

THE SHAPE OF THE PAST

Studies in Honor of Franklin D. Murphy

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MINIATURE ART FROM TERQA, 1700 B.C.
NEW SOURCES FOR MID-SECOND MILLENNIUM ART IN
MESOPOTAMIA

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Illus. 5. Haematite seal from the excavations at Terqa next to its modern rolling. The design shows the emphasis of the drill holes in the Khana style as in the garment fringe and in the hats of the deities. TQ5-T111

INTRODUCTION

CYLINDER SEALS AS THE main source for miniature art in Mesopotamia have been a major contribution from this area to the history of Western art. The noted art historian in the field of ancient Near Eastern art, Henri Frankfort, was able to write as early as 1939: "The cylinder seals of Mesopotamia constitute her most original contribution to art" (Frankfort 1939, p. xiii). Mesopotamian sphragistics, as the study of cylinder seals and their impressions is called, has long been pursued by art historians because of the intrinsic beauty of Mesopotamian seals exhibited in their rich expression of iconographic and formal stylistic traits which in all periods paralleled those of monumental art. The importance of cylinder seals for the history of Mesopotamian art is heightened by the paucity of preserved monumental art for some periods. Thus a continuous history of Mesopotamian art can only be seen through its miniature art.

This essay deals with cylinder seals and their impressions excavated in the ancient city of Terqa, located in eastern Syria along the middle Euphrates River. The miniature art evidenced by these seals is one of the most important finds from the excavations at Terqa, on account of the contribution they make to our understanding of the Mesopotamian artistic tradition and, beyond that, of the historical development of an otherwise obscure period of the Near East. It is fitting that the first publication of this choice material should appear in a volume dedicated to Franklin D. Murphy, who has been an essential catalyst in making the excavations possible and has always shown an insider's interest in the work there.

The seals and sealings from Terqa are rolled for the most part on legal contracts and on the clay envelopes protecting them. Their historical importance lies in the fact that they are beginning to fill a gap both in space (i.e., the middle Euphrates River) and time (the period from 1750 to 1500 B.C.). Terqa is one of the few sites in Mesopotamia where we have material from this time period and, further, it is one that provides a link between the southern states in Sumer and Babylonia and the rich tradition of western Syria, highlighted in recent times by the major discoveries at Ebla.

Author's Note. The Joint Expedition to Terqa has been sponsored in part by the Samuel H. Kress Foundation and the Ahmanson Foundation, with whom Dr. Murphy is associated, as well as by the Ambassador International Cultural Foundation. The five seasons completed thus far (1976 to 1980) have been directed jointly by the writer and Giorgio Buccellati, with an international team from several American and European universities.

THE MID-SECOND MILLENNIUM SEAL STYLE

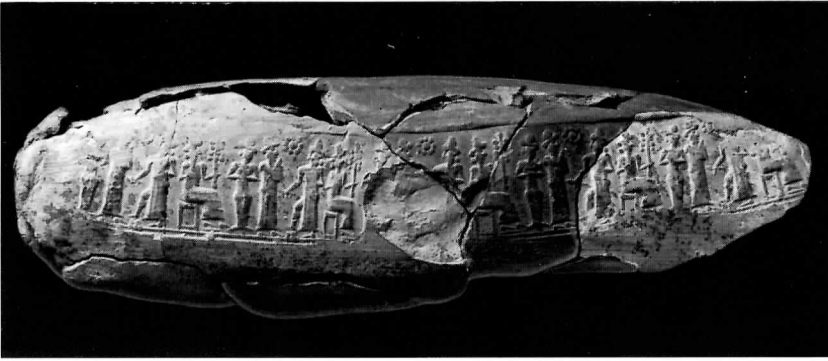
From about 1800 B.C. on, the typical Old Babylonian seals made in Mesopotamia have depicted on them the standard scenes of either a worshipper before an enthroned deity, or an individual giving homage to an enthroned king. While other motifs are found, Old Babylonian seal cutters and their customers preferred this theme. These scenes were diversified through the depiction of a variety of deities, subsidiary figures (such as different types of worshippers, the addition of interceding goddesses, animals associated with the deities, etc.), and smaller motifs placed in the field such as a star, crescent, bird, tortoise, mongoose, etc.

The style of carving of Old Babylonian seals varied also according to the skill and training of the seal cutter, the city the seal was produced in, as well as the time within the Old Babylonian period in which it was carved. In general we can see that the best seals, made of haematite, were carved with attention to the fine linear details of the figures and their costumes (illus. 1). The carving was started with a bow drill, and continued with various engraving tools.

In Old Babylonian seals the major figures take up the full height of the seal which determines the frame of the representation once the seal is rolled out. The relation between the size of the figures and the height of the seal stone was established as standard in the earliest cylinder seals carved in Mesopotamia, with deviations, previous to the Old Babylonian period, only in the best Akkadian seals (ca. 2300 B.C.) where more emphasis was given to the pro-



Illus. 1. A typical Old Babylonian Seal with its impression from Ibezeikh in southern Mesopotamia with a bearded god seated on the right and a worshipper in the center followed by an interceding goddess.

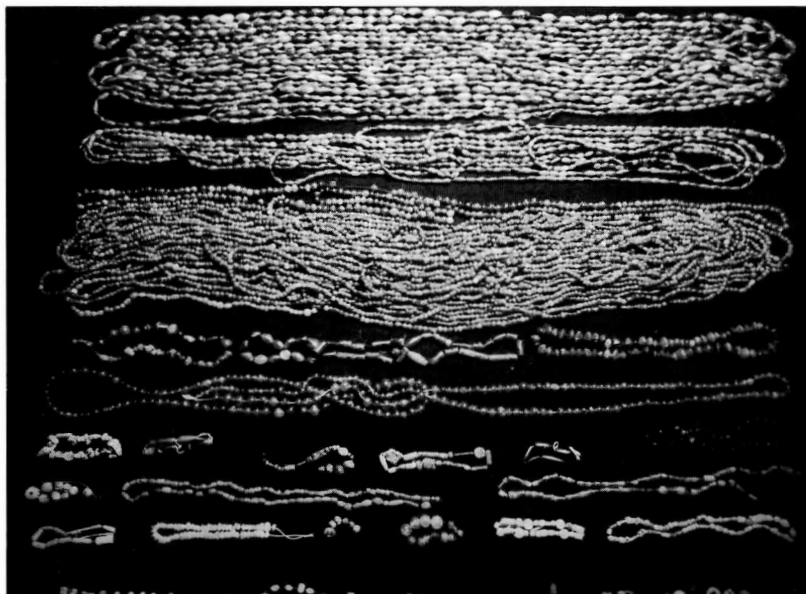


Illus. 2. Seal impression from Terqa rolled in a continuous band along one side of a clay envelope covering a cuneiform tablet. In this case the tablet was contained in two envelopes with the side of the outer one pictured here. The design, repeated several times in this rolling, includes a god holding a saw on the right faced by a worshipper, next is placed a naked goddess before a god seated on the left. TQ4-T68

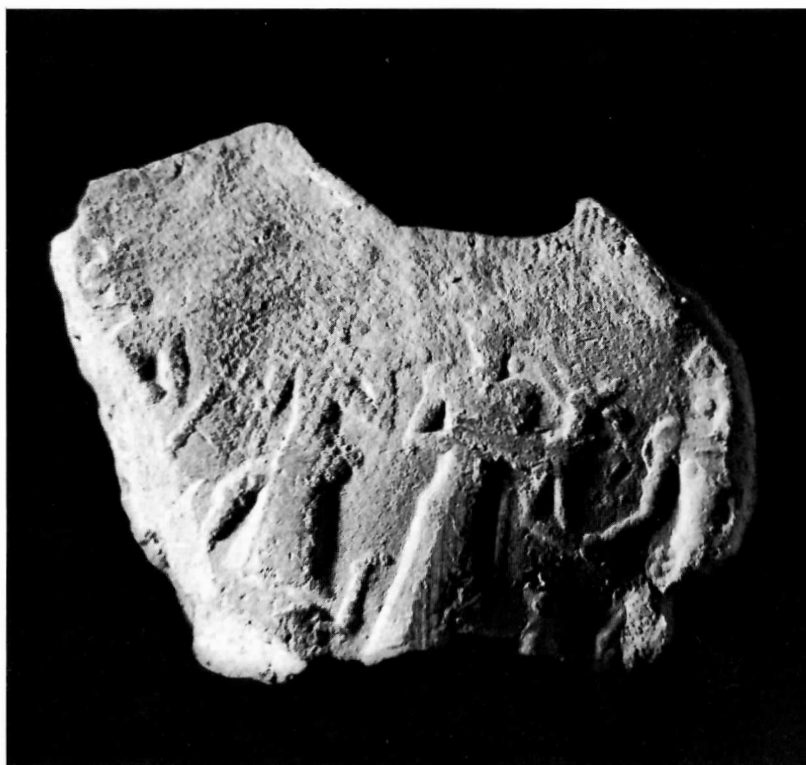
portion of the figures in relation to the landscape depicted (Kantor 1965). This Akkadian practice, however, was sporadic and quickly fell out of use, so that in the following Ur III period we again find the main figures occupying the entire vertical space available. This compositional rule was so strong that it prevailed even when one of the figures is seated (illus. 2). In our example a bearded god on the left is seated on a plain stool with his feet resting on a low platform. The other three figures in the composition are all standing; their heads, however, are the same height as the seated figure. The artist was not trying to depict figures placed on different levels, as shown by the fact that the stool and footrest of the deity on the left, as well as the feet of the three standing figures, are all placed on the same continuous ground line. The only possible conclusion to be drawn is that the rule of composition whereby the main figures had to occupy the full height of the seal was so strong that it had to be followed even though the dictates of realism would have precluded such an arrangement. This is by no means the only place where the Old Babylonian artist, following tradition, ignored realism even though art in the Old Babylonian period was in many respects realistic.

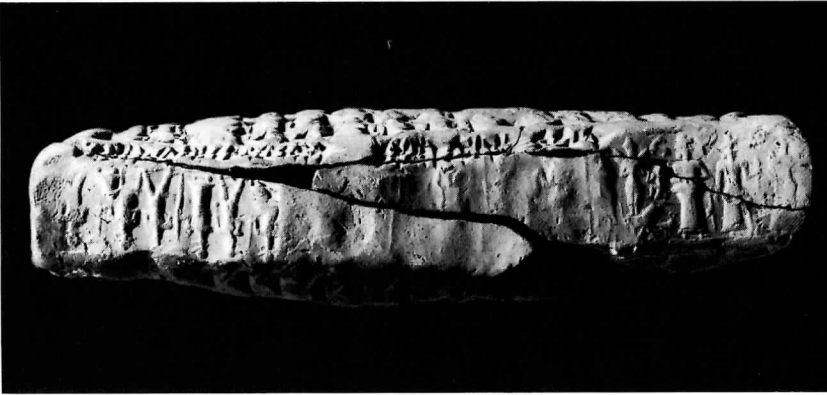
Given this trend toward realism, the question then should be asked: to what extent do these seals reflect actual religious ceremonies? We know that statues of the deities were placed on altars in Mesopotamian temples. In the temple of Ninkarrak (the Mesopotamian goddess of Good Health) at Terqa we have excavated the sanctuary with the altar as well as a hoard of over six thousand beads which were probably used as part of the jewels of the goddess (illus. 3). It seems probable that this goddess, as well as all the other Mesopotamian deities, actually wore the clothes and jewels ascribed to them in the texts (Buccellati and Heimpel 1981).

Illus. 3. The jewels of Ninkarrak found in the sanctuary near the altar of her temple at Terqa. The hoard included more than 6000 beads in a wide variety of stones and shapes including several Egyptian scarabs.



Illus. 4. A portion of a seal rolling on the exterior of an envelope from Terqa. This fragment shows part of the figure of a worshipper holding the typical offering animal—a kid. TQ5-T82





Illus. 6. The side of a Khana period tablet from Terqa showing two seal impressions. The impression on the right includes a worshipper before a winged goddess standing on top of a lion. The impression on the left, reversed with respect to the other, depicts two deities next to two worshippers. TQ4-T1 and 4

As stated above, the themes on Old Babylonian seals were centered on scenes of an enthroned deity or a king being worshipped by a single adorer, who is sometimes introduced by an interceding goddess. The worshipper often carries a kid as an offering (illus. 4). From the texts we also know that offerings made to the deities included such animals. Also, the gesture of homage that a worshipper makes with his right hand (illus. 5 and 6), that is, fingers extended and close together with the hand before the mouth, is seen not only in cylinder seal designs but also elsewhere in monumental art, for instance on the famous stela with the Code of Hammurapi, where the king is shown in this posture in front of the god Shamash. That this gesture was actually used is difficult to determine but there is no doubt that its depiction was long lived since it can still be seen in Achaemenid art, for instance in the Treasury at Persepolis where a servant standing before Darius makes the very same gesture (Ghirshman 1964, fig. 255). Its frequent appearance in Mesopotamian art as well as its use later on by the Achaemenids certainly argues for a lively tradition in practice as well as in art.

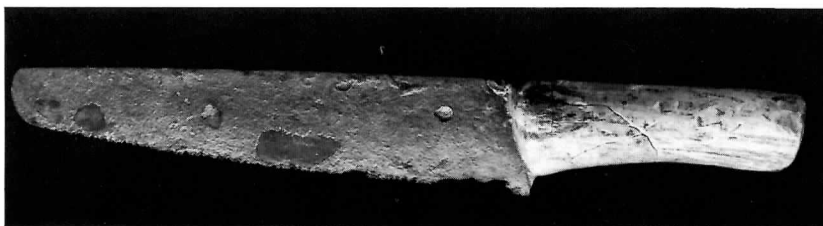
Illus. 5. Chapter frontispiece.

The seals that were produced during the Khana period (1750-1500 B.C.) at Terqa are stylistically related to those made in Mesopotamia during the Old Babylonian period. There are, however, some significant differences between the two styles, as is borne out by the techniques used in carving, by their compositional arrangements, and also by their iconographies. These differences in the Khana artistic style mark the beginning of a distinctive new type of art, which then continued in Mesopotamia for most of the remainder of the second millennium.

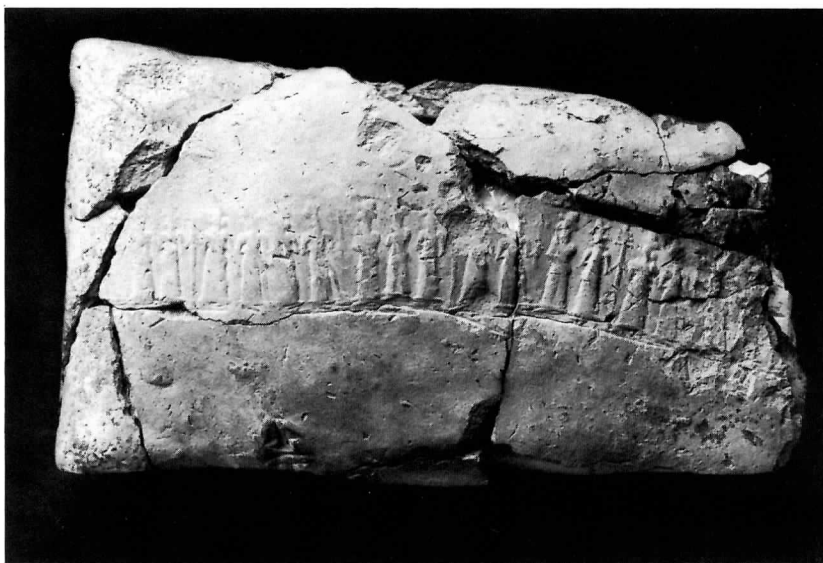
THE KHANA STYLE FROM TERQA

It has been known for some time that late Old Babylonian seals show an increased use of the drill. However, the beginning of this type of carving has been obscure because there was not enough well-dated evidence bearing on this question. With the excavations at Terqa, the presumed capital of the Khana Kingdom, we are now amassing a large corpus of Khana seals and seal impressions. From this corpus it is clear that the increased use of the drill, which is typical of the Khana style, started in Terqa at least as early as the reign of Samsuiluna, the son of Hammurapi. Seals carved in the Khana style were used to seal documents dated to the reign of a king of Khana, Yadikh-Abu. Yadikh-Abu is mentioned in a year date of Samsuiluna, king of Babylon, which names the twenty-eighth year of his reign after his victory against a certain Yadikh-Abu (Rouault 1981). Since this name is not a common one for a king, and since other evidence from Terqa points to the fact that Yadikh-Abu reigned in this time period, we can date the use of the Khana style to sometime before 1721 B.C. In all probability this style had started sometime earlier in Terqa, as is suggested by the very large number of this type of seal impressions on the tablets dated to the reign of Yadikh-Abu. These sealings indicate that by then the style was already well developed at Terqa.

Most distinctive of the characteristics of the Khana style are the holes left by the use of the bow drill. On earlier Mesopotamian seals these holes were obliterated by the careful use of engraving tools to carve them away. In the Khana style seals, however, the holes were left as an obvious part of the stylistic effect the artist wanted to produce. This can clearly be seen in illustration 5 where the fringe runs vertically down the center of the garments worn both by the worshipper holding the kid offering, on the left, and by the second worshipper on the extreme right. In each case the vertical line of dots corresponding to the holes left by the carver on the cylinder seal is visible. How this fringe is depicted can be contrasted with the linear borders on the garments in illustration 1, an earlier Old Babylonian seal. Returning to the seal in illustration 5 we can see that the god wearing a slit skirt and holding a saw has his appearance accentuated by the use of a series of drillings for the depiction of his horned miter. These drill holes are repeated below his foot with a double row of three dots indicating a mountain or hillock associated with the sun god Shamash. This seal and an example of the type of saw he is carrying were found in the excavations of the Ninkarrak temple at Terqa (illus. 7). Here we



Illus. 7. A bronze saw from the Temple of Ninkarrak at Terqa. This saw, with well-preserved teeth, has an antler handle. TQ3-100



Illus. 8. The envelope of a Khana Tablet from Terqa with a single seal rolled the entire length. The sealing, best preserved on the right, includes two figures on either side of a seven-globed standard and a god on the left facing a worshipper. TQ4-T85



Illus. 9. Seal rolled criss-cross fashion on the envelope of a Khana period tablet. The same seal was used to make this rolling as was used to make the impression seen in illustration 2. TQ4-T173

can also point to the fact that the Khana seal cutter was technically able to use engraving tools to achieve the effects he wanted, as seen, for instance, in the straight parallel lines of the dress of the god Shamash in illustration 5.

In the area of composition, also, Khana style seals stand out as being related to, but different from, Old Babylonian seals. This is the case both in the overall composition of the seals as well as in the composition of individual figures or groups of figures. In the Khana style the principal deities are often placed on the left side of the composition facing subsidiary figures which are to the right of them (see illus. 8, also 2, 5, 6). This is contrary to the position of seated deities on Old Babylonian seals where they are placed on the right facing figures on the left (see illus. 1). This change in position is also reflected in the object they are often holding—a seven- or nine-globed staff (illus. 9; this is the same seal as illustration 2 but in this case rolled on the top of the exterior envelope). An identical staff appears in Old Babylonian glyptic but not as frequently as it does in the Khana style. Seven or nine globes can also be mounted on a full-length standard (illus. 10). It is not known what these objects were used for, but they were probably part of the ritual furniture in temple ceremonies.

Illus. 10. Two seal designs from a Khana period tablet excavated at Terqa. The upper design shows two figures flanking a seven-globed standard with a god holding a similar staff facing a worshipper. Below the seal design depicts a deity with his attendant and a nude hero with characteristic hair curls down either side of his face. TQ4-T144



Through the excavations at Terqa a corpus of miniature art is being amassed which is throwing considerable light on the artistic style of the second quarter of the second millennium in Mesopotamia. We are now beginning to see the major contributions that this particular tradition made to the developmental history of Mesopotamian art. This material is, thus, bridging the gap in Mesopotamia between the relatively well-known Old Babylonian period, especially during the reign of Hammurapi, and the Mitanni seals, popular around 1500 B.C. It is significant that the Mitanni style, as an inheritor of Old Babylonian characteristics, existed mainly in northern Mesopotamia, while the Old Babylonian style was centered in the south near Babylon. The transmission of ideas as well as artistic style must have been effected through the central Euphrates Kingdom of Khana; thus Khana was the geographical and chronological intermediary between these two cultures.

CONCLUSION

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Dimensions of pieces illustrated: illus. 1, H: approx. 2 cm; illus. 2, H: 3.5 cm; illus. 4, H: 3 cm; illus. 5, H: 2.1 cm; illus. 6, H: 13.5 cm; illus. 7, L: 36.7 cm; illus. 8, H: 7.5 cm; illus. 9, H: 15 cm; illus. 10, H: 3.5 cm.