THREE CROSS-SHAPED “TET” STAMP IMPRESSIONS FROM TELL EN-NASBEH¹

Jeffrey R. Zorn

Among the previously unpublished materials from W.F. Badè’s excavations at Tell en-Nasbeh (probably biblical Mizpah of Benjamin), 12 km. northwest of Jerusalem, are three stamp impressions (Figs. 1–3). Each impression consists of a circular field in which is centered a cross or tet design. The arms of the cross in all cases reach the circular border, and in some instances appear to extend a bit beyond the border. Each impression is stamped on a single-ridge handle near where it joins the body of a storage jar. Unfortunately, no part of the rim was preserved with any of the examples, so the type of storage vessel(s) stamped remains unknown.

The first impression (Fig. 1) was discovered in surface debris in Square R12 and was given provenance number x14 for that square; it was not assigned a separate museum number. The diameter of the impression is 14 mm. The surface and sub-surface colour of the handle are 7.5YR 7/4 (pink) according to the Munsell system, and the core was evenly fired throughout.

The second impression (Fig. 2) bears provenance number x5 from Room 497 in Square AE16; it was given Museum Number 2526. In the architectural re-analysis of Tell en-Nasbeh this room was assigned to Building 159.03 of Stratum 3, which chronologically spans the Iron Age II.² This structure underwent several modifications and partial rebuildings over the course of its use. As is the case with many of the excavations of its day, at Tell en-Nasbeh the precise find spot of artifacts within the architectural features cannot usually be determined. It is impossible to say if the handle came from the floor of the room, from debris used to level the area for subsequent construction after the demolition of the building, or from a later layer. Thus, a date cannot be assigned to this impression based on its architectural or artifactual context. The diameter of the impression is 19 mm. The

¹ I would like to thank Mr. Kevin Kaiser, Co-ordinator of the Badè Institute of Biblical Archaeology, for facilitating my study of these impressions, and the Institute itself for granting permission to publish them. I would also like to thank Ilan Sharon and Avi Ofer for reading an earlier version of this article and for their helpful comments. The drawings in Fig. 4 were produced by scanning the original millimetre record card drawings into a computer, converting the resulting bitmap images to vector-based images, scaling all drawings to 1:10, and printing them on a 300 dpi laser printer.

² In the final report of the Tell en-Nasbeh excavations published by McCown and Wampler, Roman numerals were used to designate the stratigraphy (TN I:179–186). In order to avoid confusion with this earlier scheme the re-interpretation of the stratigraphy uses Arabic numerals. For a summary of the revised stratigraphy see Zorn 1993b. The other rooms assigned to Building 159.03 are 498, 503, 508, 583 and 585.
Fig. 1. Stamp impression.

Fig. 2. Stamp impression.
surface and sub-surface colour of the handle are 2.5YR6/6 (light red). The core was unevenly fired and grey in colour.

The third impression (Fig. 3) bears provenance number x35 from Cistern 127 in Square AK21; this piece was also not given a museum number. This cistern has two mouths; at least one of these, Mouth A, was found covered with stone blocking; the second opening does not appear in any photograph, nor is there any written description of it. Unfortunately, it is not certain that the cistern was found sealed, as this would have provided an unequivocal dating for this class of impressions. The contents of Cistern 127 and their use in dating the impressions will be discussed below. The diameter of the impression is 14 mm. The surface and sub-surface colour are 2.5YR6/4 (light reddish brown). The core was evenly fired.

Cross- or tet-shaped stamp impressions, not incisions, are relatively rare. Macalister and Duncan recovered seven in their excavations at the Ophel of Jerusalem. Aharoni recovered another seven at Ramat Râhel (Aharoni 1956:148; Pl. 27:5; RR I:35; Pl. 30:4; RR II: 22, 46). On the Jerusalem and Ramat Râhel pieces

3 This cistern can be seen in excavation photograph 104 in the Badé Institute collection. For a discussion of its stratigraphic position see also Zorn 1993a: 899–901, 903–904.
4 Macalister and Duncan 1926:209; Figs. 202.7, 203.8, 204 top row, first handle and bottom row, last handle; Duncan 1931:142; Pl. opposite p. 141, first four impressions in fourth line and impressions two to four in third line.
there is no circle surrounding the cross. This may be due to the stamp not being pressed deep enough to leave the full impression, or these may be variants of the Tell en-Nasbeh impressions. The specific find spots were not reported for any of these 14 impressions, making it impossible to date them. The geographic distribution of all 17 impressions is very restricted, extending in a radius of no more than 12 km. around Jerusalem.

Cistern 127 in Square AK21 lies in the southwest corner of the site and was excavated in 1927. Both of its mouths are partially under the northeast wall of Room 37. This stretch of wall marks the southernmost limit to which the site’s ring-road can be traced; even here only the southwest side of the road is preserved. This road was used throughout Stratum 3. Plan 1947 shows two stones extending out from the wall, forming almost a curb around half of Cistern 127’s Mouth A. Thus, though the wall was built across the cistern mouth, the cistern continued in use. Water running along the road was no doubt collected here.

Cistern 127 yielded a small but rich collection of intact or restorable vessels. Unfortunately, at the time the cistern was excavated descriptions of wares were very sketchy; what is available is reproduced in Table 1 and Fig. 4. Save for lamp fragment x23 and pyxis fragment x31, the assemblage seems to fit comfortably into the early 6th century B.C.E. This relative homogeneity may indicate that both openings were covered when the cistern went out of use.

Jug Type 673 is known from En-gedi V (En-gedi: 32; Fig. 20.6). The red-slipped Jug Type 607 was found in En-gedi V and in Tomb 106 at Lachish, equivalent to Level II (En-gedi: 30; Fig. 19:11; Lachish III:293, 327; Pl. 84:193–194, 198–199; Class J9). Jugs of Types 585, 586 and 588 were present in Lachish Level II and in the lowest layer of Cistern 1 at Tell el-Fül (Lachish III:291–292, 327; Pl. 86:238; Class J7b; Lachish V: Pls. 47:23–24; 50:13; Type J60; Tell el-Fül: 90; Pls. 53–56). The elongated juglet Type 679 was found primarily in Level II at Lachish, though two came from Level III and three from Level I, and the lowest layer of Cistern 1 at Tell el-Fül (Lachish III:296, 298, 328; Pl. 88:292; Class D5b; Stern 1982:119; Tell el-Fül: 92; Pl. 60:8). Holemouth Jar 323 has parallels in En-gedi V and Lachish III–I (En-gedi: 32; Fig. 21:5; Lachish III:317, 329; Pl. 95:492; Class S10). Jars with a body similar to Storage Jar 359 have been found in En-gedi V, Arad VII and VI and 6th century Babylonian destruction deposits in Jerusalem (Herzog a.o. 1984: Figs. 25:11; 29:11; En-gedi: 32–33; Fig. 22:4; Shiloh 1984:17–19; Fig. 30:2; Mazar and Mazar 1989:16–17; Pls. 4:1–4, 5:1–4). Storage jars of Type 275 were found in

5 Aharoni (RRI:35) refers to them as taw impressions. The difference between taw and tet is that the latter is inscribed within a circle and the former stands by itself.

6 For a detailed summary of Stratum 3 see Zorn 1993a:114–162.

7 This plan is kept in the Badè Institute of Biblical Archaeology.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Surface Colour</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1a</td>
<td>Jug 673</td>
<td>H 267</td>
<td>2.5YR6/4: light reddish brown — “red ware”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1b</td>
<td>Jug 673*</td>
<td>H 216+</td>
<td>“brown ware, red surface”</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Jug 673</td>
<td>H 245</td>
<td>2.5YR4/4: reddish brown — “light red ware”</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Jug 673</td>
<td>H 270+</td>
<td>2.5YR5/6: red — “red ware”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Jug 607</td>
<td>H 150</td>
<td>10R4/6: red — “light red ware, red slip, slightly polished surface”</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Jug 607</td>
<td>D 65</td>
<td>“light red ware, poorly polished red slip”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Jug 585</td>
<td>H 179</td>
<td>“reddish brown ware”</td>
</tr>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Jug 585</td>
<td>H 233</td>
<td>10YR7/3: very pale brown — “brown ware, buff surface”</td>
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<td>8</td>
<td>Jug 585</td>
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<td>10YR7/3: very pale brown — “reddish brown ware”</td>
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<td>9</td>
<td>Jug 585</td>
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<td>10YR7/3: very pale brown — “red ware”</td>
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<td>10</td>
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<td>11</td>
<td>Jug 585</td>
<td>H 248</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>Juglet 679</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>Juglet 679</td>
<td>H 161</td>
<td>5YR6/6: reddish yellow — “reddish brown ware”</td>
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<td>15</td>
<td>Juglet 679*</td>
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<td>Krater 1526</td>
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<td>Bowl 1189</td>
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<td>18</td>
<td>Rattle 1818</td>
<td>H 100</td>
<td>2.5YR4/4: reddish brown — “reddish ware, contained pebbles”</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>Ellipsoid weight*</td>
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<td>20</td>
<td>Shell*</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Jug 588</td>
<td>H 242</td>
<td>7.5YR6/4: light brown — “brown ware”</td>
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<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Cyl. Jar 430</td>
<td>H 207</td>
<td>“light brown ware, grey core”</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>Lamp 1597</td>
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<td>Lamp 1631</td>
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<td>Jug 588</td>
<td>D 81</td>
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<td>26</td>
<td>Jug 585</td>
<td>H 186+</td>
<td>“red ware”</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>Storage Jar 359</td>
<td>H 298+</td>
<td>“grey ware, red surface”</td>
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<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Jug 586</td>
<td>D 80</td>
<td>“brown ware”</td>
</tr>
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<td>29</td>
<td>Bottle 1730</td>
<td>H 160+</td>
<td>“light brown ware”</td>
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<td>30</td>
<td>Cooking-pot 1067</td>
<td>D 90</td>
<td>“red ware”</td>
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<td>31</td>
<td>Pyxis 1699</td>
<td>D 83</td>
<td>“black ware, red surface, dull red bands”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Storage Jar 323</td>
<td>D 244</td>
<td>“drab ware”</td>
</tr>
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<td>33</td>
<td>Storage Jar 275</td>
<td>D 110</td>
<td>“light brown ware”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Jug 588</td>
<td>H 242+</td>
<td>“reddish brown ware”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* not illustrated

12 The Type numbers are those of Wampler in *TN II*. The surface colour in quotation marks is that written on the Badé Institute millimetre record cards. The other colour is based on the Munsell system; all pieces which could be re-examined were checked according to the Munsell colours.
Fig. 4. Vessels from the Cistern 127 assemblage (see Table 1).
Lachish III and were still in wide use in Lachish II; they also occurred in En-gedi V (Lachish III:314, 329; Pls. 94:479; 96:494, 513, 514; Zimhoni 1990:34–35; Figs. 23; 24:2; En-gedi: 32–35; Fig. 22:2). Cylindrical jars similar to Type 430 were common in Iron IIb and later; Lachish Level II provided parallels to this form (Lachish III:316, 329; Pl. 97:537–543; Class S8). Stern suggests that the alabastron bottle Type 1730 began in the 7th century and continued into the 5th century B.C.E. Lapp noted that kraters with vertical necks, like Type 1526, are characteristic of the early Persian period (Lapp 1985:23; Tell el-Fül: 94–95). Cooking-pot Type 1067 was common in Judah from the 8th century onwards (Lachish III:309, 311; Pl. 93:451–456). The same is true of disk-based lamps of Type 1631 (Lachish III:285, 326; Pl. 83:150; Class L7; En-gedi: 35; Fig. 23:3; Tell el-Fül: 98; Pl. 71:3).

Given the fairly homogenous nature of the Cistern 127 assemblage it seems reasonable to suggest that the cross-shaped impressions date at least to the late 7th and 6th centuries B.C.E. The use of the cross-shaped stamp impressions at this time provides new data on the origin of the tet symbol on some types of the yhwd stamp impressions, a debate with a long history.

The tet sign, combined with imik ("belonging to the king"), was written on ostraca from Elephantine dating to the second half of the 5th century B.C.E. and on two jars from Shiqmona dating to the mid-4th century B.C.E.; these are predominantly in the Phoenician script, though there are a few in Aramaic script (Lidzbarski 1912: Pl. VI:56–59, 61–65; Cross 1968:226–228). Yhwd or yhd impressions in which the tet symbol is part of the impression are generally dated to the 4th century B.C.E. and later (Stern 1982:203, 205). No consensus has emerged regarding the origin and meaning of the tet symbol in these contexts. Sukenik and Yadin thought it might be a degenerate form of an earlier Judean royal insignia, such as the rosette or the scarab (Sukenik 1934:183–184; Yadin 1961:16; Cross 1968:231). Colella, Delavault and Lemaire, Lapp, and Avigad believed that the tet is meant to be understood as the letter tet, though with varying interpretations of its meaning. Goldwasser and Naveh argued that it derives from Egyptian royal

8 A vessel of Type 494 came from Locus 1065, a room built over the burned debris of Palace C and below the northeast corner of the Residency (Lachish III:118–119).
9 Stern (1982:125); his type B (note that he incorrectly cites Tell en-Nasbeh Type 1720 instead of 1730).
11 Colella (1973:553), with the meaning "closed or sealed" from yp; Delavault and Lemaire (1975:38–41), with the meaning "good" from yb; Lapp (1963:28) equivocates, believing that the sign is Aramaic tet, but without offering a suggestion as to its meaning; Avigad (1960:26), with three possible meanings: an indication of capacity, an authoritative mark of genuineness, or a degenerate solar disk.
symbolism (1976:17–19). Thus, the use of the tet symbol has been thought to have
its origin in Hebrew, Phoenician and Egyptian milieus and has almost as many
suggested meanings as interpreters.

The new data provided by the impression from Cistern 127 at Tell en-Nasbeh
shows that the use of the cross- or tet-shaped symbol as an indicator of governmental
authority in a Judean context probably goes back a full century before its use on the
Elephantine ostraca, at least to the 6th century B.C.E. Given this early date,
perhaps the cross-shape should be viewed as a degenerate form of an earlier Judean
royal emblem, but whether representing scarab, solar disk or rosette remains
unclear.

The limited geographic distribution of these impressions is intriguing. With the
information at hand it is impossible to determine if the stamps used to produce
these impressions overlapped chronologically with any of the better known and
more widely distributed governmental stamps (i.e. the mlk, rosette, m(w)gh or
yhwzd types). If the cross-shaped stamps did not overlap with these other stamps
they may then belong in a period when governmental control based in Jerusalem
was severely limited. A possible historical context might be the second half of the
6th century B.C.E., following the return from the Babylonian Exile. This was
certainly a period of uncertain political fortunes for the Jewish community, and the
simple cross-shaped stamp may represent a crude and hasty attempt by the new
government in Jerusalem to establish its own ruling symbolism, hearkening back to
the era of the monarchy, but without using blatant motifs that might be regarded by
the Persian authorities as too independently minded.

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