



A Hebrew Seal Depicting a Sailing Ship

Nahman Avigad

Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research, No. 246. (Spring, 1982), pp. 59-62.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0003-097X%28198221%290%3A246%3C59%3AAHSDAS%3E2.0.CO%3B2-2>

Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research is currently published by The American Schools of Oriental Research.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/asor.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

The JSTOR Archive is a trusted digital repository providing for long-term preservation and access to leading academic journals and scholarly literature from around the world. The Archive is supported by libraries, scholarly societies, publishers, and foundations. It is an initiative of JSTOR, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to help the scholarly community take advantage of advances in technology. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

A Hebrew Seal Depicting a Sailing Ship

NAHMAN AVIGAD
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem
Jerusalem, Israel

A most beautiful ancient seal bearing a Hebrew inscription and depicting a sailing ship was brought to my attention by an anonymous American collector. He let me have an excellent impression of the original seal, a photograph of which is reproduced here.¹ I lack information as to the exact form of the seal, its material, and color, but we may assume with a high degree of certainty that it is of the scaraboid type common to most of the known Hebrew seals. Its impression reveals that the seal is of an oval shape 18 mm. long and 15 mm. wide. It is made most probably of a hard stone, as can be inferred from the perfect execution and the fine state of preservation of the engravings (fig. 1).

The surface of the seal is surrounded by a single oval line and is divided by two double lines into three registers of which the bottom one is no more than a small, plain exergue. The upper register is large, containing the depiction of a ship and the first line of the inscription. The lower register contains the second line of the inscription.

The Inscription

The two-line inscription reads as follows:

לאניהו . ב	<i>Belonging to ʿOniyahu</i>
מירב . ן	<i>Son of Merab</i>

Between the words are dividing dots. The script represents the semi-cursive formal Hebrew of the 8th-7th century B.C. at its best. It exhibits no



Fig. 1. Impression of the seal of ʿOniyahu, Son of Merab.

special key letters that could provide a closer date.

The name אֲנִיָּהוּ, ʿOniyahu, is not attested in the Bible, but it occurs in a Hebrew tomb inscription from the 8th century B.C. found at Khirbet el-Qôḿ in the Hebron hills (Dever 1969-1970: 159). The name derives from אָץ, "strength" (cf. Gen 49:3). The personal name אָץ (Num 16:1) is a hypocoristicon of the theophorous אֲנִיָּהוּ, "Yahweh is my strength"; and the same is true in all probability of the name אֲנִי, which appears on another seal (Diringer 1934: 239).

The name מִירב is of an unknown etymology. It is the *plene* spelling of מֶרֶב, Merab, the name of the eldest daughter of King Saul (1 Sam 14:49).

Is מִירָב of our seal a matronymic? If so, this would be the first occurrence of a matronymic on Hebrew and related seals, where patronymics are generally the rule. In the Hebrew Bible several persons are listed in terms of their mother's name, e.g., יְהוֹכָד בִּן שִׁמְרִית, חֲנָן בֶּן מַעֲכָה, יוֹאָכָב בֶּן צוּרִיהָ, אֲבִישִׁי בֶן צוּרִיהָ, etc. In Elephantine the fem. מַפְטָחִיהָ (Cowley 1923: 13: 2) appears also as a matronymic (22: 135). Our seal is thus not exceptional. On the other hand, names of dual genders are not uncommon in the OT and elsewhere, for example, אֲבִיָּה, נֹעֲדִיָּה, שְׁלֵמִית. Note that גִּמְרָה is fem. in the OT (Hos 1:3) and masc. in Samaria Ostrakon no. 50 (Diringer 1934: 34, 44); סָלֵמָה is masc. in the OT (1 Chr 9:7) and fem. in Elephantine (Cowley 1923: 18: 2). Thus מִירָב of our seal could possibly be also a masculine name.

The Ship

On the top of the seal surface there is a nicely executed engraving of a sailing ship. It is hardly 8 mm. in length yet despite its minute size the engraver succeeded in giving this ship a realistic appearance. It has a rounded hull with raised prow and stern of equal height. The curved prow terminates with the head of an animal that seems to have a short horn (?) projecting from its forehead. But most probably it is meant to represent the head of a horse. The sternpost is headed by an unidentifiable, bifurcated top-piece.

The stern is equipped with a steering oar, but otherwise no oars are shown on the ship so the vessel had to rely on sail power. The gunwale of the deck is screened by a line of round shields. The rig of the ship consists of a single mast set amidship, supported fore and aft by two shrouds and carrying on a yard a broad square sail.

This is the first realistic representation of a sailing ship found on a Hebrew seal,² and the only one of its kind to appear on any ancient piece of Israelite art dateable to the First Temple period. Whether the seal owner, who decorated his seal with the emblem of a ship, was himself a mariner or otherwise connected with the sea trade cannot be established. Perhaps he was. But another, more likely interpretation emerges. The motivation for using a ship as an emblem should probably not be sought in the profession of the seal owner, but rather in the meaning of his name.

The interpretation of אֲנִיָּה, as mentioned above,

"Yahweh is my strength," is certainly the correct one. However, the word אֲנִיָּה in biblical Hebrew, shortened from אֲנִיָּהָ, means also "ship" (1 Kgs 9:26-7; Is 33:21), and the name אֲנִיָּהָ can be also interpreted verbally as "The ship of Yahweh" or "Yahweh is a/my ship." This, of course, does not make much sense.

Oniyahu, the owner of the seal, was indeed aware of the ambiguous meaning of his name, and, using this play on words, he adopted a ship as the heraldic design for his seal. Thus the ship became a pictorial representation of the seal owner's name by the way he interpreted it for this specific purpose.

This is the third Hebrew seal found so far bearing an emblem expressing graphically the meaning of the owner's name—a kind of rebus. The former two symbols were: a locust standing for the name גִּוְכָה = גִּוְכִי (Avigad 1966: pl. 4:c); and a bird standing for the name עֶרֶב (Avigad 1981, 57:3). Such an emblem-consciousness among the aniconic Hebrews, unparalleled on other seals, is rather surprising. It seems that glyptic art in ancient Israel was much more sophisticated and independent than has been generally believed.

The engraver of our seal obviously had in mind a real ship of a known type and not an abstract design. We have no information about the shape of Israelite ships. The Hebrews were for historical reasons not a seafaring people, the larger part of the Mediterranean coast being occupied by Phoenicians and Philistines. When Solomon (965-928 B.C.) built a fleet and developed the port of Ezion-Geber as a base for long voyages, he had to rely on the aid and experience of Hiram, king of Tyre (1 Kgs 9:27; 2 Chr 9:21). When Jehoshaphat, king of Judah (867-846 B.C.) attempted to repeat Solomon's feat in building ships of Tarshish (אֲנִיֹּת תַרְשִׁישׁ) at Ezion-Geber, he was offered help and advice by Ahaziah, king of Israel (1 Kgs 22:49-50; 2 Chr 20:36-7). This shows that, as a result of the traditional cooperation with the Phoenicians, the northern kingdom of Israel became more experienced in shipbuilding than Judah was. Israel's harbors were Dor and Jaffa, which became later Phoenician territory.

Thus, the ship of our seal may have been meant to represent an Israelite ship, perhaps of the type of the famous Tarshish ships, which seem to have been merchantmen fit for long voyages. Looking for parallels, we should consider first of all Phoenician ships that served most probably as

prototypes for Israelite ships. However, the curious fact is that, unlike Egyptian and Greek artists, the seafaring Phoenicians, in spite of being ardent traders and efficient craftsmen, left no representations of their seagoing vessels in their prolific decorative art, except for warships minted on coins.

Therefore, in search for contemporary parallels to our ship, we must depend solely upon the few representations of Phoenician ships that have been preserved on Assyrian reliefs. We may distinguish three main types of vessels.

(1) On the reliefs of the palace of Sargon at Khorsabad (ca. 710 B.C.) are depicted boats of the kind of coastal craft engaged in hauling logs along the Phoenician coast (Pritchard 1954: 107; Harden 1962: pls. 48-9). Some of them are masted, but most of them are not. They are distinctive by their upright stem- and sternposts of equal height. One of these sterns, and sometimes both, bear a horse's head as figurehead (Pritchard 1954: 356). The Greeks called such vessels *hippoi* ("horses").

(2) Heavier seagoing vessels are represented in reliefs from the palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh (ca. 690 B.C.). They depict a fleet of Phoenician transport galleys escorted by warships evacuating the city of Tyre (Casson 1971: pl. 78). These transport galleys have a rounded bowl-shaped hull,³ and the prow and stern are of equal height. The sternpost is adorned with a goose- or duck-head, which is not distinct in Layard's drawing but is clearly distinguishable on the photograph published by Barnett (1969: pl. 1:2). They have an upper deck. The gunwale is lined with round shields, behind which are shown soldiers and passengers. These ships are powered by two banks of oars with no sail.

(3) The warships shown on this relief are somewhat similar in shape to (2), but they have a straight prow and are equipped with a sail (besides the two banks of oars) and also with a pointed ram at the front to batter the enemy's ship.

How does the ship of our seal compare with the three types of vessels described above? It matches

none of them, but combines features of each of them. It has a rounded hull (type 2); a horse-headed prow (type 1); a sternpost of equal height and a gunwale with a line of shields for additional protection (type 2); a steering oar and a mast with sail (type 3). But it has no bank of oars.

Our ship is definitely not a warship, despite the shields (compare type 2), but a merchantship propelled by a sail only. The sailing ship is the ocean-going cargo carrier par excellence. We know of no contemporary Phoenician parallel for it. A much later Sidonian sailing cargo vessel is depicted on a sarcophagus of the 2nd century B.C. in the National Museum at Beirut (Casson 1971: fig. 156). Perhaps our ship belongs to the category of Phoenician merchantmen known from literature as *gaulos* (tube). Casson says that none of the preserved representations of Phoenician ships are identifiable with it (Casson 1971: 66, n. 114).

Conclusion

The significance of our seal may be summarized as follows:

(a) It is unique among the seals and a masterpiece of glyptic art of high aesthetic value.

(b) It bears the first representation of an 8th-7th century B.C. Israelite ship and reflects most probably an unknown contemporaneous Phoenician prototype. Experts in nautical history may succeed in evaluating the contribution of our seal to the investigation of ancient shipping in the Eastern Mediterranean more deeply than has been done in this rather concise treatment of the subject.

(c) Of epigraphic interest is the equivocal meaning of the seal-owner's name, which was the cause of using a ship as the emblem of the seal. Incidentally, ²Oniyahu was probably a Judahite, since in the northern kingdom of Israel his name would probably have been spelled ²Oniyau (אניו), according to the common usage prevailing in Israel to shorten the Yahwistic ending of theophorous names.⁴

NOTES

¹Although I have not seen the original seal, its impression leaves no doubt whatsoever regarding its genuineness. I am taking this opportunity to express my sincere thanks to the unknown collector for putting the impression of this unique seal at my disposal. This article is being published in an American journal in the hope that it will come to his attention. I should be most grateful if he will contact me and provide me with more information about the seal.

²One Hebrew seal (Diringer 1934: 256-58, pl. 22: 13a) inscribed גרליהו בן גרליהו bears on its reverse a schematically incised representation of a bowl-shaped boat with high prow and stern ending with bird heads. On the deck of the boat is depicted a bearded man seated on a throne, flanked by two stylized palm trees. It is reminiscent of a sacred bark. The genuineness and the meaning of this obscure scene on a

Hebrew seal are widely disputed.

³In the drawing of Layard these vessels are somewhat shortened. A photograph published by Barnett (1969, pl. 1: 2) shows more elongated proportions, closer to the hull of our ship.

⁴When this article was in galley proofs a recent publication on the subject of ships came to my attention. Unfortunately I was unable to benefit from this useful book, but I learned the interesting fact that two seal-impressions dating to the Persian period were found at Persepolis which depict skillfully executed Phoenician war galleys. See Marie-Christine de Graeve, *The Ships of the Ancient Near East* (c. 2000-5 B.C.), *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 7 (Louvain, 1981), pp. 74-75, 141; pls. XLVI:106-07.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- | | |
|---|--|
| Avigad, N. | Cowley, A. |
| 1966 A Hebrew Seal with a Family Emblem. <i>Israel Exploration Journal</i> 16: 50-53. | 1923 <i>Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.</i> Oxford: Clarendon. |
| 1981 On Titles and Symbols on Hebrew Seals. <i>Eretz-Israel</i> 15 (the Aharoni volume): 303-05 (Hebrew). | Dever, W.G. |
| Barnett, R. D. | 1969- Iron Age Epigraphic Material from the Area of |
| 1958 Early Shipping in the Near East, <i>Antiquity</i> 32: 220-30. | 1970 Khirbet El-Kôm, <i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i> 40-41: 139-204. |
| 1969 Ezekiel and Tyre, <i>Eretz-Israel</i> 9 (the Albright volume): 1-13. | Diringer, D. |
| Casson, L. | 1934 <i>Le iscrizioni antico-ebraiche Palestinesi</i> . Florence. |
| 1971 <i>Ships and Seamanship in the Ancient World</i> . Princeton: Princeton University. | Harden, D. |
| | 1962 <i>The Phoenicians</i> . London: Thames and Hudson. |
| | Pritchard, J. B. |
| | 1954 <i>The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament</i> . Princeton: Princeton University. |