
A SEAL IMPRESSION FROM TELL BRAK AND ITS MATCHING CYLINDER SEAL

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ABSTRACT

Seal impressions on pottery are a recurrent feature during the Bronze Age in the Khabur region. Despite having numerous examples of cylinder sealed pottery in sites such as Tell Arbid or Tell Beydar, none of those present the seal impression at the very base of the vase. While studying some pottery evidence housed in the British Museum and coming from Tell Brak, I came across what certainly is a unique case of a seal impression on pottery in the Khabur region, a seal impression whose cylinder-seal had been already documented by Mallowan back in 1947, which is a Mitannian seal with parallels in sites such as Tell Afis and even Tepe Giyan in Iran. Exceptionally on this occasion a cylinder seal and its very impression on a vase meet again thousands of years later.

KEYWORDS

Brak, seal impression, Mitanni, glyptic, pottery

UNA IMPRESION DE SELLO DE TELL BRAK Y SU CILINDROSELLO

RESUMEN

Las impresiones de cilindro-sello en cerámica es una característica que se repite a lo largo de la Edad del Bronce en la zona del Jabur. A pesar de contar con varios ejemplos de cerámica con impresiones de cilindro-sello en yacimientos arqueológicos como Tell Arbid o Tell Beydar, en ninguno de éstos la impresión se encuentra en la base de la cerámica. Mientras estudiaba fragmentos de cerámicas procedentes de Tell Brak y sitios en el Museo Británico, encontré un caso único entre las impresiones de sellos de la región del Jabur, por dos razones principales: por tratarse de una impresión en la base de un vaso cerámico y por tratarse de la impresión de un sello documentado por Mallowan en 1947. Es un sello mitannio con paralelos en Tell Afis y en Tepe Giyan, en Irán. De manera excepcional el sello y su impronta se encuentran de nuevo miles de años más tarde.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Brak, impronta de sello, Mitanni, glíptica, cerámica.

This paper is a humble homage to the work of Karlheinz Kessler, to his many and rich contributions to the science of Assyriology and to his valuable advice during my study of seals and seal impressions from the Khabur region. I was lucky enough to share with him long conversations on Near East archaeology and to have the chance to attend his seminars while researching for my dissertation in Erlangen, Germany. His wisdom and flexibility allowed me to make the most of the opportunity I was given.

After several years, our paths crossed again in the summer of 2009 while both of us were studying on the same table at the British Museums's Arched Room for about a month. He was always excited to show the progress on his studies. So was I, being fortunate enough to share my small findings with such an amazing Assyriologist.

On a personal level, he and his family were always an enormous support and a source of inspiration for continuing my studies in the archaeology of the Ancient Near East. For that I will remain forever grateful.

The quest for seal impressions

During my research stay in the British Museum in the summer of 2009 I was given the chance to deal with some seals and sealing material from Tell Brak and Chagar Bazar. Within this vast collection and besides many seal impressions from the classic Akkadian period, I also studied some potsherds coming from Tell Brak. To my surprise, the largest of these sherds was part of a bowl, tagged in the catalogue as Akkadian, with a seal impression not in the body, nor in the neck or the lid of the pot, as it is common, but on the very base. As I was looking for Akkadian seal impressions in objects coming from Tell Brak, I asked to have a look at the sherds. After going through each one of those sherds, I finally found the seal impression. It did not look Akkadian to me and that is the reason why I studied more carefully the object and the reports from Brak until I was able to find what I was looking for.

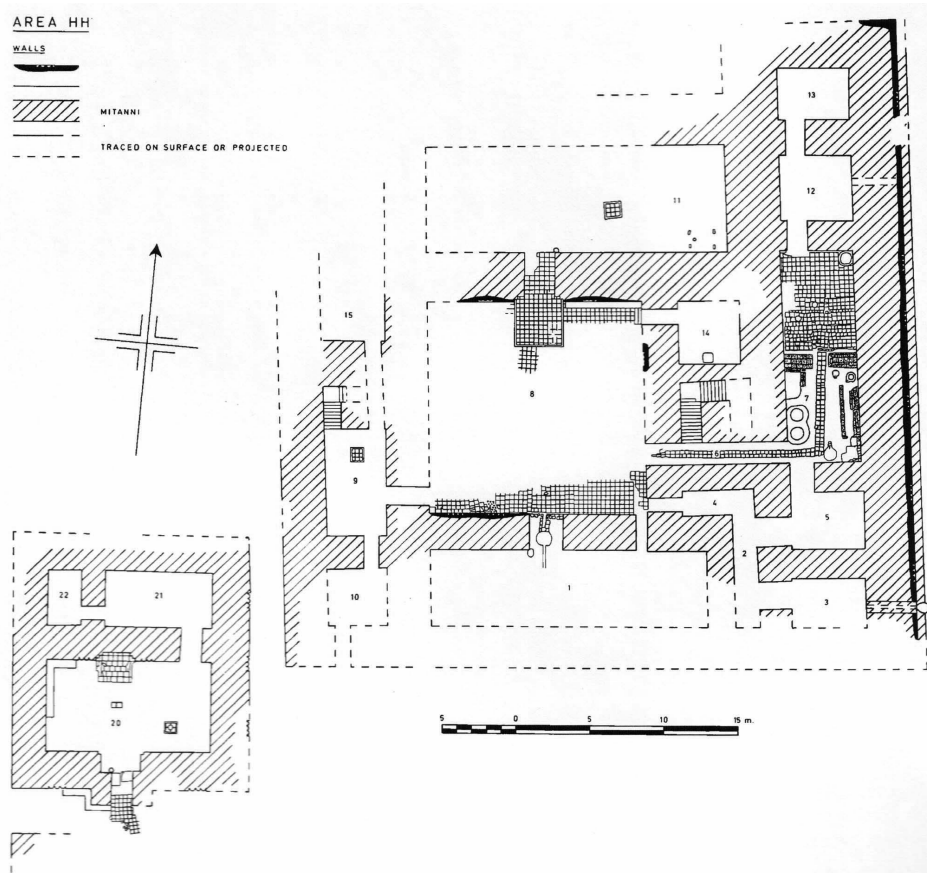


Fig. 1. Plan of Mitannian Palace and temple in area HH of Tell Brak. BM 125795. OATES, D; OATES, J. & MCDONALD, H (eds) Excavations at Tell Brak. Vol. 1. The Mitanni and Old Babylonian periods. Cambridge. p. 4.

Description of the vase

The fragmentary bowl is one of 16 sherds from different vessels coming from Tell Brak and registered under the museum number 1988,0410.97.

The bowl could be classified as a typical medium-size string-cut bowl with a gritty salmon fabric and a pale wash. Its diameter measures around 14 cm and its maximum height is 6.55 cm. The thickness of the bowl -2.6 cm at its maximum- shows the quality of the firing as well as the pale wash in the outer side of the pottery. The vase relates more to Nuzi and Mitannian materials than the pointed Akkadian origin¹. However, in the archaeological levels of Brak belonging to the Mitannian period it has been challenging to be able to determine a whole sequence of the pottery².



Fig. 2. Profile of the fragmentary bowl with seal impression on the base. 1988,0410.97. Photo: Alejandro Gallego López.

The quality of the pottery points to a special kind of consumption that can be confirmed through the presence of an atypical sealing on the base. It is obvious that the sealing does not provide information about the goods contained in the bowl, but rather about its function or provenance. While many bowls of this type, with varying dimensions, have been unearthed in Brak and many other sites of the Khabur region none of them bear a sealing of this type.

The reason behind that is yet to come and undoubtedly came as a surprise. Although the pottery was clearly labeled as Akkadian, probably due to its context and its already analysed shape and temper, the seal impression on the bowl was meant to reveal the real date both for the pot and the seal. The typology and iconography of what was yet visible in the rolling of the seal was not consistent, as mentioned above, with even the latest examples of the 3rd Millennium in the region.

¹ Even Joan Oates dates some of this open bowls to the Bronze Age. See Oates, J. 1987 "A note on 'Ubaid and Mitanni pottery from Tell Brak'". *Iraq* 47. p. 197.

² Oates, D; Oates, J. & McDonald, H (eds), *Excavations at Tell Brak*. Vol. 1. *The Mitanni and Old Babylonian periods*. Cambridge. p. 61.

The Seal Impression

We may say that the impression was squashed and heavily damaged and that, together with what we can call an “archaizing” bowl may have misled the dating of this impressed ceramic, grouped together with another 16 Uruk and Akkadian potsherds. Another issue was that that pottery lacked any reference to its archaeological context.

After making the first sketch of the impression I came to notice that the seal, and therefore, the pottery, were much more recent than the already mentioned seal-impressed jars from Brak or Arbid. Once the first drawings were made and the impression was measured, the next step was to first identify iconographical elements and second, to find stylistic parallels.



Fig. 3. Back of the bowl, featuring the seal impression. 1988,0410.97. Photo: Alejandro Gallego López

One of the iconographical elements strongly drew my attention, the presence of what seemed to be a tree, an unlikely element in the Akkadian and older periods in Brak. Also, the two standing bearded figures wearing robes were stylistically a better match to the 2nd Millennium BC rather than to the late 3rd Millennium.

A closer look to Mallowan’s publication in the journal *Iraq* in 1947 confirmed my suspicions. There, I found the publication of the original faience cylinder-seal which matched perfectly the impression on the base of the pottery³. The dimensions of this faience seal -24 mm in height and 10 mm in diameter- perfectly matched the rolled margins of the impression.

This identification of the seal changed the original assumption that we were dealing with a 3rd Millennium seal impressed bowl, when we were actually looking at the image of a Mittannian sealing dated to the second half of the 2nd Millennium, around 1400 BC.

³ MALLOWAN, M. 1947 “Excavations at Brak and Chagar Bazar”. *Iraq* 9. Pl. XII. 1-2.

In any case, the confusion in the classification of this unique sherd is understandable, because what was found in Brak was the same typology of string-cut base bowls, as can be ascertained when having a look at the Brak volumes, specifically when looking at the material coming from the area HH that corresponds to the Mitannian palace and temple. This is a clear case where the date of the pottery and the seal can be so different that it may lead to such an archaeological misunderstanding.

Identification of the Seal

The seal itself -BM 125795- and its rolling, done by Mallowan, were also published by Matthews, who clearly states that the seal, found 1.5 m below the surface, might be contemporary to the Nuzi ware⁴. Stylistically the seal belongs to the well-known Mitannian common style and also to the “tree and humans” group within the Mitannian glyptic.

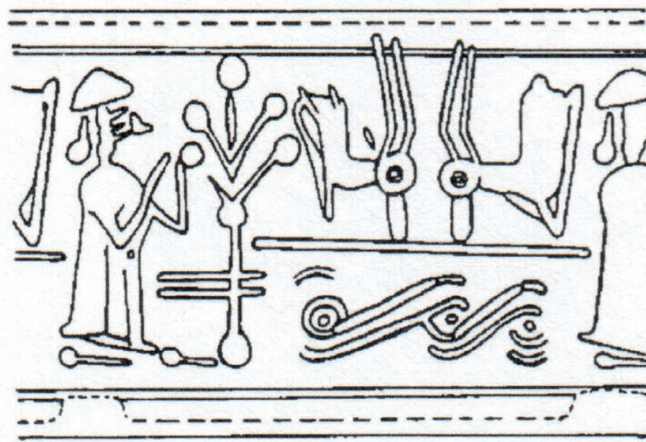


Fig. 4. Drawing of the cylinder seal BM 125795. OATES, D; OATES, J. & MCDONALD, H (eds) *Excavations at Tell Brak. Vol. 1. The Mitanni and Old Babylonian periods.* Cambridge. p. 161.

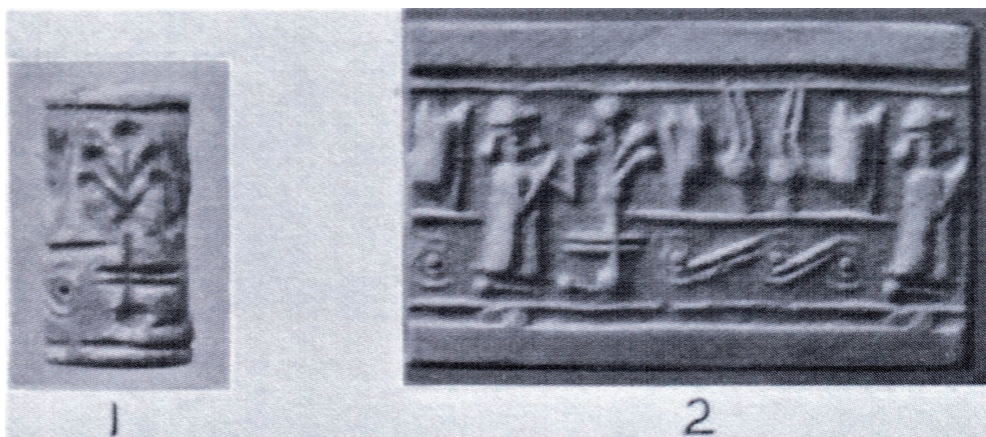


Fig. 5. BM 125795 cylinder seal and its rolling. MALLOWAN, M. 1947 “*Excavations at Brak and Fig. Chagar Bazar*”. Iraq 9. Pl. XII. 1-2.

⁴ MATTHEWS, D 1997 “The Mitanni Seals from Tell Brak” in D. Oates, J. Oates, H. McDonald (eds), *Excavations at Tell Brak. Vol. 1. The Mitanni and Old Babylonian periods.* Cambridge. pp. 58-60.

The faience seal represents a standing bearded man wearing a long robe facing right with his arms outstretched towards a vegetal element that represents a bouquet-tree type, often depicted in the Mitannian seals. Following the tree, we find a two-register section. In the upper part, two facing horned animals are depicted. These quadrupeds have round-shaped eyes and long straight horns. In the lower register, marked by a single line, a geometric spiral-like motif is carved. As it is normal in Late Bronze Age Mitannian seals, it bears no inscription.

Comparanda

A clear parallel to this seal, and therefore to our seal impression, was found in a clay jar sealing that depicts a very similar scene, with two standing figures framing a bouquet-tree. We may infer that, probably, these seal and sealing may come from some altered level of the same HH sector.

Outside Tell Brak, many analogies to this seal have been found in places as far away and apart as Alalakh and Tepe Giyan. Much closer than these two relatively distant places, in 2005 a very similar seal was found in Tell Afis. The seal TA.05.E2, also produced in faience, was recently published in detail⁵ and, most surely corresponds to the same period and was probably produced and carved in the very same workshop.

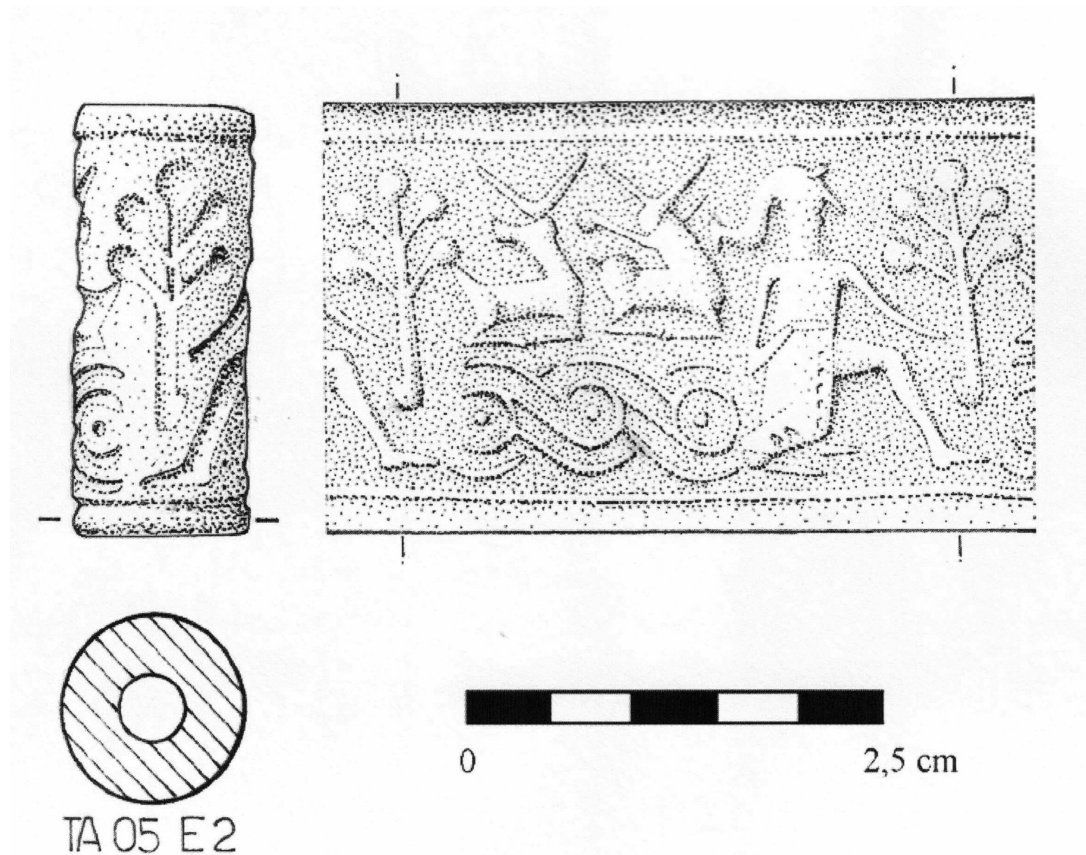


Fig. 6. Drawing of the cylinder seal TA.05. E2 from Tell Afis. CHITI, B. 2016 “Un sceau-cylindre mitannien de Tell Afis (Syrie)” in B. Perello & A. Tenu. (eds) *Parcours D’Orient. Recueil de textes offert à Christine Kepinski*. Oxford. pp. 79.

⁵ CHITI, B. 2016 “Un sceau-cylindre mitannien de Tell Afis (Syrie)” in B. Perello & A. Tenu. (eds) *Parcours D’Orient. Recueil de textes offert à Christine Kepinski*. Oxford. pp. 77-83.

As mentioned above, there are other clear parallels as far away as Tepe Giyan in Iran, like seals 56.81.5 and 56.81.17 from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. This raises the question of a possible production somewhere in between Iran and Upper Mesopotamia, like Palestine, or also a possible local production following the same exact iconographic motifs.

Conclusion

It is a rare occasion to have the chance to find the cylinder-seal corresponding to a seal impression. This is especially exceptional when the seal and the sealing were unearthed at different times and were never associated together. The finding also helps us to better understand the use of seals and sealings in Syria during the 2nd Millennium, not only by identifying iconographic motifs, locating its origin or production, but also, and more importantly, determining its function and true meaning. Because of this unusual finding of a seal impression on the base of a pot we might infer that its special location bears a distinctive meaning, but in order to reach that conclusion we would need to come across other examples such as this one from Tell Brak.

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