

# THE KING IS DEAD. LONG LIVE THE KING! THE SEMIOTICS OF POWER TRANSITION IN THE LMLK STAMPED AND THE CON- CENTRIC-CIRCLES INCISED JUDAHITE JAR HANDLES



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**Abstract:** The paper briefly discusses – on the basis of the historical and archaeological data, and from a semiotic theoretical perspective – the possible context that produced the Judahite jar handles marked with lmlk stamps and/or concentric circles incisions. It argues that is not conceivable that the Assyrian king Sennacherib had subjugated Hezekiah, the king of Judah, reduced his dominion in favor of the Philistines, and increased his tax burden, without having also altered the very symbol system that represented the sovereignty of the Judahite king. It proposes that the concentric circles (1) were an Assyrian imposition over Judah, (2) should be understood in the light of the Philistine iconography, and (3) had the function of distinguishing jars intended to collect taxes for the king of Judah from those intended to collect tributes for the king of Assyria or for Assyrian interests.

**Keywords:** lmlk jars, winged symbols, concentric circles symbols, Kingdom of Judah, Senacherib's campaign, Philistines

**Resumo:** O artigo discute brevemente – com base nos dados históricos e arqueológicos, e de uma perspectiva teórica semiótica – o possível contexto que produziu as alças dos jarros judaítas marcadas com selos lmlk e/ou incisões de círculos concêntricos. Argumenta que não é concebível que o rei assírio Senaqueribe tenha subjugado Ezequias, rei de Judá, reduzido seu domínio em favor dos filisteus e aumentado sua carga tributária, sem também ter alterado o próprio sistema de símbolos que representava a soberania do rei judaíta. Ele propõe que os círculos concêntricos (1) eram uma imposição assíria sobre Judá, (2) devem ser entendidos à luz da iconografia filisteia, e (3) tinha a função de distinguir os jarros destinados a coletar impostos para o rei de Judá daqueles destinados a coletar tributos para o rei da Assíria ou para interesses da Assíria. **Palavras-chave:** jarros lmlk, símbolos alados, símbolos de círculos concêntricos, Reino de Judá, campanha de Senaqueribe, filisteus.

**Resumen:** El documento discute brevemente – sobre la base de los datos históricos y arqueológicos, y desde una perspectiva teórica semiótica – el posible contexto que produjo las asas de botijas judahitas marcadas con sellos lmlk y/o incisiones de círculos concêntricos. Argumenta que no es concebible que el rey asirio Senaquerib haya subyugado a Ezequías, el rey de Judá, haya reducido su

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dominio a favor de los filisteos y haya aumentado su carga impositiva, sin haber alterado también el sistema de símbolos que representaba la soberanía de lo Rey judahita. El propone que los círculos concéntricos (1) eran una imposición asiria sobre Judá, (2) deberían entenderse a la luz de la iconografía filistea, y (3) tenía la función de distinguir botijas destinadas a recaudar impuestos para el rey de Judá de aquellas destinadas a recaudar tributos para el rey de Asiria o para los intereses asirios.

**Palabras clave:** botijas *lmk*, símbolos alados, símbolos de círculos concéntricos, Reino de Judá, campaña de Senaquerib, filisteos.

## INTRODUCTION

Power never becomes orphaned. It only changes hands. And with the shift from one power holder to another, it is common for the symbols of power to change as well. The fundamental importance of symbols, as indispensable and even inevitable in the formation and consolidation of political power, in all places and times, has already been pointed out by many studies (e.g. KAUFMANN, 1978; VOCELKA, 1981; CREMADES, 1987; MARIN, 1988; MORÁN, 1990; ANGLO, 1992; TOLOSANA, 1992; BURKE, 1994; 1997; BRADDICK, 1996; FRYE, 1996; ALM, 2003; BROWN & ELLIOTT, 2003; WORTMAN, 2006; DENISON, 2009; BENZ & BAUER, 2013). Reflecting this widespread understanding, Michael Walzer suggested that in building political unity “symbolic activity is perhaps our most important means of bringing things together, both intellectually and emotionally”, after all “the state is invisible; it must be personified before it can be seen, symbolized before it can be loved, imagined before it can be conceived” (WALZER, 1967, p. 194). Therefore, in contexts of power reordering, a trend of change can also be expected in the symbols of power.

Such a context of reorganization of the political forces was produced by the Assyrian military campaign in Canaan, in 701 BCE, documented by the Annals of Sennacherib (Pritchard, 1969, p. 287-288), by the Azekah Inscription (NA'AMAN, 1974), by the royal reliefs of Sennacherib (LIPPOLIS, 2011), and by several Biblical sources (2 Kings 18-19, Isaiah 36-37, 2 Chronicles 32). This geopolitical transformation manifested itself – as it is argued in this brief study – in the change of the symbols used to mark the handles of many large 8<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century BCE ceramic vessels (Fig. 2), specifically the so-called *lmk* stamps (Fig. 3) and the concentric circles (Fig. 4).



Figure 1: Area of highest concentration of jar handles stamped with the *lmlk* seals and/or incised with concentric circles.

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA

Since the first samples discovered in Jerusalem in 1869 (WARREN, 1870), thousands of stamped or incised jar handles with different motifs (winged symbols, concentric circles and rosettes) have been found in several locations in Judah. The discovery in Lachish of a large number of *lmlk* handles, sealed in the destruction layer formed by the Sennacherib campaign in 701 BCE, led most scholars to the conclusion that these marked vessels were exceptionally and specifically produced as a war effort to collect tributes, to ensure provision of food, and thus try to resist the imminent Assyrian attack (USSISHKIN, 1977, p. 50-56; cf. NAAMAN, 1979, p. 75; 1986, p. 12-17; VAUGHN, 1999, p. 88 -99, 136-137; KLETTER, 2002).

Lipschits, Sergi and Koch suggested that the practice of stamping jars with the *lmlk* seal as part of a tax collection system had already been introduced by the Assyrians at the end of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE when they came to dominate the region, perhaps a couple of decades before Sennacherib's campaign (LIPSCHITS, SERGI & KOCH, 2010, p. 7).

About 700 jar handles impressed with a fingertip or a tool of similar shape were found in Khirbet Qeiyafa (Fig. 5; KANG & GARFINKEL, 2015). If that city was in fact Judahite as its excavators proposed, the custom of distinguishing some jars from others by marking their handles had already been consolidated at the beginning of the 10<sup>th</sup> century BCE.

Ussishkin points out that "no similar system is known from Assyria proper, or from other countries dominated by Assyria, this been a clear indication that the introduction of the *lmlk* stamping system in Judah was not due to Assyrian inspiration and influence" (USSISHKIN, 2012, p. 16; cf. 2011, p. 222; cf. NAAMAN, 2016, p. 114).

The evidence, therefore, suggests that such a practice had a long history and was typically Judahite. Although using different iconographic motives, it may have continued in Judah/Yehud/Judea even after the extinction of the Kingdom of Judah in 586 BCE (STERN, 2001, p. 175; LIPSCHITS, SERGI & KOCH, 2011; cf. ARIEL & SHORAM, 2000; AVIGAD, 1957; 1958; VANDERHOOFT & LIPSCHITS, 2007; STERN, 1971).



Figure 2: *mlk*-stamped jar, from Tel Lachish. Photo: Amalyah Oren. (ISRAEL MUSEUM, 1975, Accession Number IAA 1975-246).



Figure 3: *mlk* jar handle.  
Photo: Oded Lipschits (YIRKA, 2017).



Figure 4: Jar handle incised with concentric circles, from Ramat Rahel. Photo: Oded Lipschits. (LIPSHITS, 2017)



Figure 5: Finger-impressed jar handle, from Khirbet Qeiyafa. Photo by the author, 2013.

The probable function of all these different marks has generally been inferred from the Hebrew inscription that appears on a set of them, the aforementioned *lmlk* handles – ללמל “*belonging to the king*” or “*for the king*” – suggesting that they were royal emblems (WARD, 1968; TUSHINGHAM, 1970; 1971; AVIGAD & BARKAY, 2000, p. 243; FOX, 2000, p. 220-223; HUDON, 2010, p. 31-32; NAAMAN, 2016, p. 114-116), perhaps used to identify jars used to collect taxes, probably in the form of shares of wine, oil and grains (KLETTER, 1998, p. 145-147; ZIMHONI, 2004, p. 1706;



The hypothesis that the *lmlk* jars carried royal symbols and were part of a centralized tax collection system is supported by the findings produced by neutron activation and petrographic analyses which showed that those jars, found in a number of different Judahite sites, seem to have been all produced in a single location in the Shephelah (MOMMSEN, PERLMAN & YELLIN, 1984; GOREN & HALPERIN, 2004, p. 2556; YELLIN & CAHILL, 2004).

The largest assemblage of *lmlk* handles, comprised of hundreds of pieces, was found on Lachish Level III. Evidence provided by archaeological and textual sources allows to date the end of the period represented by this layer to the destruction of the city by the Assyrian king Sennacherib, in 701 BCE (USSISHKIN, 2004a; 2004b; NAAMAN, 1979). This fact led most scholars to assume that all *lmlk* handle types were produced prior to the destruction of Lachish (USSISHKIN, 1976; 1977, p. 57-59; 2004b; NAAMAN, 1970; 1986; VAUGHN, 1999; FOX, 2000, p. 216-235; HUDON, 2010).

A more recent research work, carried out by LIPSCHITS, SERGI & KOCH, 2010; 2011; cf. LIPSCHITS, 2012; Ji 2001; GRENA, 2004, p. 333-346), taking as reference the typology of the *lmlk* handles proposed by André Lemaire (1981), and considering their relative chronology and distribution pattern, convincingly demonstrated the following points:

1. *lmlk* stamps of types Ia and Ib (both bearing a four-winged symbol; Fig. 6 and 7) and IIa (with a two-winged symbol; Fig. 8) are generally found in archaeological layers prior to 701 BCE; while types IIb, IIc and XII (all three bearing a two-winged symbol; Fig. 9, 10, and 11) are generally found in layers later than 701 BCE. However, the rigidity with which this chronological scheme separates the *lmlk* handles between earlier and later than 701 BCE probably needs to be slightly calibrated by the exceptions pointed out by Ussishkin, although they are rare (USSISHKIN, 2012, p. 16).

2. Of the almost four hundred *lmlk* handles found in Lachish, less than 10% are of the two-winged type (IIa); almost all are of the four-winged types (Ia and Ib) (LIPSCHITS, SERGI & KOCH, 2010, p. 18; cf. MAZAR, 2018, p. 184). After 701 BCE the four-winged symbols are discontinued, while the two-winged ones increase in number. Thus,



assuming the seriation axiom – according to which a new type starts making room in a culture with few exemplars, gradually increasing in number until it reaches a peak of popularity, to then starts to decline in number until it disappears from record – the conclusion that the proportionally small number of the IIa type (two-winged) in Lachish Level III indicates that this type was introduced after the much more numerous types Ia and Ib (four-winged) (LIPSCHITS, 2012, p. 9) seems correct, despite Ussishkin's contrary opinion (USSISHKIN, 2011, p. 223; 2012, p. 15-16).

3. Before the Assyrian campaign, *lmlk*-stamped jars were used over a wide area that encompassed the mountains of Judah and the Shephelah, that soft-sloping hills between the Judahite highlands to the East and the Philistine plains to the West. After 701 BC, however, not only the four-winged symbol (types Ia and Ib) was replaced by the two-winged symbol (IIb, IIc and XII) but also the *lmlk* jars practically disappear from the Shephelah and pass to be used almost exclusively in the mountain range, the traditional heart of Judah's territory (LIPSCHITS, SERGI, & KOCH, 2010, p. 19, fig. 3; p. 21, fig. 4; 2011, p. 17, fig. 1, p. 16, fig. 2, p. 18, fig. 3).

4. After Sennacherib's victorious campaign, jar handles incised with concentric circles (Fig. 4) were introduced in the highland sites of Judah, basically in the same locations where the two-winged *lmlk* symbols were being used. In a large number of cases, concentric circles appear on handles that already had a *lmlk* stamp; many others were incised on new, unstamped jars. Lipschits, Sergi and Koch point out that "not even a single incised handle was discovered in a 701 destruction level" (2011, p. 8), thus establishing *its terminus post quem*. Since the *lmlk* marks were stamped on soft, unbaked clay, before the jars were fired, and that the concentric circles were incised after the jars had already acquired their hard, ceramic form, it is evident that the incisions are a later development. The semiotic effect of placing the concentric circles beside the *lmlk* stamp is the cancellation of the *lmlk* stamp, at least on these jars that bear both symbols. One may therefore infer that a change in the identity of those jars occurred, perhaps hurriedly promoted, since old jars bearing the *lmlk* stamp were recycled before new, unstamped jars could be produced.



Figure 6: Type Ia

Four-winged Symbol. Cursive inscription.  
Upper register: *lmlk* ("belonging to the king"). Lower register: name of a place.  
(After GRENA, 2004)



Figure 7: Type Ib

Four-winged Symbol. Lapidary inscription.  
Upper register: *lmlk* ("belonging to the king"). Lower register: name of a place.  
(After GRENA, 2004)

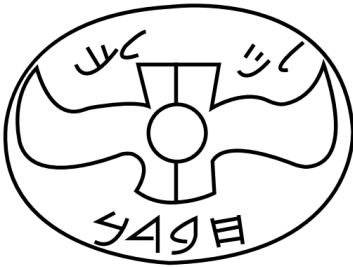


Figure 8: Type IIa

Two-winged symbol. Upper register: *lmlk* ("belonging to the king"). Lower register: name of a place (letters clustered).  
(After GRENA, 2004)



Figure 9: Type IIb

Two-winged symbol. Upper register: *lmlk* ("belonging to the king"). Lower register: name of a place (letters separated).  
(After GRENA, 2004)



Figure 10: Type IIc

Two-winged symbol. Upper register: name of a place. No lower register.  
(After GRENA, 2004)

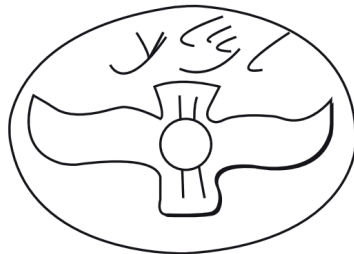


Figure 11: Type XII

Two-winged symbol. Upper register: *lmlk* ("belonging to the king"). No lower register.  
(After GRENA, 2004)





5. Eventually, incised concentric circles ceased to be used, while the two-winged *lmlk* stamps remained (BARKAY & VAUGHN, 2004: 2168). This suggests that the reason for the seemingly hasty introduction of the concentric circles no longer existed and was short-lived.

In sum, the marks on the Judahite handles reveal a dynamic picture of the late 8<sup>th</sup> and early 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE period, showing signs of both continuity and discontinuity. On the one hand, the custom of distinguishing some jars from others by marking their handles was maintained without interruption, despite the dramatic political turmoil of that time. On the other hand, the marks changed both in form and distribution. Thus, given the fact that the practice was maintained, it becomes necessary to ask the reason for the changes.

It has been tentatively suggested that each Judahite king selected a particular mark as his own private emblem, hence the diversity of symbols (JI, 2001; NAAMAN, 2016, p. 117, n. 7), or that each mark represents a different administrative system (LIPSCHITS, SERGI & KOCH, 2011, p. 7-8). However, none of these conjectures is able to satisfactorily account for all the archaeological data. The first requires supposing that the marks have succeeded each other; but it is unable to explain, for example, the fact that concentric circles were introduced after the two-winged *lmlk* symbols, coexisted with them in the same sites at the same time, and vanished before the *lmlk* symbols did. The second requires assuming – against basic semiotic principles – that a king of Judah deemed practicable to use two different symbols, both with the same function, at the same time and place.

## THE CONTRIBUTION OF SEMIOTICS

The fundamentals of Semiotics, as is widely known, were seminally enunciated by Ferdinand de Saussure (1921) and contributed to give rise to Structuralism, that great current of thought that eventually came to dominate broad sectors of the Social Sciences (e.g. LÉVI-STRAUSS, 2003, p. 45).

Saussure taught that a *signified* (that is, a *concept*), being abstract, immaterial and intangible, invariably needs to be incorporated into a *signifier* - this one, perceptible – so that a message can be communicated. The correlation between the two of them, that is, between *content* and *expression*, he called a *sign* (cf. ECO, 1986, p. 1). Especially important, according to him, is the fact that the *sign* means what it means because it differs from all other signs of the same system. Primarily concerned with spoken and written language, Saussure



used the word *sign* as reference to the combination of a *concept* and an *acoustic image* (SAUSSURE, 1983, p. 118-123). Charles Sanders Peirce, in turn, interested in other forms of language as well, classified the types of *sign* into three categories: *icon* (a sign in which the signifier indicates the signified due to the evident similarity between the two of them); *index* (a sign in which the signifier indicates the signified because there is a continuity or a causal relationship between them); and *symbol* (a sign in which the signifier indicates the signified due to a social convention, therefore arbitrary and constructed) (PEIRCE, 1932, Vol. II, p. 297).

According to this theoretical advance, the “elements of signification” – may they be part of the verbal language or of any other system of signs – only acquire meaning through the establishment of distinctions between the components that make up their semiotic system (LÉVI-STRAUSS, 2003, p. 45-50; cf. SAUSSURE, 1983, p. 118; SEBEOK, 2001, p. 50-59; CHANDLER, 2002, p. 29-44; SANTAELLA, 2007, p. 13-15). Therefore, since each *signified* requires a distinct *signifier*, the introduction of a new symbol – such as those on the Judahite jar handles – must necessarily be understood as an action intended to produce a new meaning (cf. PEIRCE, 1932, Vol. III, p. 360).

## HISTORICAL DATA

It seems also useful to refer to the main features of the late 8<sup>th</sup> century and early 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE scenario offered by literary sources:

1. *The Subjugation of Judah by Sennacherib*. The invasion of Judah by the Assyrian army was overwhelming, ending the relative autonomy that the Judahite kingdom had. Referring to King Hezekiah, Sennacherib reports in his Annals that he “laid siege to 46 of his strong cities, walled forts and to the countless small villages in their vicinity” (Pritchard, 1969, p. 288). Similarly, the biblical text reports that “in the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah’s reign, Sennacherib king of Assyria attacked all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them (2 Kings 18:13; cf. Isaiah 36: 1).
2. *The Favoring of the Philistines*. The punishment imposed by the Assyrians on the rebel Judah resulted in the reduction of its domains and in the reorganization of that region’s territory. Much of the area which, up to then, was under Judah’s control was given by the Assyrians to the Philistines, as Sennacherib reported: “His towns which I had plundered, I took away from his country and gave them (over) to Mitinti, king of Ashdod, Padi, king of Ekron, and Sillibel, king of Gaza” (PRITCHARD, 1969, p. 288).

3. *The Reorganization of the Tax System.* The very reason for the Assyrian campaign and the most important imposition of Sennacherib on king Hezekiah was of a tax nature. Biblical sources record that, faced with the risk of annihilation of Jerusalem, its capital city, “Hezekiah king of Judah sent this message to the king of Assyria at Lachish: I have done wrong. Withdraw from me, and I will pay whatever you demand of me” (2 Kings 18:14). The Assyrian king’s reaction is referred to in his Annals: “Thus I reduced his country, but I still increased the tribute and the *katrû* -presents (due) to me (as his) overlord which I imposed (later) upon him beyond the former tribute, to be delivered annually” (PRITCHARD, 1969, p. 288).

One the basis of all these archaeological and historical data, and theoretical considerations, the following scenario may be drawn.

### THE TWO-WINGED LMLK STAMPS

The two-winged symbols (types IIa, IIb, IIc and XII) can be safely associated with King Hezekiah considering that: (1) the dates of these handles coincide with his period of reign; (2) the inscription they bear makes direct reference to a *למלך/mlk/king*; and, most importantly, (3) nine *bullae* inscribed with the name *Hezekiah* have already been discovered and reported, all containing the same two-winged symbol (Fig. 12 and 13; CROSS, 1999; DEUTSCH, 2002; 2003a, p. 13-20; 2003b, p. 45-50; 2011, p. 76; MAZAR, 2018, p. 180, 183-184).



**Figure 12:** King Hezekiah’s Bulla Seal stamp with the two-winged symbol flanked by the Egyptian *ankh* symbol. Upper register: “Belonging to Hezekiah, (son of) Abaz”. Lower register: “King of Judah”. (MAZAR, 2018, p. 180, Fig. II.1.4)



**Figure 12:** Drawing of King Hezekiah’s Bulla Seal stamp with the two-winged symbol flanked by the Egyptian *ankh* symbol. Upper register: “Belonging to Hezekiah, (son of) Abaz”. Lower register: “King of Judah”. (MAZAR, 2018, p. 180, Fig. II.1.4)



This explains why, before Sennacherib's campaign, the two-winged symbol (type IIa) was used in a wider territory, which included the Shephelah, but after Hezekiah was defeated and had his territory reduced by the Assyrians the two-winged symbol (types IIb, IIc, and XII) continued to be used but only in the highland sites, heart of the Judahite territory, over which Hezekiah was allowed to keep some control; but not in the Shephelah, which was devastated by the Assyrian troops and was no longer administered by Hezekiah.

## THE FOUR-WINGED LMLK STAMPS

The stamps with the four-winged symbol, have the inscription *lmlk* in the upper register and a toponym in the lower register (types Ia, and Ib). In this respect, they are very similar to the stamps with the two-winged symbol (types IIa, IIb, IIc and XII), but they clearly differ from each other. While the four-winged symbol appears to be a scarab, the two-winged symbol looks more like a bird or a winged disk, from which rays radiate.

For communication to be accurate and effective, preventing dubiety, different ideas must be conveyed by different symbols. The corollary is that different symbols must be seen most probably as expressions of different ideas. Just as it is not reasonable to conclude that the traffic signs "turn right" and "turn left" have the same meaning, despite their similarity, one may not conclude that the four-winged scarab and the two-winged disk are "alternative expressions of the same idea" (NA'AMAN, 2016, p. 114), unless they did not coexist.

Considering that the two-winged symbol is associated with Hezekiah and occurs in layers both earlier (type IIa) and later (types IIb, IIc and XII) than Sennacherib's campaign, the four-winged symbol, which vanishes after 701 BCE and could not have existed with the same function at the same time as the two-winged symbol, can only be earlier.

The fact that both symbols are embedded in the layer formed by the destruction inflicted by the Assyrians, in 701 BCE, does not necessarily present a problem. This date offers only the *terminus ante quem* for the four-winged symbols. There is no way of knowing for sure when they started to be used and for how long. The period represented by Lachish Level III possibly started in mid-8th century BCE (USSISHKIN, 1977, p. 56-57; 2004a, p. 82-83) and may have been long enough to accommodate two consecutive royal symbols. Thus it can be suggested that (1) the four-winged symbol and the two-winged symbol represent respectively two distinct phases of Hezekiah's reign, or that (2) only the two-winged symbol is associated with Hezekiah (715 -686 BC),

while the four-winged symbol would belong to the time of his father, king Ahaz (731-715 BC) (for the chronology of the kings of Judah, see THIELE, 1983).



## THE CONCENTRIC-CIRCLE INCISIONS

The jar handles marked with concentric circles started to be used, as already said, after the Assyrian invasion. This new symbol is found almost exclusively in the highlands of Judah, practically in the same sites where the two-winged *lmlk* jars were widely used. About 40% of these marks were incised on the same handles already stamped with the *lmlk* seal. The remaining 60% occur by itself; however, at least for some time, they seem to have been used concomitantly with the two-winged *lmlk* stamps (PARAYRE, 1993; LIPSCHITS, SERGI & KOCH, 2011, p. 7-9).

The fact that these two different symbols, both marking the same type of storage jar handles, are found together in the same archaeological strata has led some scholars to speculate that either they had different function or one gradually replaced the other.

James B. Pritchard, for example, suggested that concentric circles might only have a decorative function, or that they were potter's or owner's marks (PRITCHARD, 1959, p. 20-23). However, concentric circles are too crude and unattractive to be considered decorative; and it seems very unlikely that a private person would dare to affix his symbol side by side and practically in opposition to a royal seal stamp.

Paul Lapp proposed that the concentric circles were used to indicate the quality of the products contained in the jars, or to indicate the jars that had already been used (LAPP, 1960, p. 22). These ideas, however, are purely speculative, lacking any evidence to support them.

Oded Lipschits *et al.*, in turn, suggested that concentric circles "should be interpreted as a new phase of the Judahite administrative system, overlapping and possibly replacing the original *lmlk* system" (LIPSCHITS, SERGI & KOCH, 2011, p. 7-8). This proposal seems to be based solely on the assumption that the two marks performed the same function. Their rationale seems to be that, being radically different from each other, the two marks could not have functioned in the same place at the same time, so one must have followed the other. However, they themselves candidly admit that their suggested date for the concentric circles, making them be later than the *lmlk* stamps, "cannot be proved from the archaeological point of view, since there are no destruction

layers and thus distinctive *pottery* assemblages from this period in Judah” (*Ibidem*, p. 8).

Whatever the function or chronology of the concentric circles, the idea that a king of Judah adopted a geometrical figure as his emblem presents an enigma. The choice of the scarab as an emblem of Judah’s royalty is not surprising because, as early as the second millennium BCE, the scarab image was already used on stamps bearing pharaoh’s name and title. From that time on, the symbolic image of a beetle, sometimes with open wings, manifests itself throughout the Eastern Mediterranean, as far as Mesopotamia (e.g. Fig. 14; WARD, 1994; BIETAK & CZERNY, 2004; BEN-TOR, 2007). Broadly speaking, the same can be said of the winged disk, often found above the entrance of Egyptian temples and tombs, on top of stelae associated with the image of some pharaoh, and in images used by various peoples all over the Fertile Crescent (e.g. Fig. 15; GARDINER, 1944; TEISSIER, 1996, p. 27, Fig. 184; p. 64, Fig. 68; p. 94, Fig. 172; p. 155-157; p. 158; SHONKWILER, 2014). These two symbols – the scarab and the winged disc – were common in the ancient Middle East, and evidently were adopted by the kings of Judah, although perhaps with an adapted meaning (LEMON, 2010). Concentric circles, however, before they appeared on jar handles, were unheard of in Judah.



**Figure 14:** Scarab inscribed with the name of Pharaoh Amenhotep II, XVIII Dynasty.  
Photo: Sara Kopelman-Stavisky.  
(ISRAEL MUSEUM, 1989, Accession Number 76.031.2108).



**Figure 15:** Seal with the inscription “Amos, the scribe”. At the top, the winged symbol.  
Photo: The Israel Museum.  
(ISRAEL MUSEUM, 1978, Accession Number 71.065.0177)

Chang-Ho Ji (2001, p. 13-14) suggested that the concentric circles represented the concept contained in the biblical expression עֵרְכָה גִּוּחַ (*hug ha-eretz, circle of earth*). This correlation, however, is very tenuous. In all three occurrences of גִּוּחַ (*hug, circle*) in biblical texts (Job 22:14; Proverbs 8:27; Isaiah 44:22), the word is always in the singular and seems to refer to the vault of heaven. Thus, the image of a single circle would be the most appropriate to

represent this idea. The concept is certainly that of a curved line but does not seem to allow the idea of concentric circles.



Considering that concentric circles seem to be a new arrival in Judah, they must be interpreted as the signifier of a new concept that, given the scenario provided by the historical sources, was perhaps imposed on the Judahites. However, although apparently foreign to Judahite culture, in order for the concentric circles to function semantically, that is, for them to convey a message, it was necessary that they already denoted something to somebody. Assuming, as previously argued, that the meaning of a sign can only be found in its relations with other signs of its own semiotic system, it is then necessary to seek the meaning of the concentric circles outside the Judahite culture boundaries, but in a cultural system somehow closely related to Judah, otherwise it would be impossible to explain the occurrence of concentric circles on Judahite jar handles and harmonize all the data discussed above. Therefore, it seems useful to bring to the discussion of this question, albeit tentatively, the fact that the Philistines were the only immediate neighbors of the Judahites to use geometric figures, especially spirals, circles and concentric semi-circles, in the decoration of their ceramics, which are abundantly represented in sites such as Ekron, Tell Qasile, Ashdod, Ashkelon and several others (Fig. 16 to 19; MAZAR, 1985; BEN-SHLOMO, 2010, p. 104).

It is not conceivable that Sennacherib had subjugated king Hezekiah, reduced his dominion, and increased his tax burden without having also altered the very symbol system that represented the sovereignty of the king of Judah.

One may remember at this point that the idea that concentric circles arose well after Sennacherib's campaign is mere conjecture which, apparently, only seeks to avoid the problem of having two symbols - concentric circles and *lmlk* stamps - with the same function, in a same place, at the same time. But if the assumption that they had the same function is removed, it can be admitted, without contradicting the archaeological evidence, that concentric circles were introduced immediately after the Assyrian victory over the kingdom of Judah.

Thus, one can tentatively propose the hypothesis that the concentric-circles symbol incised on Judahite handles is a direct reference to the Philistines, imposed on Judah by the victorious Assyrians. The storage jars thus marked would identify the ones set aside to collect tributes from the Judahites; not for the king of Judah – for that was the function of the *lmlk* jars – but for the king of Assyria, perhaps brokered by the Philistines. That expedient would certainly punish and humiliate the rebel Hezekiah.



**Figure 16:** Philistine Bichrome Ware from Tel Beth-Shemesh. (BUNIMOVITZ & LEDERMAN, 2011, p. 40, Fig. 4)



**Figure 17:** Philistine Bichrome Ware from Tel Ashdod. (ROSE, 2015).



**Figure 18:** Philistine Bichrome Ware from Tell Ashkelon. (ISRAEL MUSEUM, 2016)



**Figure 19:** Philistine Ware from Tell Qasile. (MAZAR, 1985, p. 71, Photo 73)

The reconstruction here proposed fits the whole purpose of Senacherib's campaign, and explains why, soon after, concentric circles started to be incised next to *lmlk* stamps, as if nullifying the latter and disauthorizing the king of Judah, and why two different symbols – *lmlk* stamps and concentric circles – co-existed for some time in the cities of Judah. It seems to account for all the data presently available and may be summarized as follows: (1) the marks on jar handles were part of a royal taxation system; (2) the introduction of concentric circles occurred amid the circumstances generated by the military campaign of Sennacherib, which aimed to ensure the collection of tribute, (3) as a result of the Assyrian campaign, Judah lost control over the Shephelah, much of Judah's territory was given by the Assyrians to the Philistines, and Judah was forced to confine itself to the highlands; (4) the concentric circles were imposed by the Assyrians on the Judahites, indicating that the storage jars thus marked were





intended to be collected by the Philistines perhaps on behalf of and in behalf of the Assyrians; and (6) eventually, shortly after Assyria's power over that region loosed, Judah got rid of the concentric circles and went back to using only the *lmlk* stamps, though restricted to its now diminished territory in the highlands.

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