

Archaeological Facts, Historical Speculations and the Date of the *LMLK* Storage Jars: A Rejoinder to David Ussishkin

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“Facts are meaningless. You could use facts to prove anything
that’s even remotely true!” (Homer Simpson)

INTRODUCTION

In two essays published recently (Lipschits, Sergi and Koch 2010, 2011), two of my students and I suggested a new chronological scheme for the *lmlk* stamped jars in Judah. In this study we challenged a 30-year scholarly consensus that contended that all the *lmlk* jars were associated with the destruction of Level III at Lachish, and that they were dated to the three years of Hezekiah’s revolt and Judah’s preparations for the 701 B.C.E. Assyrian attack (Ussishkin 1977; Na’aman 1979, 1986; Vaughn 1999; Kletter 2002). We based this new chronological scheme on a careful study of the distribution of the *lmlk* stamped handles, according to the detailed typology set out by André Lemaire in 1981. We isolated the four-winged Types Ia and Ib and the two-winged Type IIa as those found sealed under the destruction level of Lachish III and contemporaneous strata. Accordingly, we defined these types as the “early types,” used before the 701 Assyrian attack on Judah (Lipschits, Sergi and Koch 2010: 11 and Fig. 1). By contrast, three types of two-winged *lmlk* stamp impressions (Lemaire’s IIb, IIc and XII) appear only in hill-country sites that were not destroyed in 701 B.C.E., or in strata attributed to the 7th century B.C.E., with not even one stamped handle of these types found in a clear 701 B.C.E. destruction level. Therefore, we assumed that these types were produced after the 701 campaign, defined them as “late types,” and dated them to the beginning of the 7th century B.C.E. (*ibid.*: 11, 13–

17). Furthermore, we suggested that the *lmlk* stamped jars were not part of a short-term system of preparations for the Assyrian attack, but rather part of an administrative system begun before Hezekiah's revolt against the Assyrian empire, and followed by the incised concentric circles and the rosette stamp impressions (Lipschits, Sergi and Koch 2010: 8–9; Koch and Lipschits 2010).

The continuity of the manufacturing of royal storage jars (Vaughn 1999: 148–150; Shai and Maeir 2003; Gitin 2006) and of the use of royal emblems stamped on their handles (Lipschits, Sergi and Koch 2010: 7–10) indicates that the different stamps are all part of the same administrative system that probably functioned without interruption for about 140 years. Moreover, the same administrative system continued after the 586 B.C.E. destruction for an additional 450 years, during the Babylonian period (the *mwšh* and lion stamped handles; see Lipschits 2010), during the Persian and the Early Hellenistic periods (the *yhwd* stamped handles; see Lipschits and Vanderhooft 2011), and until the Late Hellenistic period (the late *yhwd* and the *yršlm* stamped handles; see Ariel and Shoham 2000: 159–163; Vanderhooft and Lipschits 2007; Bocher and Lipschits 2011). Throughout this long period, Judah was under the hegemony of great empires, and the stamped jars were part of the Judahite administrative system that was already established when Judah became an Assyrian vassal kingdom; they continued to be in use as long as Judah was a vassal kingdom and afterwards when it was a province under the rule of the Babylonian, Persian and Ptolemaic empires.

Recently, Ussishkin published a rejoinder (2011) defending his 34-year-old view, claiming again that all the *lmlk* stamped storage jars were manufactured concurrently during a brief period shortly before 701 B.C.E. (*ibid.*: 223–224, 231). He even went one step further, claiming that, despite the archaeological fact that not even one handle bearing a concentric circle incision was discovered sealed under a 701 B.C.E. destruction level, all the handles bearing concentric circle incisions should also be dated to the same pre-701 B.C.E. period (*ibid.*: 233–235). He further claimed that all the rosette stamped storage jars should be dated to shortly before the 587/6 B.C.E. destruction (*ibid.*: 235). If this were indeed the case, then no stamped jars were produced in Judah during the 110 years between Hezekiah's revolt and the Assyrian military campaign against Judah (704–701 B.C.E.), and Zedekiah's revolt against Babylon and the Babylonian military campaign against Judah (588–586 B.C.E.); furthermore, the rosette system, just like the *lmlk* system that preceded it, had to be developed over a very short period of time. Ussishkin did not connect the 6th to 2nd century stamped jar handles to the *lmlk*, concentric circle and rosette jars, and he ignored the continued use of the same system of stamping handles of the same type of jars for an additional 450 years.

In this article, I will focus on the differences in the methods used for dating and for interpreting the stamped jar handles in gen-

eral, and those methods used for the *lmlk* stamped jars in particular. I will also emphasize the differences in the approach toward archaeological facts and their historical interpretations.

HISTORY OF RESEARCH AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE TWO METHODOLOGIES

Beginning with Tufnell's suggestion to associate the destruction of Level III at Lachish with the Sennacherib campaign of 701 B.C.E. (Tufnell 1953), it became clear to most scholars in Israel that the *lmlk* jars should be connected to the period of Hezekiah's rule in Judah. On the other hand, many British and American scholars remained loyal to Starkey's opinion that connected the destruction of Level III at Lachish to the 597 Babylonian campaign; consequently, they continued supporting Diringier's classification of the *lmlk* stamp impressions as well as Albright's chronology for the different groups, and dated all of the 4-winged types to the time of Hezekiah and Manasseh while assigning the 2-winged types to the time of Josiah (Diringier 1941; 1949; Albright 1943).

David Ussishkin's excavations at Lachish (1973–1994) put an end to this debate. Ussishkin established that Lachish Level III was indeed devastated by Sennacherib in 701 B.C.E. and thereby confirmed the date of the *lmlk* stamp impressions sealed by this destruction layer.

During the early period of his research, Ussishkin was careful not to fix rigid a *terminus post quem* or *terminus ad quem* for the production and the use of the *lmlk* stamped jar handles. He stated that, "Royal storage jars of all types ... were used profusely in Level III prior to its destruction in 701 B.C.E., showing that all types of these jars were used concurrently in Judah during the reign of Hezekiah. On the basis of the present stratigraphical evidence it is impossible to determine whether all the various types were produced during the reign of Hezekiah, or whether some of the types were produced prior to his accession to the throne, but continued to be used during his reign. Since Tel Lachish was virtually deserted after 701 B.C.E., we also do not know whether royal storage jars were produced and used after that date, namely during the latter part of Hezekiah's reign and during the period following his death" (Ussishkin 1977: 56–57).

It was Nadav Na'aman (1979) who connected the system of the *lmlk* stamp impressions to Hezekiah's revolt and to the preparations in Judah before the Assyrian attack of 701 B.C.E. Na'aman concluded that the entire system of jars and stamp impressions should be limited to a very short three-year period between 704 and 701 B.C.E. Ussishkin accepted this *historical* reconstruction, stating that the "renewed excavations at Lachish confirmed that all the royal Judean storage jars belong to level III ... Na'aman (1979) convincingly showed that the royal storage jars were manufactured as part of Hezekiah's preparations for the Assyrian invasion, a con-

clusion which accords with their dating at Lachish to immediately prior to the destruction of Level III in 701 B.C.E., and may help in elucidating the question of their function” (2004b: 2141–2142).

From a methodological point of view, it should be stressed that while the interpretation of the many specific *lmlk* stamped handles sealed under destruction Level III at Lachish as the *terminus a quo* of the system is an archaeological fact, the assumption that the *production* of the jars and the system of stamping jar handles had begun only three years before that, as part of Hezekiah’s revolt, is for its part a historical conjecture.

The many *lmlk* stamp impressions discovered at Lachish opened the door for a detailed study of this phenomenon, but Ussishkin did not explore this option, and stated instead that *all* the different types of stamped handles were discovered sealed under the destruction of Level III (1977: 56–57). This statement was the outcome of a general assumption and not part of a careful and exact study of the actual finds. A study of this kind, with a clear separation of the different types of the *lmlk* stamp impressions and a study of the locations where they were found became possible when Lemaire published his classification of the *lmlk* stamp impressions (1981, and see a summary and description in Lipschits, Sergi and Koch 2010: 10–11). According to Lemaire, there are five main *lmlk* types of impressions. Two types are of the four-winged icon (**Ia-** is with lapidary inscriptions, *lmlk* in the upper register and place name in the lower register; **Ib-** is the same but with cursory inscriptions), and three types are of the two-winged icon (**IIa-** is with *lmlk* in the upper register and place name in the lower register; **IIb-** is similar, but the place name in lower register is divided into two on the sides of the lower part of the icon; **IIc-** is with place name in the upper register, without *lmlk*). Lemaire defined four variants in each of the five main types, according to the first letter of each place name that appears on them (**H-** for *ḥbrn* = Hebron; **S-** for *śwkh* = Socoh; **Z-** for *zyp* = Ziph; **M-** for *mmšt* = ?), and designated one additional type, with no place name, as **XII**.¹

Surprisingly, 30 years passed before a careful and exact study of the exact location, stratigraphy, and distribution of each type was published (Lipschits, Sergi and Koch 2010). As demonstrated above, this study shows that some types of the two-winged stamp impressions (Types IIb, IIc, XII) were never found sealed by the

¹ Lemaire (1981) identified another type of *lmlk* stamped handle, which he termed “Type OII,” and which bears only the two-winged sun disc without any inscription. He based this typology on one example from Ramat Raḥel (Aharoni 1962: Pl. 29: 9). However, a careful study of this handle demonstrated that it actually bears a stamp impression of Type XII. The same is true regarding another handle from the Jewish Quarter Excavations (Avigad and Barkay 2000: 261: 27) which, too, had been classified as Type OII but is undoubtedly another exemplar of Type XII. Ussishkin (2011: 221) is still citing this non-existent type, and criticizes Lipschits, Sergi and Koch for ignoring it.

701 B.C.E. destruction debris at Lachish, or by any destruction layer assigned to the 701 B.C.E. Assyrian campaign in the many sites excavated in Judah.

In his recent article, Ussishkin (2011: 237) acknowledged for the first time that this is indeed the archaeological situation in Lachish Level III and in all other contemporary destruction layers in Judah. Yet, he adhered to his 34-year-old general assumption: “The fact that neither storage jar nor handle stamped with these seals was found sealed by a 701 B.C.E. destruction debris is no proof for their late date”. He also failed to distinguish the differences between the distribution pattern of the different *mlk* types as well as the fate of the different regions in Judah during the Assyrian 701 B.C.E. campaign, and continued to interpret the *mlk* stamped handles as a short-term phenomenon initiated by King Hezekiah on the eve of the Assyrian onslaught. Furthermore, in his studies, including the most recent (2011), Ussishkin observes the history and archaeology of Judah through the narrow keyhole of Lachish, which was destroyed in 701 and then virtually abandoned for a long period. However, large areas of Judah, especially in the hill country, did not suffer destruction in 701 B.C.E. and continued to develop while Lachish lay in ruins, demonstrating a more gradual change in the region’s material culture (Lipschits, Sergi and Koch 2011).

The new understanding of the long-term administrative system of stamping jar handles from the late 8th to the 2nd century B.C.E.—when Judah was under the rule of the Assyrian, Egyptian, Babylonian, Persian, Ptolemaic and Seleucid empires—and especially the changes between the different types of the late 8th and 7th centuries B.C.E., allows for a refined interpretation of the changes in the history of Judah before and after the 701 B.C.E. Assyrian campaign, as well as of the developments in Judah during the 7th and early 6th centuries B.C.E. (Lipschits, Sergi and Koch 2011).

DIVERGENT METHODOLOGIES OF INTERPRETING ARCHAEOLOGICAL FINDS AND THEIR IMPACT ON HISTORICAL INTERPRETATION

Divergent methodologies and theories for interpreting the stamped jar phenomenon raise various points of dispute regarding the archaeological material and its historical interpretation. This is a good theoretical case-study for discussing how to deal with and interpret archaeological material, and how archaeological data impacts our understanding of history. Therefore, I would like to address here some disputed subjects concerning the late Iron Age stamped jar handles and present the relevant archaeological data on one hand, and options for their interpretation on the other. Above all, I will emphasize the implications of these interpretations for our understanding of the history of Judah.

WHEN DID THE LMLK SYSTEM BEGIN?

It is a clear archaeological fact that all early *lmlk* types discovered on jar handles sealed by the destruction debris of Level III at Lachish and other destruction levels that date to the same 701 B.C.E. event were in use earlier. But can archaeology tell us how much earlier and when, exactly, this system was initiated? The question of how long these jars had been in use before 701 B.C.E. has no clear archaeological answer, and the absence of stamped jars in destruction levels that date to the early last third of the 8th century B.C.E. can be interpreted only as the *terminus post quem* for the system. The answer to the question of when the production of the stamped jars began cannot be more than a historical assumption with no clear-cut archaeological evidence supporting it.

Ussishkin's statement that the system began in 704 B.C.E. and was in use for only three years is a historical conjecture with no real archaeological base, as mentioned by Ussishkin himself (1977: 56–57). The statement that, “[i]t is generally agreed that pottery found in a stratum sealed beneath a layer of destruction debris dates to the last stage in the history of that stratum” (Ussishkin 2011: 223) is not a clear indication of how long pottery vessels and other finds were in use before the destruction and when they were produced; nor does it indicate whether the same rule should be applied to cooking pots, bowls and jars, especially when, for example, a few *lmlk* jars were discovered at sites that were built during the second half of the 7th century B.C.E. (Lipschits, Sergi and Koch 2010: 8).

Assuming that all *lmlk* jar production was limited to only three years, it is difficult to understand how, in such a short period, during a revolt against the Assyrian empire, such a sophisticated system was developed—one with such an abundance of seals in use for stamping the jar handles, so many stamped jars, so many different symbols on the seals, and such a wide distribution of the jars; furthermore, many of these jars were found at sites that were not part of Judah's preparations for the Assyrian attack, most of which would not be destroyed in 701 B.C.E. and would continue to develop in the 7th century (Lipschits, Sergi and Koch 2010: 6–7; see already Vaughn 1999: 136–152). Furthermore, Level III at Lachish was probably founded in the mid-8th century B.C.E. (Ussishkin 2004a: 82–83), and unstamped jars of the type bearing the *lmlk* stamp impressions had already appeared in the late 9th–early 8th centuries B.C.E. (Shai and Maier 2003; Gitin 2006; Sergi, Karasik, Gadot and Lipschits forthcoming). The fact that stamped jar handles (of other types) continued to be in use during the 7th century B.C.E. and later, when the Babylonian, Persian, Ptolemaic and Seleucid empires ruled in Judah, does not support the idea that the *lmlk* administrative system was an *ad hoc* operation. Rather, the *lmlk* system represents the first stage in an enduring administrative and economic system that was established when Judah became an Assyrian vassal kingdom (Lipschits, Sergi and Koch 2010: 7, with further details and literature).

This is, of course, a historical assumption, and even a speculation, just like the assertion that the system was limited to the three years of Judah's revolt against Assyria. However, in contrast to the "minimalistic theory," which looks at the *lmlk* system as a unique phenomenon, and separates it from the many other groups of stamped jar handles, Lipschits, Sergi and Koch's study provides a much broader look at the stamped jars as part of a large administrative system involving many different seals that were used over the course of long periods accounts for the *lmlk* system as part of many other groups of stamped jar handles. According to this historical explanation, the system of stamped jars was initiated in the early stages of Judah's subjugation to the Assyrian empire, and continued for about 600 years, disappearing only after the Hasmonean revolt. This system functioned as part of the Judahite administration under imperial rule, probably for collecting agricultural products at one main collection center. It seems that the first collection center was Lachish, and this role can explain the fate of this site and the fate of the Shephelah during the Assyrian 701 B.C.E. campaign. It can be assumed that Ramat Raḥel was initially founded as a Judahite administrative center under the supervision and guidance of imperial forces, probably after the destruction of Lachish in 701 B.C.E. (Lipschits and Gadot 2008; Lipschits, Gadot, Arubas and Oeming 2009; 2011).

As a historical assumption, we may then date the beginning of the *lmlk* stamp impression system to the beginning of the last quarter of the 8th century B.C.E., the period when Judah became a vassal kingdom, probably during the final years of King Ahaz's rule in Judah. During this period many other changes occurred in Judah's economy and administration, such as the technological changes in the agricultural production installations (Faust and Weiss 2005; Katz 2008: 55–59), the change in Judahite pottery from non-standardized, small-scale production in local workshops to a standardized mass-production industry with a limited variety of shapes and a broad distribution network (Mazar 1990: 509; Zimhoni 1997: 171–172; 2004: 1705–1707; Katz 2008: 52–53), and the appearance of the new system of marked weights (Kletter 1998: 145–147; Katz 2008: 77–79, with further literature).

THE STRATIGRAPHY AND DETAILED TYPOLOGY OF THE STAMPED JAR HANDLES

Ussishkin's recent position (2011) that *not* all types of *lmlk* stamp impressions were found sealed by the 701 B.C.E. destruction debris at Lachish, based on Lipschits, Sergi and Koch (2010), is commendable. However, his claim that this clear stratigraphic fact concerning a portion of the *lmlk* types "is no proof for their late date" (*ibid.*: 237), stands in tension with the actual archaeological data. Facts should always come before general interpretations, and in this case, too, Hercule Poirot's famous statement, *If the fact will*

not fit the theory—let the theory go (cited by Ussishkin 2011: 220), should prevail.

Lipschits, Sergi and Koch's detailed study (2010) demonstrated that it is possible to isolate the four-winged Type Ia and Ib *mlk* stamp impressions and the two-winged Type IIa as those found sealed under the destruction layer of Level III at Lachish and contemporaneous strata. These types, which date to the end of the 8th century B.C.E., should be considered the "early *mlk* types" (*ibid.*: 11 and Fig. 1). Three types of *mlk* stamp impressions (Lemaire's IIb, IIc and XII) appear only in hill-country sites not destroyed in 701 B.C.E., or in strata attributed to the 7th century B.C.E. with not even one stamped handle of these types found sealed under a clear 701 B.C.E. destruction level; hence, it is archaeological logic to assume that they were produced after the 701 campaign, at the beginning of the 7th century B.C.E. (*idem.*: 11, 13–17). These types should be considered as the "late *mlk* types".

WAS THERE A GRADUAL DEVELOPMENT WITHIN THE EARLY LMLK STAMP IMPRESSIONS?

As stated above, the jar handles bearing the different Ia and Ib four-winged types and IIa two-winged types were all discovered sealed under the destruction debris of Level III at Lachish and other parallel destruction levels at other sites in the Shephelah. The question is whether one can find any indication of different stages in the development of these pre-701 B.C.E. *mlk* types. In his recent rejoinder, Ussishkin states that there is no evidence for such differentiation (2011: 222–223), even though he was the first to notice one of the optional keys for an answer to this question: the connection between the 2-winged *mlk* and the private stamp impressions on jar handles, which from the outset of the research were considered part of the royal Judahite storage jars (Ussishkin 2004b: 2143; and cf. Lipschits, Sergi and Koch 2010: 26, n. 45).

The 43 types of private stamp impressions known thus far from excavations and surveys were classified according to the different variants of the personal names (Lipschits Sergi and Koch 2010: 22–27). The main concentration of the handles bearing this kind of stamp impression is in the Shephelah of Judah (132 out of 187 that have a known origin), and most of the types were discovered at Lachish, primarily in the Level III destruction layer, as well as at other sites that were destroyed during this period. It is clear that all the jar handles bearing private stamp impressions are dated to the stratum prior to the 701 B.C.E. Assyrian attack (*idem.*: 13–17).

Since handles bearing private stamp impressions represent only about 15% of the entire corpus of *mlk* stamp impressions, it is reasonable to assume that this system was in use for a much shorter time. In contrast to Na'aman (1986: 16–17), who ascribed the entire *mlk* stamp impression system to Judah's preparations for the Assyrian campaign, Lipschits, Sergi and Koch (2010: 26) suggested that the unique nature of private stamp impressions on

the royal Judahite jars combined with their limited duration before Sennacherib's campaign, the fact that their distribution tends to be restricted to the Shephelah, and their relative scarcity (1:7 in proportion to the *lmlk* stamp impressions), lead to the hypothesis that the private stamp impression system was adopted for a short period by the administrative and economic system of the *lmlk* stamp impressions, and was used as part of the preparations for the Assyrian onslaught. For a short while, the private stamp impression system replaced the *lmlk* system. Following the Assyrian campaign, the private stamp impression system disappeared, while the *lmlk* system continued to develop, with the necessary changes caused by the massive Assyrian destruction.

Lipschits, Sergi and Koch (*ibid.*: 17) further suggested seeing the connection between the private and the two-winged *lmlk* stamp impressions as the main clue for the earlier date of the four-winged stamp impressions of Types Ia and Ib, and for the later change to the two-winged stamp impressions of Type IIa, which continued after 701 B.C.E. and developed into the late *lmlk* two-winged types. Based on historical evidence, a good assumption is that when the "private" impressions were stamped, probably as part of the adaptation of the *lmlk* system to the preparations in Judah for the Assyrian attack, four-winged *lmlk* stamp impressions were no longer stamped on new jars, and only old jars stamped by seals of these types were still reused in large numbers. The main archaeological argument in support of this suggested dating is that among all the early types discovered at Lachish, many more Types Ia and Ib four-winged handles were found than Type IIa two-winged handles. This may indicate that storage jars bearing a four-winged emblem were in use for a longer period of time than those bearing a two-winged emblem.

THE DATE OF THE CONCENTRIC CIRCLE INCISIONS ON JAR HANDLES

Ussishkin (2011: 233–235) argues that all the jar handles with circle incisions should also be dated to the pre-701 B.C.E. destruction level. Yet, not a single handle with such an incision has thus far been discovered sealed by the Lachish III destruction level or by any other destruction level assigned to the 701 B.C.E. event. Here, too, the archaeological facts do not fit Ussishkin's theory, who refused to accept that, from the archaeological point of view, the *terminus post quem* of the concentric circle incisions is 701 B.C.E. Furthermore, only six jar handles with incised concentric circles out of the 285 discovered thus far were excavated in the Judahite Shephelah (Lipschits, Sergi and Koch 2011: 31), all in post-701 B.C.E. strata or without clear archaeological context, while most of the handles were uncovered at highland sites.

It is clear that the incisions were made after the jars were fired, and that they thus postdate the stamping of the *lmlk* impressions. This should be interpreted as a system of recycling jars, and as a

new phase of the Judahite administrative apparatus, overlapping and possibly replacing the original *lmlk* system. The existence of handles bearing concentric circles but not *lmlk* stamp impressions may indicate that the former were developed as an independent system of marking the same type of storage jars—some of them were old jars that were reused, while others were new jars, probably replacing broken or missing containers.

The date of the jars with concentric circle incised handles can be deduced from their distribution pattern, which is quite similar to that of the jars with the “late” types of *lmlk* stamp impressions dated to the early 7th century B.C.E. This is different from the distribution pattern of jars with “early” types of *lmlk* stamp impressions, dated to the late 8th century B.C.E.; it is also different from the distribution pattern of the rosette stamp impressions, which are dated to the late 7th century B.C.E. (Lipschits, Sergi and Koch 2011: 7–8). For this reason, the system of concentric circle incisions should be dated to the middle of the 7th century B.C.E., when it overlapped with the final phase of the late *lmlk* system, prior to the introduction of the rosette stamped handle system. This date, however, cannot be proven archaeologically, since there are no destruction layers between 701 and 586 B.C.E., and thus no distinctive pottery assemblages from this period in Judah.

THE DATE OF THE HANDLES DISCOVERED OUT OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Ussishkin’s statement that the few handles bearing incised circles, which were discovered out of archaeological context, “have to be assigned to Level III destroyed in 701 B.C.E.” (2011: 233), as well as the similar assertion that the four jar handles with *lmlk* Type IIB stamp impressions “have to be assigned to Level III destroyed in 701 B.C.E.” (2011: 237), are contrary to common archaeological logic and method. Hundreds of stamped jar handles have thus far been discovered *in situ*, and research can no longer be based on vague interpretations. Archaeologists must always look at the facts and interpret the facts for what they are. They should never favor theories and preconceptions over facts.

There is, of course, always the possibility of a new find (e.g., a handle bearing an incised circle, or a late *lmlk* stamp impression type in a clear destruction level assigned to 701 B.C.E.), which will force scholars to change their theories. But until these new finds and new facts have been discovered, it is better to let the theories be based on facts rather than vice versa.

**CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT
THE IMPACT OF THE CURRENT ARCHAEOLOGICAL
DEBATE ON THE HISTORY OF JUDAH**

The current debate between the two methods—the one summarized and presented by Ussishkin (2011), and the one presented by Lipschits, Sergi and Koch (2010; 2011) and summarized in this article—is not merely archaeological or focused on technical archaeological arguments, but has far-reaching historical implications on our understanding of the history of Judah during the late First Temple period and most of the Second Temple period. Was the system of stamping jar handles part of an ongoing administrative system or was it an *ad hoc* military system?

Ussishkin assumes that all the different stamped handles were part of two short periods of preparations in Judah, before the Assyrian 701 B.C.E. onslaught (all the *lmlk* and “private” stamped handles, as well as the handles bearing incised circles), and before the 586 Babylonian attack (the rosette handles). In this article I have tried to summarize the main arguments for the new theory, according to which the *lmlk* system was already initiated at the beginning of the last quarter of the 8th century B.C.E. (the early *lmlk* types) and continued during the first quarter of the 7th century B.C.E. (the late *lmlk* types) and during the middle of the 7th century (the concentric circle incisions) (cf. Lipschits, Sergi and Koch 2010; 2011). The 24 sub-types of the rosette stamp impressions, which were stamped with 28 stamps (Cahill 1995; Koch 2008: 14–29; Koch and Lipschits 2010: 15–17), as well as the 224 handles with rosette stamp impressions, indicate the complexity of the system and its long-term usage (Koch 2008: 12–30). From the historical point of view, Naʿaman (1991: 31–32) showed the correlation between the distribution of the rosette stamped handles and the town lists of Judah and Benjamin (Josh 15:21–62; 18:21–28), which are dated to the time of King Josiah. It is difficult to accept the idea that two similar systems existed in Judah, with a break of more than 100 years between them. The assumption that the system of marking jar handles continued to exist during the 7th century B.C.E., with the concentric incised circles as the connecting system in between the late *lmlk* and the rosette systems, seems much sounder on both archaeological and historical grounds.

Furthermore, this same administrative system of stamping jar handles continued in Judah for an additional 450 years after 586 B.C.E.—a long period with no known revolts or destructions, when Judah was first a Babylonian province (the *mwšh* and lion stamped handles; see Lipschits 2010), and then became a Persian, Ptolemaic and Seleucid province (the *yhwd* and the *yršlm* stamped handles;

see Vanderhooff and Lipschits 2007; Lipschits and Vanderhooff 2011; Ariel and Shoham 2000: 159–163).

In summary, three points should be emphasized: (1) Future reconstructions of the history of the late First Temple period should use the chronological scheme of the *mlk* and rosette stamped jar handles as presented by Lipschits, Sergi and Koch (2010; 2011) as an indication for the continuous administrative system in Judah for stamping storage jars between ca. 730 and 586 B.C.E.; (2) The distribution of the stamped handles can document the administration of the Judahite kingdom during the late 8th and 7th centuries B.C.E., and is one of the most important archaeological tools in exploring and understanding the material culture of this period; (3) The *mlk*, concentric circles and rosette jars can no longer be interpreted as distinct official Judahite systems for marking storage jars that were in use for a short time before a catastrophic foreign invasion of Judah. Rather, these should be seen as part of an ongoing administrative system that was initiated in the early stages of Judah's enslavement to the Assyrian empire, and continued for about 600 years, disappearing only after the Hasmonean revolt.

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