



## ANCIENT BREAD STAMPS FROM JORDAN

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### ABSTRACT

Marking bread was an old practice performed in different parts of the old world. It was done for religious, magical, economic and identification purposes. Bread stamps differ from other groups of stamps. Accordingly, the aim of this article is to identify such stamps, displayed or stored, in a number of Jordanian Archaeological Museums. A collection of twelve ancient bread stamps were identified and studied. Two of the stamps were of unknown provenance while the others came from al-Shuneh, Dhiban, Khirbet an-Nawafla, Abu-Sido and Jerash. The stamps are presented according to their museum collection since a chronological classification could not be achieved due to the fact that the majority of the stamps were purchased from antiquities dealers.

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**KEYWORDS:** Stamps, Bread Stamps, Jordan, Archaeological

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Bread stamps differ from other groups of stamps. Stamps impressed on a vessel's handles to act as a trade mark for a certain commodity, or to mark the production centre, are inscribed. They are of smaller size than bread stamps and there are archaeological finds that speak for their uses. Also, brick stamps usually bore the name of the person or institution ordering the bricks. All the stamps studied here had no traces of colours, so the possibility that they might have been used to tattoo human bodies or to colour textiles is excluded. In an attempt to locate similar objects from archaeological excavations in the region, a search was made of the collections of museums in Jordan. I was able to identify twelve bread stamps: three from The Jordan Archaeological Museum, one from The Jordan Museum, six from Irbid Dar Al-Saraya Museum, one from Jerash Archaeological Museum and one from The Ahli Bank Numismatic Museum. The majority of the stamps were purchased from antiquities dealers, which makes dating them difficult as they were not discovered in the stratified context of an archaeological excavation. Thus it is impossible to present a chronological classification of the collections discussed though in future, luminescence dating and archaeomagnetic dating is recommended (Aitken et al., 1989; Liritzis & Kovacheva, 1992; Liritzis et al., 2013). Due to these limitations, the stamps are presented according to their museum collection and thus any interpretation is done with caution.

## 2. CLAY SEALS-STAMPS: AN OLD PRACTICE

The use of clay seals was developed in the Near East in the eighth millennium B.C. Scholars studying Neolithic and Copper Age seals from sites in western Asia and southern Europe have different opinions concerning the use of such seals, including the marking of bread (Skeates 2007: 183-198). There is sufficient evidence to suggest that since the Neolithic period, seals were used as stamps by local populations for the

purposes of identification and differentiation from other groups. Stamps were also viewed as apotropaic devices, aimed at protecting the owner of the object or the object itself. Clay stamps found in Neolithic settlements in Macedonia and other parts of Eastern Europe point to their use in the preparation of bread (Naumov 2008: 185-204). Stamps were used for decorating cakes and bread, which were used in rituals, as votive offerings made by the living to the dead, to ask for rain, etc. Bread was also stamped with magical messages that wished the person who ate it a good life or good health<sup>2</sup> (Caseau 2009: 120).

In the Greco-Roman periods bread was stamped with the name of the baker in order to establish the source of the bread or for use in certain occasions such as ritual performances. The secular use of bread stamps is confirmed by a number of carbonized loaves of bread from Pompeii (fig. 1). Roman bakeries stamped their bread in order to establish the source of the bread and prevent attempts at forgery.



**Figure 1** A stamped loaf of bread from Pompeii dated to the first century A.D. the stamp bears the name of its producer

(<http://www.ancientresource.com/lots/roman/roman-byzantine-bread-stamps.html>)

Bread stamped with a variety of symbols was used for special occasions related to pagan deities. Bread or cakes were a substitute for expensive offerings made to the deities. Herodotus, describing the practice of sacrificing swine to the Moon, mentions that the poor, because of the scantiness of

their means, shaped pigs of dough, baked them and offered them as a sacrifice (Herodotus 2:47). In the Fables of Aesop, a poor ill man who promised the impossible: to sacrifice one hundred oxen to the gods, if he was cured, had to bake one hundred oxen of dough and offer them on an altar as a substitute (Aesop 1998: 37)<sup>3</sup>. Bread continued to be stamped with magic symbols during this period (Caseau 2009:120). Probably holy bread that was taken by worshippers of Asklepios when visiting his sanctuaries and asking for cures, was marked (Edelstein 1998:189).

### 3. THE STAMPS

As explained above, the absence of provenance for the stamps necessitated their organization according to museum collections for this project.

#### 3.1 Jordan Archaeological Museum (three stamps)

(1). A handmade clay stamp (no. J 5773), roughly the shape of an isosceles triangle. The sides of the triangle measure 4.8 cm on the shorter side and ca. 5.5 cm on the longer sides. The stamp has a pierced handle that is 3.6 cm in height (fig. 2). The provenance of the stamp is unknown. The clay is gray in colour and not of fine quality. The stamp is in a good condition except for damage to the tip of the triangle. Engraved on its surface are geometric shapes of unknown meaning and significance. No parallel examples have been found that might aid in dating the object.



Figure 2 A clay stamp (Jordan Archaeological Museum)

(2). A handmade clay stamp (no. J 5225); the clay is reddish in colour and not of fine quality. It is circular in shape with a diameter of ca. 5.5 cm. It is in good condition, with minimal breakage on the edges. It has a broad handle, which is partially broken, across its back. Its height with the handle is ca. 3 cm. (Fig.3).



Figure 3 A clay stamp (Jordan Archaeological Museum)

The surface of the stamp is incised with a swastika and four small dots inscribed within a circle. The swastika has been interpreted as having many meanings. The symbol was related to the mother goddess in the Neolithic period (Alsawah 2002: 45), and the reverse swastika was interpreted as a feminine symbol in ancient religions and associated with the vulva in representations of Artemis and Astarte (Stevens 2001:185). The swastika motif was used frequently in the Classical and Byzantine periods and, therefore, is not an indicator of date.

According to the records, the stamp was acquired from al Shuneh, ( in the upper Jordan valley) but no additional information was available.

(3). A handmade clay stamp (no. J 6741), blackish in colour, of a circular shape, 4 cm. in diameter. It has a pierced circular-shaped handle, ca. 3 cm. in diameter (figs. 4 and 5). It is in good condition except for the partly broken edge of the handle.



Figure 4 A clay stamp (Jordan Archaeological Museum)



Figure 5 Detail of the handle of the stamp in figure 4, forming a second stamp (Jordan Archaeological Museum)

The stamp is ornamented on both faces (a double stamp). On the larger surface, the disc is divided into two parts with an unclear design consisting of lines and an arch shape. The design on the handle, which was also used as a stamp, consists of a rosette with six petals. The motif of the six-petaled rosette was widely spread in ancient art. It was probably a solar or lunar symbol, it was carved on ossuaries, lintels and was also used as a potters' mark on the bottom of Jerash lamps (Avi-Yonah 1981: 107-108). It continued to be used in the Byzantine period. The motif is still used on

bread stamps in Jordan today, only as a decorative design<sup>4</sup> (Figs. 6 and 7).

According to the museum's records, the stamp came from the excavations of the Department of Antiquities at Dhiban in 5/1/ 1952, and was acquired by the museum in 1958. In an attempt to date the stamp, I looked through the files in the registration centre in the Department of Antiquities, but, unfortunately, was not able to find any records concerning the referenced excavation. The site of Dhiban was inhabited in the Early Bronze, Iron, Nabataean, Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic periods, and as no parallels were found elsewhere, the task of securely dating this stamp is impossible.



Figure 6 A modern plastic bread stamp from a bakery at Fuheis, with the design of a rosette in its centre.



Figure 7 Loaves of bread from the same bakery at Fuheis.

### 3.2 The Jordan Museum (one stamp)

(1). A roughly conical-shaped stamp (JMN 921; Petra Museum no. 921), with a rectangular shaped face (ca. 3.6 x 3 cm.). Its



height, 6.5 cm., allowed it could be easily grabbed. It is carved from soft white limestone, and has some damage on the edges (fig. 8).

The engraved decoration on its surface does not survive completely due to the fractures on the edges; what remains of the decoration consists of a cross and two dots in low relief<sup>5</sup>.



Figure 8 A limestone stamp (The Jordan Museum)

This bread stamp is the only one in the collection that comes from a stratified context and, therefore, can be dated to the Abbasid period. It was discovered at Khirbet an-Nawafla (KN: season 97, excavation 193), a site that extends over an area of around 50,000 m<sup>2</sup> in the north-west sector of the town of Wadi Musa. The site was occupied during several periods: the earliest remains at the site date to the Iron Age II, the Edomite period.

The main occupation of the site began in the Nabataean period (1<sup>st</sup> century BC), and continued with a few gaps up to the present day. A monumental building in the southern part of the site was excavated. The excavation team expected it to be the local church since they noticed several stones, originally from church furnishings, reused in nearby traditional houses. The building continued to be used during the early Islamic period. The continuity of Christianity at Khirbet an-Nawafla during

the Umayyad and early Abbasid periods is indicated by finds from these levels, and including this stone bread stamp (Amr et.al. 2000:231-235). Even with the presence of the sign of the cross on this bread stamp, we cannot be certain that it was used for Eucharistic bread. It might have been used simply for daily bread by Christian families at the site.

### 3.3 Irbid Dar Al-Saraya Archaeological Museum (six stamps)

The following Six bread stamps (not on display) are housed in the Irbid Dar Al-Saraya Archaeological Museum. The items were bought in 1995 from Abu Tala't al Sayahein, an antiquities dealer. Abu Tala't claimed that he bought them from the village of Abu Sido, near al-Mashare' in the northern Jordan Valley.

(1). A conical shaped stamp carved from soft lime stone (no. IR 5603), with a nearly circular stamp face (5.5-6.2 cm. in diameter), its height is 5cm., and it is in good condition (Fig. 9).



Figure 9 A limestone stamp (Irbid Dar Al-Saraya Archaeological Museum)

Engraved with a rosette like motif, the design is carved so that the impression would come out in relief (Fig. 10).



Figure 10 An attempt by the author to use the same stamp (fig. 9) on leavened dough.

(2). A rectangular stamp (no. IR 5601), carved of soft lime stone (8.5x5.8 cm.); its height is 5 cm., including the rectangular handle (5.8x3.5 cm.) (Fig. 11). The stamp is in good condition, but the handle is partly broken. The stamp is decorated with triangular shapes; the composition and meaning of the engraved motifs is unclear.



Figure 11 A limestone stamp (Irbid Dar Al-Saraya Archaeological Museum)

(3). A rectangular shaped stamp (no. IR 5597) carved of soft limestone (6.6x9.3cm.) Its height is 7.4 cm., including the rectangular-shaped handle (5.1x3.1 cm.) (Fig. 12). The stamp is unfinished: it is decorated with a circle, inside of which there is an unfinished design.

(4). A rectangular stamp (no. IR 5600) carved of soft limestone (8x5.6 cm.) Its height is 3.6 cm. (Fig. 13). The stamp has a knob handle. As with the previous stamp, this one is probably not finished; it is deco-

rated with a circle inside which is an unfinished design.



Figure 12 A limestone stamp (Irbid Dar Al-Saraya Archaeological Museum)



Figure 13 A limestone stamp (Irbid Dar Al-Saraya Archaeological Museum)

It is difficult to assert here that the initial 'M' (Greek mu) might have been an attempt to engrave MP? (the initials of the title of the Virgin), but if so this stamp may be dated to the Byzantine period.

(5). A rectangular stamp (no. IR 5602) measuring 12.3x4.8 cm. It is 3.8cm. in height (Fig.14). It is carved of soft limestone, and is broken in the middle and repaired, it is partly broken on one side. The stamp has a hole on its back for suspension. The design engraved on the face of the stamp is composed of geometrical shapes, the meaning or symbolism of which is unclear.



Figure 14 A limestone stamp (Irbid Dar Al-Saraya Archaeological Museum)

(6). A unique conical-shaped stamp (no. IR 6663) with a rectangular face (6x 4.7 cm.). Its height is 4.1cm (Figs. 15 and 16). It is carved of soft limestone and has a hole for suspension. The stamp contains an incised image of a lamb with four Greek letters carved in low relief on the animal's body (APNI = lamb). Although text on a stamp is usually carved in reverse so that the impression will read from left to right, the text here is not carved in reverse. Thus the letters in the impression appear backward (Cotsonis and Kouroumalis 2012: 3).



Figure 15 A limestone stamp (Irbid Dar Al-Saraya Archaeological Museum)

A swastika is engraved on one of the conical sides of the stamp (Fig. 16). It is tempting to date this stamp to the Byzantine period as Jesus is frequently referred to as the sacrificial lamb in the New Testament (John 1:29, Revelation 5:6). Early Eucharistic bread stamps, dating from the 6<sup>th</sup> - 7<sup>th</sup> centuries and perhaps earlier, contain

the letters (IC XC NI KA) (Jesus Christ is victorious), or some form of a cross or Christogram, but no images of lambs<sup>6</sup> (Fig. 17).



Figure 16 Detail of stamp no.14 (Irbid Dar Al-Saraya Archaeological Museum)



Figure 17 Eucharistic bread from a bakery at Fuheis with the same ancient symbols still in use in the Greek Orthodox Church today

The six stamps at Irbid Dar Al-Saraya Archaeological Museum likely date to the same period. This conclusion is based on the similarity in material and technique of manufacture. In addition, all of the objects come from the same site, the village of Abu Sido. The records of the Department of Antiquities do not refer to any excavation or accidental discovery at Abu Sido and, therefore, the question remains as to whether the stamps were made in the Byzantine period.

### 3.4 Jerash Archaeological Museum (one stamp)

(1) A handmade clay stamp, brownish in colour (no. G332) (Fig. 18). Conical in shape, it is in the form of a Greek cross. The arms of the cross are decorated with dots incised in sunken relief. The stamp is 4.5 cm. in height; the extension of the arms is 5x5 cm., and it is pierced for suspension. According to the records of the Jerash Ar-



chaeological Museum, this stamp came from the excavations in the area of the Umayyad houses located on the northern side of the western end of the southern Decumanus, conducted by the Polish team in 1982/3. Its function was not mentioned in the records. Being found in the area of the Umayyad houses, the Umayyad period could be suggested as *terminus post quem* for dating.

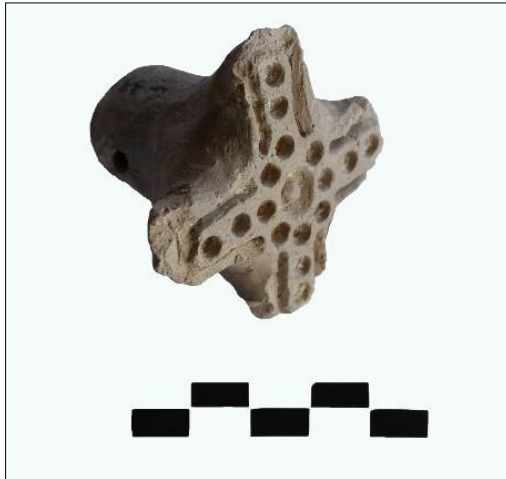


Figure 18 A clay stamp (Jerash Archaeological Museum)

### 3.5 Ahli Bank Numismatic Museum (one stamp)

(1) A handmade clay double stamp, rather crude, circular in shape with a diameter of 5.3cm. The handle forms a second stamp, with a diameter of 4.5cm. The height of the stamp is 4.5cm. The handle is pierced so that it could be hung. (Figs. 19, 20, 21). The stamp is in good condition except for some fractures at the edges. On the larger face of the stamp two main lines intersect in order to divide the surface into four quadrants. In each one, a number of lines are incised parallel to the main line. The intended motif is probably a whirling wheel, a common motif in ancient art, that probably had a religious meaning. Similar designs were still in use in the nineteen and twentieth century in Jordan (Fig. 22). On the face of the stamp's handle are geometric shapes forming an indiscernible design. This stamp was bought by Dr. Nayef Qusos from Mustafa al-Dayekh, an antiquities dealer in the 1970s; its provenance is un-

known. It is now in the collection of The Ahli Bank's Numismatic Museum.



Figure 19 A clay stamp (Ahli Bank Numismatic Museum)



Figure 20 Detail of clay stamp in figure 19 (Ahli Bank Numismatic Museum)



Figure 21 Detail of the handle of stamp in figure 19 (Ahli Bank Numismatic Museum)





Figure 22 A large bread stamp that was still in use in the nineteen and twentieth century (The Heritage Museum at the University of Jordan)



Figure 23 A modern two face liturgical bread stamp from Jordan

#### 4. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE STAMPS

As to material and technique, the collection presented here consists of five clay stamps and seven stone stamps. The stone stamps were carved from soft limestone. The clay stamps were modelled by hand, smoothed, engraved and then baked. It is reasonable to assume that wood was also used to manufacture bread stamps, but they would rarely have survived.

The known examples of bread stamps are either small and were pressed upon the centre of the loaf, or large, covering almost the whole surface of the loaf. Our corpus is of the small size.

The stamps have two parts: a flat surface of different geometric shapes and a handle. Six of the stamps have handles perforated with suspension holes so that they could be hung or carried around the neck. There are two double in which the handles were also decorated for use as stamps (Figs. 4 and 19). Double stamps with two faces were not unusual in the Byzantine period (Galavaris: 34) (Fig. 23). The stamp was pressed onto the dough when the bread was leavened; this was done before the dough began to rise. Since the stamps have deeply incised symbols or patterns, they were suitable for imprinting on soft surfaces. Their designs are either sunken so that the impression came out in relief, or vice versa.

#### 5. DATING THE STAMPS

Concerning the dates, only two stamps were found in situ during scientific excavations and, therefore, datable. The first, discovered at Khirbet an-Nawafla, was dated to the Abbasid period (750-969 C.E) by Dr. Amr and her team (Amr et al. 2000:231-235) (Fig. 8). The second (Fig. 18), according to the records of the Jerash Archaeological Museum, was found during the excavations of the Polish team in 1982/3, in the area of the Umayyad houses and thus would be dated to the Umayyad period (661-750 C.E), or earlier. As to the other stamps presented here, although in some cases the provenance is known, it is impossible to date them as they were not discovered in the course of scientific excavations. Unfortunately, information about the context of their discovery is not available in most cases, nor were there parallel examples to help in dating them. Therefore, as mentioned in the introduction, a chronological classification of the studied collection could not be achieved here.

#### 6. DISCUSSION

To the best of my knowledge, only two bread stamps from Jordan have previously been published. The first is from Samra (Kerak), the second was purchased in Dhiban and is now in a private collection in

Meinz. The one from Samra has three arms which are positioned to form a triangular shape. The stamp is made of baked clay, and decorated with small leaves and dots. At the centre is a circular medallion that contains a cross-shaped motif. Canova believed it to be a stamp for Eucharistic bread (Fig. 24) (Canova 1954: 14). Its present location is not known. As to the second stamp, only a small fragment of it survived (Fig.25). The stamp is circular in shape (20cm.in diameter), carved of soft limestone, and probably had a handle. There was an inscription running around the outer edge of the stamp's face. Of the inscription, only three Greek letters remain: (TOC). Hubner offers several possible readings of the inscription encircling the stamp<sup>7</sup>. Inside the inscription, there is a band of Maltese crosses. The author dates the stamp to the sixth century CE based on comparative material and palaeographic evidence<sup>8</sup> (Hubner 1990: 177-179).

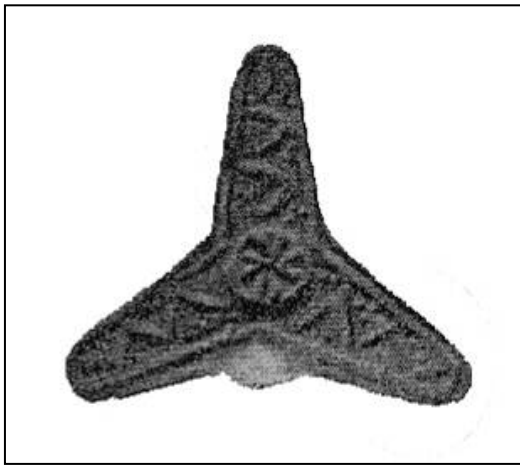


Figure 24 A bread stamp from Samra (Kerak) (Canova 1954: 14)

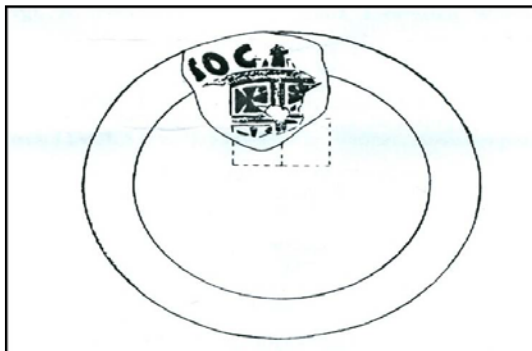


Figure 25 A bread stamp from Dhiban (Hubner 1990: 177)

A number of Byzantine bread stamps from Palestine have been identified and published. Because of their clearly Christian religious symbols, they were easily identified as Eulogia and Eucharistic bread stamps. A Byzantine Eulogia bread stamp of St. Paul came from Caesarea Maritima, circular in shape (10.4 cm. in diameter) and 1 cm. thick, made of well fired pink-reddish clay, with a knob shaped handle. Its surface is decorated with an arch surmounting a cross, with two smaller crosses at the sides. The text of the Greek inscription reads " blessing of the lord upon us and of Saint Paul (Segni, 2000: 383-400; Patrarch 2000:363-382), another Eulogia bread stamp came from the Gaza region, also circular in shape (10 cm. in diameter), made of greenish-yellow clay. On its back a knob handle. Engraved on the face of the stamp is the Virgin Mary enthroned with the child Jesus in her lap; two angels flank the virgin and the child. The inscription on the stamp reads: " Blessing of (our) Lady the Mother of God Mary" (Rahmani 1970: 105-108). A third one was discovered at Tiberias, bigger in diameter (15 cm.) also with a thick handle. Decoration is deeply engraved in the clay, and it is of a geometric pattern, in the shape of a Greek cross with four arms, dividing the stamp into four equal quarters, with a depression in the middle surrounded by dots (Feig, 1994: 591-594). From the village of Kafr Sumei in upper Galilee came a large stamp for Eucharistic bread, with a handle and a circular base (16 cm. in diameter). The stamp is engraved with crosses subdivided by rows of dots all over its surface (Bagatti, 2001: 170, fig:92). Concerning our collection, the case is different. Two or three stamps of the collection may have been Eucharistic bread stamps (Figs.8, 15 and 18).

## 7. CONCLUSION

Our study has attempted to identify and analyze a collection of twelve bread stamps from Jordanian museums. I was able to differentiate them from other groups of stamps. Due to the absence of information, in most cases, concerning the context of

their discovery and due to the absence of parallel examples, this study was unable to achieve a chronological classification of the studied collection. This study could easily identify the Christian stamps that were used to mark bread for liturgical purposes. Two or three stamps out of the collection may have been Eucharistic bread stamps. More work is needed on pre-Christian bread stamps in order to clarify the role of stamped bread in ritual, magical and administrative practices. Many questions re-

main to be answered especially those related to symbolism of motifs since the stamps used to have powerful symbolic significance.

It is hoped, consequently, that in the near future a typological classification could be achieved for bread stamps. Furthermore, this study hopes that future research on bread stamps may enrich our understanding of social, religious, and organizational practices and rituals in the ancient world.

#### FOOTNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Ibn Manzur 1999: 222. A bread stamp is called *Rashem* in ancient Arabic literary sources. The term is still in use in the Greek Orthodox Church in Jordan today. A *Rashem* is identified in *Lisān al-'Arab* by the famous Arabic lexicographer Ibn Mazur as the stamp used to mark grain or wheat.

<sup>2</sup> One of the traditions that was still common in Jordan during the 20<sup>th</sup> century was for the host of a house to put a loaf of bread, or part of a loaf, on a newly born baby when taken with his mother to visit. This was done to avert the evil eye and to ask for God's protection for the baby. In Palestine, one of the ancient practices that also disappeared was to use holy bread as an amulet in children's diseases (Canaan 1962:46-47).

<sup>3</sup> for examples of such stamps see: Galavaris 1970: fig. 7.

<sup>4</sup> Marking bread is still a common practice in some bakeries in Jordan where a kind of sweet bread made from flour, yeast, with aromatic spices such as mastic, mahlab and anise, is sold. The designs on the bread have lost their symbolic meanings and are done for decorative purposes.

<sup>5</sup> Christian women in Jordan continue to make the sign of the cross on the dough, using their hand. In this practice, they ask for God's blessings.

<sup>6</sup> The tradition of stamping liturgical bread continues in the Greek Orthodox Church. Modern liturgical stamps are identical to stamps used in the Byzantine Empire since the 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> century (Galavaris 1970:74-5, 65, 169, figs. 37, 38). The face of the stamp bears the design of an engraved Greek cross within a square, and between the arms of the cross are the letters IC XC NI KA (Jesus Christ is victorious).

<sup>7</sup> Hubner suggested that the three letters left (TOC) could be part of two words: 1- XPICTOC = Christ or 2- AΘANATOC = immortal. Thus the complete phrase encircling the stamp could be one of the following common phrases: 1- IHCOYC XPICTOC, 2- IHCOYC XPICTOC NIKE, 3- IHCOYC XPICTOC ΘEOY YIOC or 4- AΓIOC O ΘEOC AΓIOC ICXYPOC AΓIOC AΘANATOC EΛEHCOC HMAC.

<sup>8</sup> Byzantine occupation of Dhiban is well attested; two churches were discovered and excavated (see: Tushingham, A., The Excavations at Dibon (Dhiban) in Moab - The Third Campaign 1952-53, *AASOR* 1972 (XL), pp68-72.

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