Identity Writ Small: Seal imagery in Seleucid Palestine

In classical antiquity, multiple ethnoi lived within the confined territory of the southern Levant. Tyrians, Judeans, Idumeans (among others) lived in close proximity but spoke distinct languages, wrote in different scripts, worshipped different gods, followed their own calendars and legal precepts, and in addition accommodated themselves to the political dominion of outsiders – Achaemenid Persians, Ptolemies, and Seleucids – whose representatives introduced other alphabets and languages, ways of marking time, gods, rituals, and social ranks.

How did people cope with the cultural cacophony? To answer this question we want material remains that reveal individual choices made at specific points in time, from known venues and circumstances. The almost 2000 sealings stamped found in the mid-second century BCE provincial administrative building at Tel Kedesh, in northern Israel, provide such a corpus of remains. In this paper I discuss the imagery of three of those devices, each depicting a different pictorial mode and channeling a distinct cultural milieu:

- a sealing of the city itself, bearing a naturalistic shaft of wheat and bunch of grapes, with Kedesh written in Greek below;
- a sealing of a Phoenician provincial official, bearing a schematic Tanit, with the phrase “He who is over the land” written in Aramaic below;
- a sealing depicting a lion in profile, head frontal, one paw raised and holding a javelin. The motif is eastern, the style Greek, the origin unknown. The lion is very similar to ones sculpted on the Qasr al-Abd at ‘Iraq el-Emir, near Amman; and might be a symbol of the Tobiad house.

I argue that the differences are best understood as a kind of call-and-response. In a time and place that often required people to represent themselves to outsiders, each seal was a carefully chosen signal, an essential distillation intended to convey its owner’s personal essence.

Prof. Dr. Andrea Berlin (Boston University)