

# **From Sha'ar Hagolan to Shaaraim Essays in Honor of Prof. Yosef Garfinkel**

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Essays in Honor of Prof. Yosef Garfinkel  
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# Contents

Acknowledgments	v
Preface	xi
List of English Publications of Prof. Yosef Garfinkel	xiii
Abbreviations	xxiv

## ENGLISH SECTION

The Story of the Ceramic Industry in the Southern Levant Judith Ben-Michael	1
The Yarmukian Site at Tel Mitzpe Zevulun North (Naḥal Zippori 3), Lower Galilee, Israel Omry Barzilai, Edwin C.M. van den Brink, Jacob Vardi, Roy Liran	19
The Miniature Chalices from Sha'ar Hagolan: A New Interpretation Michael Freikman	41
Pavements, Pits and Burials: The Case of Pit 183 at the Early Pottery Neolithic Site of Beisamoun, Northern Israel Danny Rosenberg	47
Yarmukian-Type Architecture without Yarmukian-Type Pottery at the Site of Khirbet 'Asafna (East) in the Jezreel Valley, Israel: A Dilemma? Edwin C.M. van den Brink, Dan Kirzner, Michal Birkenfeld, Alla Yaroshevich, Nimrod Marom	63
A Newly Uncovered Cowrie-Eye Female Clay Figurine Fragment from Bet H̱ilqiya, Northern Negev, Israel Edwin C.M. van den Brink, Yitzhak Marmelstein, Roy Liran	93
'Yarmukian' Figurines of the Neolithic Period at Lod Eli Yannai	101
Early Wadi Rabah and Chalcolithic Occupations at Tel Dover: Environmental and Chronological Insights Hamoudi Khalaily, Ianir Milevski, Liora Kolska Horwitz, Ofer Marder	109

The 'Ein el-Jarba Holemouth Jar: A Local Vessel with Parallels in the Near East and Southeast Europe	155
Ianir Milevski, Zinovi Matskevich, Anat Cohen-Weinberger, Nimrod Getzov	
Protohistoric Infant Jar Burials of the Southern Levant in Context: Tracing Cultural Influences in the Late Sixth and Fifth Millennia BCE	171
Katharina Streit	
A Fourth-Millennium BCE Seal from Hazor	187
Amnon Ben-Tor	
The Archaeology of Destruction: Methodological Desiderata	205
Michael G. Hasel	
Siege Warfare, Conflict and Destruction: How are They Related?	229
Igor Kreimerman	
Pottery Production in the Iron Age Shephelah: An Evaluation According to Recent Petrographic Research	247
David Ben-Shlomo	
Four Egyptian Seals from Khirbet Qeiyafa	265
Martin G. Klingbeil	
Four Notes on Tel Lachish Level v	283
Hoo-Goo Kang	
Solomon's Golden Shields in the Context of the First Millennium BCE	295
Madeleine Mumcuoglu	
Sealed with a Dance: An Iron Age IIA Seal from Tel Abel Beth Maacah	307
Nava Panitz-Cohen and Robert A. Mullins	
Reassessing the Character of the Judahite Kingdom: Archaeological Evidence for Non-Centralized, Kinship-Based Components	323
Aren M. Maeir and Itzhaq Shai	
The Samaritan Syncretic Yahwism and the Religious Center of Kuntillet ʿAjrud	341
Gwanghyun Choi	



Revisiting Vaughn and Dobler's Provenance Study of Hebrew Seals and Seal Impressions	371
Mitka R. Golub	

The Assyrian Empire and Judah: Royal Assyrian Archives and Other Historical Documents	383
Peter Zilberg	

Ekron: The Ceramic Assemblage of an Iron Age IIC Philistine Type Site	407
Seymour Gitin	

The Meaning of the Boat Scene on the Phoenician-Cypriote Scapula from Tel Dor	435
Silvia Schroer	

#### HEBREW SECTION

Religious Practices and Cult Objects at Tel Rehov during the 10th–9th Centuries BCE	*1
Amihai Mazar	

The Iron Age IIA Judahite Weight System at Khirbet Qeiyafa	*33
Haggai Cohen Klonymus	

Tel Ḥalif as a Case Study: Targeted Excavations in a Cave as a Means of Assessing Stratigraphy at the Tell	*61
Amir Ganor, Gidon Goldenberg, Guy Fitoussi	

Fortresses, Forts and Towers in the Jerusalem Region during the Iron Age IIB–C Period	*81
Saar Ganor	

A Late Iron Age II Administrative Building Excavated in the City of David	*103
Doron Ben-Ami and Haggai Misgav	

The Lachish Inscriptions from Yohanan Aharoni's Excavations Reread	*111
Anat Mendel-Geberovich, Eran Arie, Michael Maggen	

# Sealed with a Dance: An Iron Age IIA Seal from Tel Abel Beth Maacah

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## Abstract

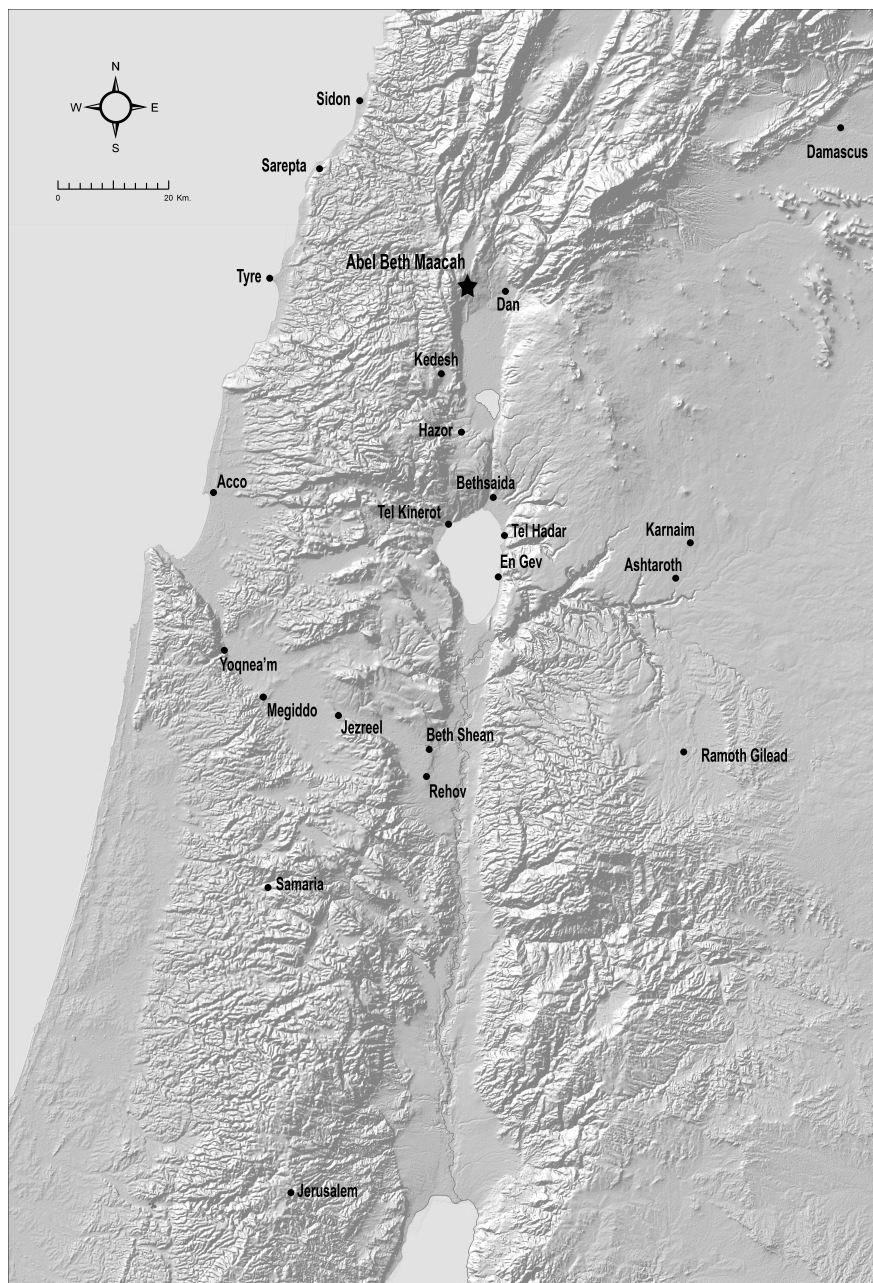
An oval-shaped stone seal was found in the 2014 season of excavations at Tel Abel Beth Maacah. It is engraved with a motif of three schematic figures in what may be understood as a dance scene. This motif is known from seals found at other sites in Israel and has been dated to the Iron Age IIA. This article discusses the iconography of the seal in the regional and geo-historical context of Abel Beth Maacah as a border site between Israelites, Phoenicians and Arameans at that time.

## Introduction

Ritual symbolic behavior and cultural traditions are among the most elusive categories of ancient life for the archaeologist to fathom. The attempt to understand and decode their expression in the material record requires mediation through theory, textual and iconographic analysis, and ethnographic evidence. Such is the act of dance, which is a prime medium for expressing and communicating ideas, feelings and experiences, be they personal or public, secular or ritual. The realization that dance served a communicative, often ritual purpose in the ancient Near East from as early as “the dawn of agriculture” in the Neolithic period was pioneered by Prof. Yosef Garfinkel (Garfinkel 2003), whose work provides the basis for our understanding of a small stone seal found in our excavations at Tel Abel Beth Maacah. It is with great respect for his wide range of scholarship and long-time friendship that we write the following article for this volume in his honor.

## The Site and Excavations

Tell Abil el-Qameh is located on the northern border of present-day Israel, just south of the town of Metulla, about six kilometers west of Tel Dan and 30 kilo-



Ruhama Bonfil, Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

*Fig. 1* Location map

meters north of Tel Hazor (Fig. 1). Nahal Iyyon, one of the four headwaters of the Jordan River, bypasses the tell on the west and south. From its strategic vantage point overlooking the northern end of the Huleh Valley, the tell commands roads

leading north to the Lebanese Beq'a, west to the Lebanese/Phoenician coast (ca. 35 kilometers to Tyre), and east/northeast to inland Syria and Mesopotamia (ca. 70 kilometers to Damascus). The tell is approximately 100 dunams (10 hectares) in size. It consists of a large lower mound in the south and a smaller, but lofty upper mound in the north (Fig. 2). Until 1948, it was the location of the small Palestinian village of Abil el-Qameh, whose ruins are still visible on about one-third of the mound.



Fig. 2 Tel Abel Beth Maacah, looking southeast

The tell was first identified with the biblical city of Abel Beth Maacah by several 19th-century explorers (Dever 1986: 207–210). This conclusion was based mainly on its order of appearance in two lists of conquered northern cities found in the Bible. According to 1 Kings 15:20, the 9th-century Aramean king Ben-hadad conquered “Iyyon (Tell ed-Dibbin in the Marj Ayyoun Valley, ca. 11 kilometers to the north), Dan, *Abel Beth Maacah*, and all Chinneroth, with all the land of Naphtali”. Similarly, 2 Kings 15:29 describes how in the 8th century the Neo-Assyrian monarch Tiglath-pileser III conquered “Iyyon, *Abel Beth Maacah*, Janoah, Kadesh, Hazor, Gilead, Galilee, and all the land of Naphtali”. A third reference to Abel Beth Maacah in the Bible, set in a period earlier than the previous two, is found in 2 Sam. 20:14–22 in the context of a call for revolt against David by a Benjaminite named Sheba ben Bichri. The tale of Joab’s pursuit of the rebel far north to Abel Beth Maacah and how the local Wise Woman saved the city from destruction alludes to it as an Israelite city in the 10th century BCE. It also seems to have been the northernmost point of the Israelite entity at that time, or somewhat later, considering that this narrative most probably reflects a period later in the Iron Age II than the reign of David.

The site was briefly surveyed in 1973 by W.G. Dever of the University of Arizona, whose plans for an excavation did not materialize (Dever 1986). Other

limited explorations of the tell include surveys of the Huleh Valley by Yehudah Dayan (published as a pamphlet in Hebrew in 1962) and Idan Shaked (unpublished), as well as a small salvage excavation at the eastern foot of the mound by Yosef Stepansky (2005). The authors, together with Ruhama Bonfil, initiated a survey in 2012, and have conducted three excavation seasons to date (2013–2015) (Panitz-Cohen, Mullins and Bonfil 2013; 2015; see <http://www.abel-beth-maacah.org/> for the published survey and excavation field reports by season).<sup>1</sup>

The survey showed an almost continuous chronological sequence from the Early Bronze Age II through the Ottoman period. The excavations have produced rich architectural remains and an artifactual corpus from the Middle Bronze Age through the Iron Age I in the lower tell, indicating that human occupation after this time was limited to the upper mound in the north, where stratified remains from the Iron Age II and late Persian/Hellenistic period have been revealed to date, as well as pottery from the Iron Age I and IIA.

## The Seal

The seal that is the topic of this paper was found during the 2014 excavation season in Area O, located on the southwestern edge of the lower mound (Fig. 3).<sup>2</sup> The three strata uncovered here so far date to the Middle Bronze IIB (Strata O3 and O2) and to the Late Bronze Age (Stratum O1). The latter was severely eroded and included ceramic traces of Iron Age I under topsoil. In addition, a pit cut into the threshold of a Stratum O2 wall in the westernmost square next to the slope contained pottery that can be attributed to the late Iron Age I or early Iron Age IIA, including restorable bowls, cooking pots and storage jars. The seal was found just below topsoil in debris covering the wall of a Middle Bronze IIB building (Stratum O2) in the easternmost square, where the later remains were eroded away (Fig. 4). Thus, while the seal was found in a controlled excavation, it cannot be regarded as *in situ*, since no clear stratum associated with its likely Iron Age IIA date (see below) was uncovered in this particular area.

The seal (Fig. 5) is oval, with a flat obverse face bearing an incised motif and a plain convex reverse face; the edges are well smoothed but slightly uneven. The flat face measures 1.57 cm on its long axis and 1.24 cm on its short axis; the sides are 0.50 cm thick, although slightly irregular. The seal is carved out of very dark gray limestone with the motif's incision revealing a lighter gray color in section. A suspension perforation 0.13 cm in diameter, slightly wider on the ends, completely pierces the seal on its long axis. The upper torso of the left figure is damaged by a deep rounded chip that penetrated all the way to the suspension perforation. Another hole of pin-prick size has damaged the upper torso of the central figure. Other minor abrasions can be seen around all of the figures, although this damage does not mar them.



*Fig. 3* Location of Area O; view from upper tell, looking south; Huleh Valley and Kefar Giladi quarry in background.



*Fig. 4* Findspot of the seal in Area O, marked with star

The motif, made by shallow engraving, consists of three frontally depicted schematic “stick” figures. The right-hand figure<sup>3</sup> is shorter than the other two, and the central figure slightly taller than the one on the left, a feature that might be deliberate and not done to accommodate the shape of the seal, although this might as well have been the result of adapting the scene to the shape of

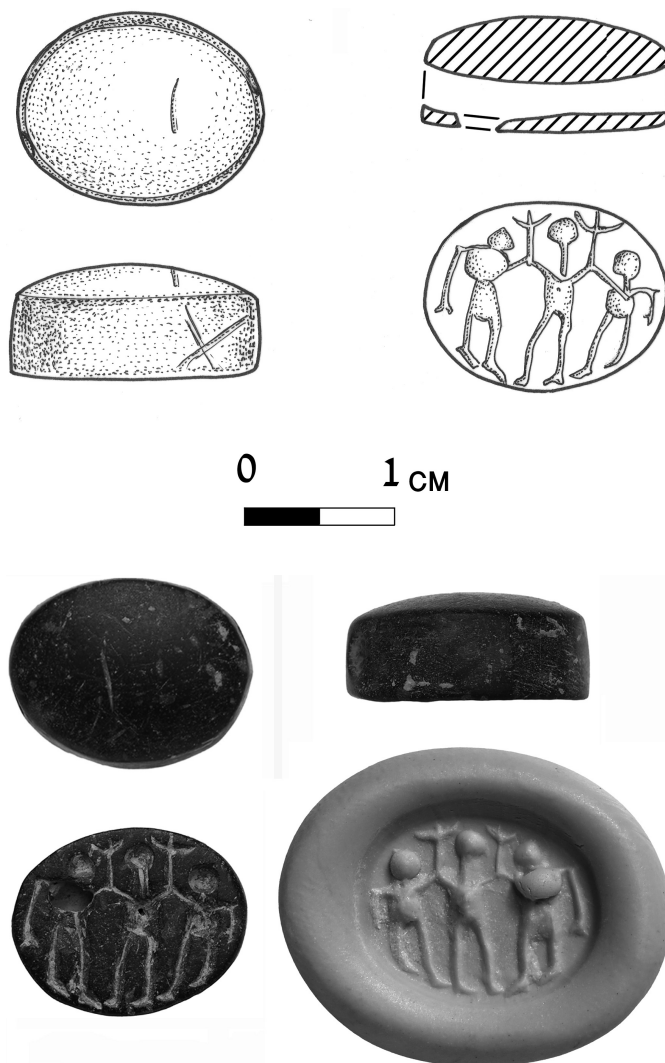


Fig. 5 The seal (scale 2:1) (drawing by Yulia Rudman; photo by Gabi Laron)

the seal. The heads are all drilled globes. The narrow neck of the central figure is unnaturally long and that of the right-hand figure short. The neck of the left-hand figure is missing due to damage. The torsos of the central and left-hand figures from which their long spindly legs extend are schematic and rounded, and there is no clear indication of dress. On the other hand, the bottom of the left-hand figure's torso (the top is damaged) is squarish and extends lower than the latter two, giving the impression of a tunic of some sort. All in all, the rendition of all three figures is simplistic, schematic and quite childlike. The feet

of the central and right-hand figure face left and those of the left-hand figure face right, so that the two flanking figures face the central one. Both arms of the central figure are raised, while the left arm of the right-hand figure and the right arm of the left-hand figure are raised to join the central figure. The outer arms of the flanking figures are turned down at the elbow. The raised arms can be understood in two different ways: 1) bent at the elbow, joined at the forearm and holding a short t-shaped item, or 2) straight with clasping hands holding a long t-shaped item. The latter interpretation seems more likely in light of the parallels to be discussed below. Schachter (2011: 32, 34) notes that such an arrangement of arms raised and lowered indicates a well-coordinated dance movement that imparts emphasized dynamics. The two t-shaped items most likely represent a branch or a flower, or less likely, a banner, staff or torch.

All in all, the carving of the seal and the motif in particular is not especially careful, although it is not an amateur or *ad hoc* product. This suggests that it was made on a production line by skilled artisans who probably manufactured many such items. It is possible that stones were carved into blank seals in one production line and then turned over to yet another one, where the motif was engraved. It is not possible to determine the location of the workshop that produced the seal based on the stone alone, which is a ubiquitous type of limestone found throughout the country. The distribution of seals with similar motifs (see below) does not indicate any particular production locus, nor does the motif itself, which follows a common Iron Age II local Palestinian style. Since the manufacture of such items did not require high artistic abilities or exotic raw material, it is possible that local craftsmen were easily trained in their manufacture, and that the production venues were not centralized or controlled by the authorities.

On the level of the consumer, it is clear that such schematic and simply executed designs amply portrayed the intended message, and as such were effective icons. Buchanan and Moorey (1988: 18–19) suggested that the “careless execution, haphazard alignment, and blotched design showed that the act of sealing was important and not the retrievability of the design”. Since there are contemporary seals with more meticulous carvings and made of special raw materials, like ivory or precious stone, it might be questioned whether the less-invested seals, made mostly of soft stone and bone, reflect the lower status of the seal owner and/or of the recipient. This begs the question – could the stamp owners/recipients have been merchants, local clerks, religious officials or representatives of extended families, all belonging to what has sometimes been defined as the “middle class” in Israelite society (Faust 2012: 16–17)? It may also be asked whether this type of seal was, in fact, meant to be used as such. While



the act of sealing is most often associated with bureaucracy and administration, it is clear that such seals were also talismanic objects that possessed apotropaic purposes, particularly in light of the choice of mainly ritually symbolic motifs, and the fact that many were found in burials (Keel 1995: 10–13; Duistermaat 2012). Duistermaat (2012: 7) suggested that, in some cases, the act of stamping served to “transfer” the attached meaning of the motif to another object. It may also be considered that the seal did indeed serve within an administrative system, but not necessarily a formal or official one determined by a central authority, but rather one that could be family- or clan-based and related to social identity. Along these lines, it is interesting to note that the motifs are generally understood to represent symbols of “folk religion”, with an emphasis on nature and fertility. While papyri or pottery vessels might be stamped with such a seal to indicate tampering in the former instance or ownership in the latter, other items, like bread or skin, could just as well have been the recipient of a stamp from such a seal (if it was indeed used as such). It is perhaps significant that seals of this style in the Iron Age IIA were only iconic and lacked inscriptions of any kind prior to the end of the 9th century BCE (Keel in prep.). This phenomenon has been taken to mean that literacy was low prior to this time (Sass 1993), although it might be possible that such seals were (also) used to mark documents (like the later aniconic epigraphic ones), which would have required the seal owner (and document recipient) to have at least some degree of literacy.

While the scene on the Abel Beth Maacah seal can be interpreted in different ways, the grouping of several equidistant figures with raised arms is most often understood as representing a ritual dance, be that ritual related to fertility, military victory, mourning, divine protection or some other cause for concern (Garfinkel 2003; 2014; Mazar 2003; Schachter 2011; Soar and Aamodt 2014: 2–3). In our seal, the position of the feet and the straight legs do not impart an impression of movement to the scene, which is portrayed mainly by the position of the arms and depicts what Garfinkel has termed, “a frozen dance movement” (Garfinkel 2003: 31). The uplifted waving of the t-shaped item might be a peak moment in the dance ritual, with arms intermittently swung low and high. The down-turning outer arms of the flanking figures as opposed to the central one with raised arms support this idea. It is also possible that the direction of the feet of the two outer figures (facing inwards) was meant to indicate a circle dance. The interpretation of the grasped item as some sort of a branch or plant might indicate that the ritual dance was related to the popular folk tree cult that was practiced at the *bamot* (Keel 1998; 2012). Several scaraboids from Iron Age II contexts depict figures (usually two) that have been understood as joyful dancing around a tree representing a god or goddess, perhaps the Asherah (Keel

1998: 43; Schachter 2011: Cat. Nos. 69–83).<sup>4</sup> A few of these scenes also contain branches as a side motif, further emphasizing the association of this ritual with fertility and growth (Keel 1998: 92).

Small stone stamp seals of scaraboid shape that bear anthropomorphic (human or deity), zoomorphic (usually quadrupeds, most often caprids) and plant motifs (trees, flowers or branches) in various combinations are typical of the local glyptic style during the late Iron Age I and Iron Age II in Israel (Keel 1994; 1995; 1998; Keel and Uehlinger 1998).<sup>5</sup> Parallels to such seals bearing figures generally understood to depict dancers have been found at various sites throughout Israel and are of diverse styles, though almost all of them are similarly schematic. Shachter (2011) presents a comprehensive corpus of all known examples in Israel, which makes Abel Beth Maacah the northernmost site where such a seal has been found to date. This location is far north of the other sites in Israel where similar seals were found, which include Megiddo and Tel Rehov in the east and Akko and Tell Abu Hawam in the west. A parallel from a context of the 10th–9th century BCE at Tell Kazel in Syria (Strata IX–X) stretches the range of seals with such motifs to include the Iron Age IIA Aramean realm. This is a small bone seal (almost the same size as the one from Abel Beth Maacah), found burnt, depicting three schematic *en-face* figures whose arms seem to be holding each others' shoulders; the arms of the two outer figures, like ours, are down-turned (Badre *et al.* 1994: 276, Fig. 17b).

Of the 26 Iron Age II stamp seals bearing dancing figures in Schachter's corpus,<sup>6</sup> 14 have two figures and 12 have three.<sup>7</sup> One bulla from Arad with such a seal impression (Keel 1997: 657, No. 26) and three more from the City of David in Jerusalem (Schachter 2011: Cat. Nos. 5, 23, 34) may also be considered. Most of these cannot be dated more closely than general "Iron Age II", while a few can be attributed to Iron Age IIA or IIB–C; about a third come from burials.

The distribution of the seals in Israel (Table 1) shows that they are found in the south (Arad – 1; Tell el-Far'ah South – 4), in the north (Megiddo – 5; Rehov – 1; Akko – 1; Tell Abu Hawam – 1) and, mostly, in the Shephelah and Judah (Jerusalem – 1; Lachish – 9; Gezer – 2; Beth Shemesh – 1; Tell en-Naşbeh – 1). The closest parallel to the Abel Beth Maacah seal is from a secure context at Tel Rehov, on the floor of a Stratum IV building in the destruction layer of the 9th century BCE (Keel and Mazar 2009: No. 20; Keel in prep.: Cat. No. 22) (Fig. 6). The seal from Tel Rehov is very similar to the Tel Abel Beth Maacah seal in size (1.68 × 1.16 × 0.74 cm), engraving technique, raw material (gray limestone) and motif, although it differs in the position of the arms of the two outer figures (raised rather than down-turned) and in the rendition of the join of the body to the neck and the arms (even more schematic than the Abel Beth Maacah seal).

Iron Age IIA	Iron Age IIA–B	Iron Age IIB
<i>Two figures (14)</i>		
Arad (1)	Tell el-Far'ah South (3)	Lachish (1)
	Lachish (2)	Tell Abu Hawam (1)
	Tell en-Naşbeh (1)	
	Beth Shemesh (1)	
	Megiddo (3)	
	Akko (1)	
	Jerusalem (1)***	
<i>Three figures (12)</i>		
Megiddo (1)	Gezer** (2)	Lachish (5)
Tel Rehov (1)	Tell el-Far'ah South (1)	Megiddo (1)
	Lachish (1)	

\* Based on Schachter 2011: Cat. Nos. 1–3, 6–12, 18–20, 22, 24–25, 30–31, 35–42, 47.

\*\* Unknown find context, figures not arranged in a row.

\*\*\* Winderbaum 2015: 370.

*Table 1* Distribution of seals with dancing figures in Israel, Iron Age II.\*



*Fig. 6* The seal from Tel Rehov (scale: 2:1); courtesy of Amihai Mazar, Tel Rehov Excavations (photo by Gabi Laron)

The arms of all three figures on the Rehov seal are raised and the hands appear to be clasped, holding two branches identical to those on our seal.

## Discussion: Cultural Significance and Historical Context

In light of the above, it can be established that the seal dates from the Iron Age II, and based on the close parallel from Tel Rehov, probably specifically from the 9th century BCE. Its motif is at home in the milieu of Israelite and Judean Iron Age culture, and it is notable that such a seal was found at Abel Beth Maacah. What then does this signify in our attempt to understand the cultural, political and ethnic affiliation of the site and its inhabitants in the Iron Age II?

The three seasons of excavation conducted to date have shown that the lower mound, which constitutes about two thirds of the site's total area, was not settled after the end of the Iron Age I/transition to the Iron Age IIA. Aside from sporadic pottery and the seal discussed here, no other traces of occupation related to the Iron Age II were found in the three areas excavated to date in the lower tell (Areas A, F and O).<sup>8</sup> However, remains of this period of occupation were revealed in an area excavated on the upper mound (Area B), where three phases of a late Persian/early Hellenistic building were found covering fine stone architecture of an earlier building, apparently to be associated with a destruction layer. Though we reached only the top of this occupation during the 2015 season, all of the pottery recovered from below the sealed Persian/early Hellenistic floors included forms that can be attributed to the Iron Age II (Cypro-Phoenician Black on Red, perforated tripod cups, red-slipped and hand-burnished vessels, bar-handled bowls, stepped-rim cooking pots, Hippo storage jar rims, strainer jugs and late Phoenician Bichrome ware, among other diagnostic forms). Further excavation will be necessary to establish a secure stratigraphic sequence and context, but so far it is clear that there was occupation in the upper tell during the Iron Age IIA and IIB.

The biblical references to Abel Beth Maacah indicate occupation during the 10th to 8th centuries BCE. The account of the wise woman who beheaded Sheba Ben Bichri when he fled from his tribe of Benjamin to take refuge here after calling for revolt against King David (2 Sam. 20:14–22) is set during the United Monarchy. Though it is not known when the narrative was written or which time frame the narrative truly reflects, the story does show that in the minds of the later biblical editors, this border town was loyal to the monarchy in Jerusalem, and thus represented as the farthest point one could go before crossing the border to Phoenicia or to Aram. The reference to the destruction of Abel Beth Maacah by the Aramean king Ben Hadad (1 Kings 15:20) assumes that the town was occupied in the 9th century BCE, as does the reference to the destruction of the city by Tiglath-Pileser III in the 8th century BCE (2 Kings 15:29).<sup>9</sup> Further excavation will reveal the nature and scope of this occupation.

The discovery at Tel Abel Beth Maacah of a typical Iron Age II seal with a

motif that was significant in the everyday lives of people in both the Israelite and the Judean spheres<sup>10</sup> might be taken as evidence of the identity of the town's inhabitants, as well as an indication that it was settled in the Iron Age IIA, specifically the 9th century BCE. Although the Abel Beth Maacah stamp seal is a small, portable object that could have reached the site under varying circumstances, as well as during a later period, the seal can nevertheless be considered an eminently representative cultural and chronological marker that may hint at the possibility that the population was Israelite at that time, although a much greater exposure is necessary to determine this. The idea that the town was populated by an Aramean element, or was under Aramean control, in the 9th century BCE, or even served as the capital of a small Aramean kingdom (Aram-Maacah; e.g., Arie 2008: 35; Naaman 2012: 94; Finkelstein 2013: 106), needs to be closely examined in light of the unfolding data being gathered in the new excavations at Abel Beth Maacah. This includes the seal discussed in this paper, which is a small, yet meaningful block that can help us construct an understanding of this interesting and important border site.

## Notes

1. The excavations are generously sponsored by Azusa Pacific University of Los Angeles and conducted under the auspices of the Institute of Archaeology of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. From 2013 to 2015, participating institutions include Cornell University, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Asbury Theological Seminary, Indiana Wesleyan University, Hebrew Union College and the University of Arizona. Ruhama Bonfil is the surveyor and stratigraphic advisor.
2. Area O was supervised during the 2014 season by Christopher Monroe of Cornell University and Ariel Shatil of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.
3. This description is given from the perspective of the viewer.
4. However, most of these could just as well be considered scenes of worship that do not necessarily involve dance (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 152–154).
5. Keel notes that these have much in common with the group of seals that he calls “post-Ramesside mass-production”, which were widespread in Palestine in the time of the 21st and beginning of the 22nd Dynasties (ca. mid-11th–end of 10th/beginning of 9th centuries BCE) (Keel, Shuval and Uehlinger 1990: 337–354; Keel 1994: 48–50; Münger 2003; 2005; 2009).
6. The catalogue compiled by Schachter (2011) is used in the present article for convenience; one additional seal found in Jerusalem and recently published (Winderbaum 2015) is included as well.
7. The seals with two figures around a tree that have been interpreted as dance scenes (Schachter 2011: Cat. Nos. 69–83) have not been included here, since they are not unequivocally defined as such (see n. 4).
8. Iron Age I is represented at the southern end of the lower mound in Area F, where two phases of a building revealed just under topsoil and numerous pits and silos were found, as well as in Area A, on the eastern slope close to the ascent to the upper

mound, with a sequence of at least four strata, one of which was clearly destroyed. However, further excavation in these areas, as well as in other parts of the lower mound, is necessary before we can draw a firm conclusion whether indeed there was no Iron Age II occupation on the lower tell.

9. Although tentative, the suggestion by some scholars to reconstruct the missing word at the end of the second line of the Dan stele as “Abel” (Schniedewind 1996: 79; Na’aman 2012: 95, n. 10) would draw the town into the fray between the “father” of the Aramean king, probably Hazael, who commissioned this inscription and the Israelite king said to have taken his land from him. Na’aman (2012: 95, n. 10) suggested that this inscription may refer to “an attack of Hazael’s ‘father’ against the king of Israel when the latter besieged Abel. Provided that the restoration (admittedly uncertain) is correct, it indicates that until this date, Abel-Beth-Maacah was an independent city.” If this scenario is valid, it provides further evidence that Abel Beth Maacah was inhabited in Iron Age IIA. However, this remains conjectural.
10. The fact that most of the Iron Age II seals with this particular motif were found in the Judean Shephelah is notable and might allude to a shared syncretic approach to this aspect of practiced folk religion. As Keel and Uehlinger (1998: 280) noted, “The discoveries at Kuntillet Ajrud and the products from the Phoenician/Israelite specialty crafts both show that there were no strict boundaries between the Israelite/Judahite religion and that of its neighbors, especially the Phoenicians (but probably also the Arameans and Gileadites, according to the evidence found at Tell Deir Alla) at the end of the ninth century and during the eighth century.” Along these lines, it is notable that a seal with a similar motif was found at Tel Kazel in northern Syria in an Iron Age IIA context.

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