage point of the subject of imagery between Near Eastern and Greek pictorial traditions from the later 5th through the early 3rd centuries BCE, and especially the relationship of that imagery to religious beliefs and practices, these sealings may not seem too relevant. For one thing, they date about a century later than the stated end point of the span of investigation; for another, they are legal, personal, and administrative in character, rather than religious. Yet we believe they are worthy of consideration, for two reasons. First, in their overall mass as well as their individual subjects, they represent the largest trove of contemporaneous images from a single site yet discovered in the southern Levant. And second, the great majority of the legible sealings, something like 98%, are *un*-official. This means that they reveal to us something that is otherwise almost impossible to see: the pictorial choices of private individuals in a specific time and place. Each sealing displays the one image that somebody decided to use to represent him or herself – and since an astounding array of

[1] For the date of the battle of Paneion and the Seleucid takeover of Coele-Syria and Palestine, see now Lorber 2021.

choices existed here, we may see in these decisions considered thinking rather than rote habit.

Before discussing these particular three sealings, it behooves us to consider the phenomenon of communicating and self-representing via pictures. In the conference call that gave rise to this paper, the organizers used the helpful phrase "the processes of interference" as a way to classify Persianization and Hellenization, in opposition to "the expressions of peoples' own cultural identities." In our opinion, *all* aspects of interaction are process; they represent new cultural or political forces working like heavy wave action on native bedrock, while we, from our far remove, try to assess the resulting effects. Images are an especially salient mode for investigating such interactions. First, the combination of subject and style forms a particular visual amalgam, which may convey a particular message. Second, that amalgam transcends language, that most daunting of communicative hurdles. In today's highly networked, connected world this last point may be readily appreciated. Globalization and the need to cross linguistic divides has meant that image-based communication has steadily risen over the past half-century. The increased use of symbols, icons, and pictures has gone hand-in-hand with the steady growth of international travel, multinational companies, and perhaps most of all the phenomenon of peoples speaking different languages settling in new places.

To return to antiquity and to the "native bedrock" of the southern Levant, we see a similar set of circumstances. Over the course of the preceding two centuries peoples here witnessed – and also participated in – international travel and multinational business operations. They regularly confronted people speaking different languages, some of whom also settled in new places. In the Persian and Hellenistic periods (and of course others as well) the southern Levant was home to multiple *ethnoi* living in close quarters: Sidonians and Tyrians, Judeans and Idumeans, Nabateans and Itureans. They wrote in different scripts, worshipped different gods, and followed their own calendars and legal precepts. They all experienced the same "processes of interference," meaning the dominion of Achaemenid Persia, Ptolemaic Egypt, and Seleucid Syria, whose representatives introduced still other alphabets and languages, calendars, gods, rituals, and social ranks. Just as today, images would have helped people surmount the hurdles of differences and represent themselves to others.

This is borne out by the overwhelmingly *pictorial* character of seals and sealings, as seen in both the Kedesh archive and also the mid-4th century archive found in the Wadi ed-Daliyeh. Both offer a sharp contrast to earlier groups from this region, as for example, the bullae from an administrative archive in Jerusalem of the later 7th and early 6th centuries BCE – which all carry writing, solely. In her publication of the Wadi ed-Daliyeh bullae, Mary Joan Winn Leith named the various influences impinging on peoples' image selections as "the

internationalist atmosphere of the Persian period … and the subtly compelling factors of prestige and/or cultural receptivity."[2] All true – and all resting on the fundamental acceptance of pictures as a form of direct, personal communication. The three sealings from Kedesh that we present here are:

- one with a schematic image of the Phoenician lunar deity Tanit, below which are two lines in either Phoenician or Aramaic that read אש על ארץ/He who is over the land.
- one with a shaft of wheat and bunch of grapes, belong which is a single line of Greek reading "Κυδίσσου/of Kedesh."
- one with a lioness or panther in profile, head frontal, one paw raised and holding a javelin.

Let us first put these sealings into the overall context of the archive at Kedesh. **Fig. 1** breaks down the archive's legible sealings according to original seals and category. 48% of the seals depict Greek gods, including Olympian deities – Zeus, Aphrodite, Apollo, Artemis, Athena, Dionysus, Hermes, and also non-Olympians – Eros, Helios, Nike, Tyche. 20% depict heroes – Odysseus, Achilles, Diomedes, and Herakles – and also humans, in naturalistic style. 17% carry realistic portrait heads. This brings the total of human imagery in Greek subjects and styles to 85%. 13% bear realistic images of symbols, animals, or plants – such as our Kedesh sealing. In other words, 98% of the imagery is Hellenizing in subject and/or style. Fantastic animals such as our armed feline comprise 1%, and non-Greek deities such as Ashtarte, Harpocrates, and our Tanit appear on a fraction of the 1% of inscribed sealings.[3]

These numbers reveal a place and time in which almost everybody embraced the image-filled world of Greek culture. To return to the concept of "processes of interference," the figures do not reveal those processes themselves, but they do reflect hundreds of individuals opting in, riding the heavy waves of the Greek aesthetic. In contrast, the few eastern subjects and styles are a tiny bit of native bedrock jutting out. As in the natural world, we need to consider them parts of a single eco-system.

[2] Leith 1997: 10.

[3] These figures represent a re-assessment of the total corpus as of August 2019. Very minor changes may ensue as the final publication is prepared.

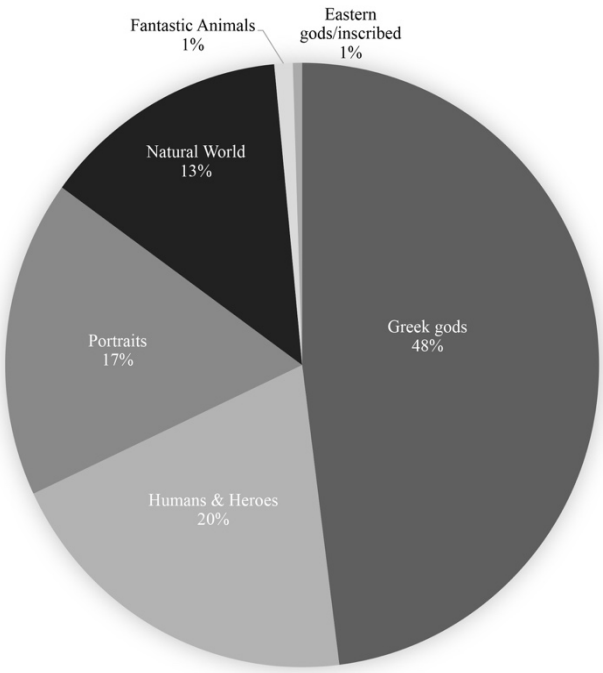

Fig. 1: Breakdown of the subjects represented by the seals attested in the archive at Tel Kedesh.

The Tanit sealing (**Fig. 2**) is one of nine made from the same seal, a ratio that is unusual for the Kedesh archive, where the vast majority of sealings are single impressions from unique seals. Based on the intact impressions, the seal was about 19 mm long. This precise combination of image and inscription is repeated on a tenth sealing, which was made from a second seal.

In their 2003 *BASOR* publication, Donald Ariel and Joseph Naveh noted that the first part of the inscription, "אש על/He who is over" is known from two Phoenician inscriptions, one from Carthage and another from the Piraeus, the port of Athens.[4] The specific full phrase "אש על ארץ/He who is over the land" is unattested in Phoenician or Hebrew, although very similar formulations occur in both languages. From Larnax Lapithos, near Larnaca on Cyprus, comes a stone inscribed "אש על לפש/He who is over Lapithos," dated to the 4th century BCE on paleographic grounds. From Jerusalem the phrase "אשר על הבית/He who is over the house (or temple)" occurs on two seals, several sealings, and the Royal Steward inscription, all dating to the late Iron Age. These parallels suggest that while the specific title is unique, the phrasing is common in this regional milieu.

[4] Ariel and Naveh 2003: 63.

Fig. 2: Impression of the "Tanit" seal.
Courtesy of the Tel Kedesh Excavations.

As for the image, some scholars have recently disputed the identification of this figure as Tanit, or indeed even as necessarily female. With respect, we disagree; and will continue to refer to this schematic image of triangle body, stick arms, and circle head as Tanit, a figure that appears in many media and modes in Levantine coastal cities, Carthage, and elsewhere in the Punic sphere. The image is remarkably long-lived and stable in its form. Its first known appearance dates to the 11th century BCE, in the form of a small copper alloy charm found at Megiddo, in Israel's Jezreel Valley.[5] The Megiddo figure is identical to the version on the Kedesh sealing, which dates some 900 years later. As Arie notes, early on Tanit had a regular epithet – *Panei Baʿal*, the face or mouth of Baʿal, and as such stands for, or with, the primary male deity of the Canaanite/Phoenician heartland. In the 3rd and 2nd centuries BCE, this symbol became common on items with official or administrative functions, such as lead weights, coins, and seals, primarily from the cities of Aradus, Berytus, and Tyre.[6]

[5] Arie 2017. For earlier studies of the Tanit symbol see Bertrandy 1992: 416–18 and Avaliani 1999. For the Tanit symbol in the Levant see Dothan 1974, updated in Bordreuil 1987. Additional inscriptions and archaeological finds with the Tanit symbol are noted in Bordreuil 1987: 81–82. For a group of ceramic *tesserae* with an inscription dedicated to Tanit as well as the Tanit symbol and a dolphin, see Bordreuil and Gubel 1988: 443, No. III.4; Wolfe and Sternberg 1989: 10, No. 4. Bordreuil dates the group paleographically to the 3rd–2nd centuries BCE; see also Stager 1991: 22, 31. In 2015, the Tanit symbol was reported on lead scale weights produced in Aradus as well as Tyre: Finkielsztejn 2015: 60–63, Nos. 1–2, 5, 10–15, 17–41, 43–54. The Aradus weights are undated. The Tanit symbol on these weights is 'defective,' i.e., without a baseline (Finkielsztejn 2015: 56). Tyre: Finkielsztejn 2015: 89–91, Nos. 129–146, 150–153. These scale weights are attributed to Tyre only because of the Tanit symbol found upon them (Finkielsztejn 2010: 88).

[6] Arie 2017: 67; for Tanit on city weights of Tyre see Finkielsztejn 2014.

It's worth noting that this particular development occurs at a time when the Phoenician cities were under the overarching dominions of the Ptolemies and the Seleucids, imperial regimes with Macedonian roots. If we agree that people chose images in order to represent themselves to others, then we would argue that the choice to depict an age-old local deity on administrative objects is a fine instance of the resilience of this particular outcrop of native bedrock.

Another thought about this symbol as affirmation of native authority is inspired by an assemblage of impressed jar handles published by Ibrahim Kawkabani. The handles, all from large storage jars, were found in the 1972 excavations of a temple precinct dedicated to Melqart at Jal el-Bahr, on the northeastern outskirts of Tyre.[7] There are 160 different impressions, and almost all are strictly writing, without any images at all. The few images that do appear are small and cursory: a caduceus on three impressions; a running animal on one; and on one Tanit.[8]

The handles are dated to the Seleucid era, and range from 205/4 to 133/2 BCE, making them largely contemporary with the group of Tanit sealings from Kedesh. We are struck by the prevalence of writing, the dearth of images overall, and the single depiction of Tanit in particular. We wonder if we might regard the Jal el-Bahr handles as an "in-house" assemblage, made by locals for their own use in a local place. In other words, these impressions – and their owners – were not communicating with the outside world – unlike the Kedesh seals and sealings, and the city weights of Aradus and Tyre, which were made to convey official authority precisely to outsiders. An additional point is that the seal and weights date to a time when their cities were under a foreign administration. Reading Tanit in this context, we see that she is large and on top, a superior entity – at least in design.

The official who owned the Tanit sealing is not the only one represented in the Kedesh archive. There is also a single sealing from a seal of the city itself (**Fig. 3**). The sealing, intact and complete, is 14 mm in length, a bit smaller than the Tanit sealings. In the upper portion is a central stalk with two leaves growing from it. Surmounting the stalk is an ear of wheat, and hanging from the left leaf is a grape cluster. A single line below in Greek reads Κυδίσσου.

As Ariel and Naveh reported in their 2003 publication, Κυδίσσου is the genitive case of Κύδισσος, one of twenty spellings for Kedesh attested over a period of five and a half centuries, from the Zenon archive of 259 BCE to the *Onomasticon* of Eusebius in c. 300 CE. The spelling found here is otherwise known only from Eusebius. The remarkable number of variations is a result of

[7] Kawkabani 2003; Kawkabani 2005: 4; 2008: 2, Fig. 1.

[8] Kawkabani 2005: 61, J-B 140. The date given here is based on a new, independent study by Donald Ariel (2019). I thank the author for sharing his results.

the name being translated from a three-consonant Hebrew original קדש; the variations are the result of having to supply vowels in Greek, and also of disagreement about the second and third consonants. What this indicates is that, like the unique title of the Tanit seal, here too the seal's artisan – or whoever commissioned it – was starting from scratch, making up the Greek spelling as well as the site's representative imagery.

Ariel and Naveh noted that this hybrid depiction of wheat and grapes has no ancient parallel, but may have been inspired by the regular combination in the Hebrew Bible of grain (דגן, *dgn*) and new wine (תירש, *tyrš*).[9] This has a certain poetic appeal, but we are not convinced that this image was crafted with a biblical connection in mind. If that was the intent, then why translate the site's name from Hebrew into Greek? But more to the point, there is no indication that anybody who worked or visited here had any connection with Judea, or would have read the Hebrew Bible. Kedesh was embedded in a market network anchored by the coastal cities of Tyre and 'Akko-Ptolemais; its sphere was southern Phoenicia. We believe instead that this image was intended to convey what somebody considered essential about the city. In that regard, one need not travel far: the mound is surrounded by all the evidence necessary to understand this depiction. The upland valley around Kedesh is today home to some of the best vineyards for Cabernet Sauvignon grapes in all of Israel; while in the adjacent Hula Valley, experimental cultivars of *triticum aestivum*, bread wheat, had been introduced already in the 3rd century BCE.[10]

The Kedesh sealing thus advertises the site's current cultural affiliations and importance: a Hellenized property with a bountiful agricultural pedigree. We might compare this manifestation of local interest with the statement sent by the Tanit seal: Greek vs. Phoenician in alphabet and language; specific name vs. anonymous official; naturalistic rendition of here-and-now commodities vs. schematic rendering of a cosmic power. The contrasts show up, and gather force, when we imagine these objects – or more properly their users – in dialogue with one another.

The last sealing to consider depicts a feline standing in profile on a ground line, slender and tautly muscled, with a long, curled tail and frontal head,

[9] Ariel and Naveh 2003: 74. They note also that the pairing of grain and wine is also found in a Phoenician text, but from centuries earlier, and in Cilicia: Gibson 1982: 53, 55. On seals and coins similar combinations are represented side by side, or bunched together. See two ring bezels in Westenholz 1998: 76, No. 27–28. Both derive from the Wolfe family collection, and were reexamined by Ariel. No. 28 is described by Westenholz as an ear of barley, but it appears to be an upright ear of wheat. Like the sealing it too has two leaves emerging symmetrically from a central stalk. But there the resemblance ends. Both ring bezels are anepigraphic, and smaller and cruder in execution than the sealing. On the other hand a well-executed stalk of wheat is depicted (alone) on one of the bilingual sealings published by Bordreuil (1996: 51, No. IIa).

[10] Berlin et al. 2003.

brandishing a javelin in a raised paw (**Fig. 4**). There is only one such impression, deriving from a seal of 11 mm in length. The pose is fantastic, the motif eastern, the origin unknown.[11] In style and attitude this animal is very similar to several of those sculpted on the Tobiad compound known as the Qasr al-Abd (**Fig. 5**), at 'Iraq el-Emir on the outskirts of ancient Philadelphia (modern-day Amman). In fact they are so close that we are tempted to suggest that our fantastic feline was a symbol of the Tobiad house.

The protective felines on the Qasr al-Abd's exterior recall those performing the same function in Babylon, on the Ishtar Gate and also along the processional way into the city. Just as those, the Qasr's lions are large three-dimensional sculpted beings, promenading on the outside of a building. They are similar to the animal on the Kedesh sealing, which is not simply walking but is armed, and deliberately confrontational. Whether we read the Kedesh sealing as Tobiad or not, both it and the lions on the Qasr send a similar message, an evocation of the still powerful glamour of Babylon and other great Mesopotamian cities.

One way to read these images is as statements of cultural persistence, outcrops of the region's native bedrock. In this way they function as other similar phenomena of retention, for example names of settlements. But if we consider the larger pictorial context of the era, we can press still more meaning from them. Against the backdrop of the Kedesh archive's overwhelmingly Greek character, we may read another dichotomy – not between east and west, between Mesopotamia and the Levant on the one side and Greece on the other, but one even more essential: the choice between old and new; between the world of the past and that of the present; the choice, in effect, of whether or not to be modern.

At Kedesh in the 2nd century BCE, most people choose modernity. Why? There is, of course, the allure of Greek subjects and styles. But there is more as well. This is a new, image-filled world, one with people on the move, getting educated and becoming literate. Written communication between regular folks is more common. It is these phenomena that are the real "processes of interference," the heavy waves washing in. The sealings from Kedesh are reflections of people embracing those processes, diving into the water as it were. As always and everywhere, a few hold back, unseduced. But these small objects show us that for the overwhelming majority, the water is fine.

[11] An impression from Artachat shows a panther moving right and holding thyrsus (Khachatrian 1996: pl. 75, no. 33).

Fig. 3: Impression of the “Kedesh” seal.
Courtesy of the Tel Kedesh Excavations.

Fig. 4: Impression of the “armed feline” seal.
Courtesy of the Tel Kedesh Excavations.

Fig. 5: One of the feline relief sculptures on the Qasr el-Abd,
Iraq el-Amir, Jordan. Photo: Andrea M. Berlin.

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