

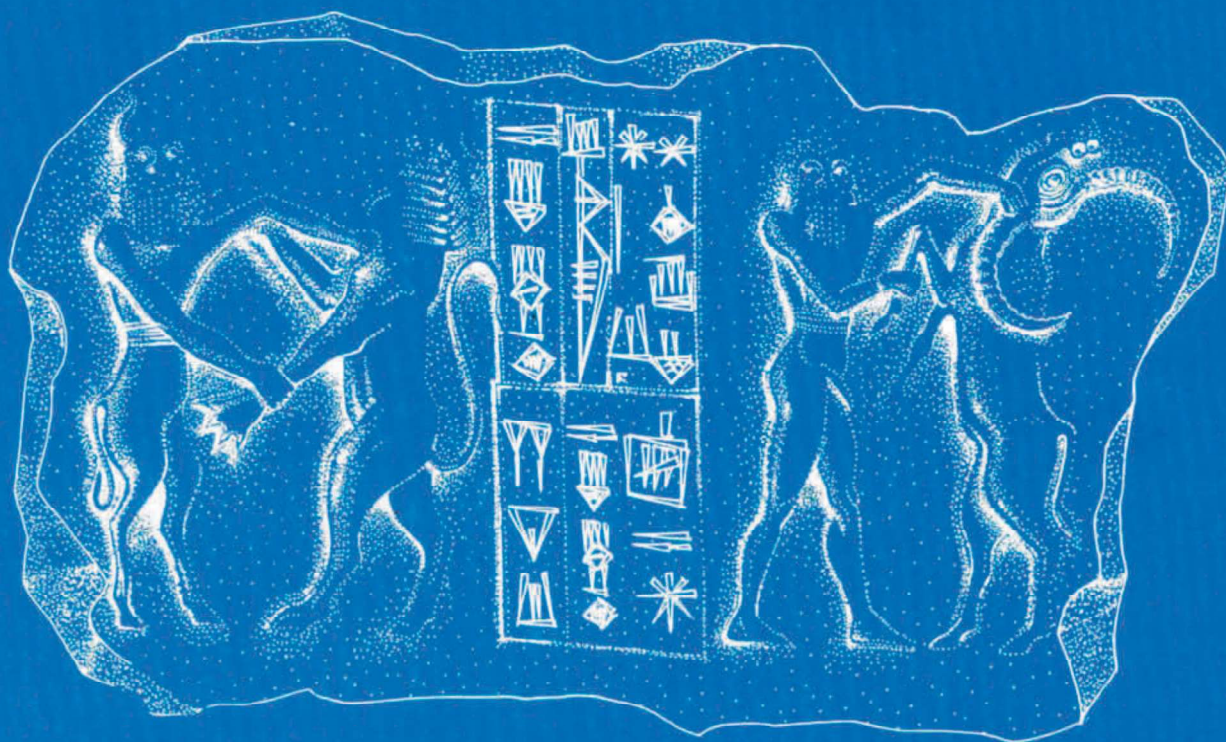


SANEM 3- STUDIES ON THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST AND THE MEDITERRANEAN

BETWEEN SYRIA AND THE HIGHLANDS

*STUDIES IN HONOR OF
GIORGIO BUCCELLATI & MARILYN KELLY-BUCCELLATI*

Stefano Valentini - Guido Guarducci
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MINIATURES OF WARS: FIGHTS, SKIRMISHES AND CONFLICTS IN ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN SEALS

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Abstract

Starting from two seal impressions from Tell Mozan, ancient Urkeš (Syria), this paper presents and discusses some Near Eastern seals from Syria and Mesopotamia whose iconography is related to war or warlike scenes. The figurative theme resembles the narrative representations of war in major monuments (such as bas-reliefs on wall panels and steles) – or vice versa? – with a clear selection of culminating moments due to the restricted surface that the seal can offer. Because of the similarity with major visual monuments, what is the meaning of and reason for carving scenes of warfare on ancient seals? The question of visibility and circulation of the theme of war and victory in ancient Near Eastern societies, with all implications of the political and religious ideology of war, will be considered.

Next to the major compositions of scenes of warfare on wall panels and steles,¹ “snapshots” of war and conflicts can also be found on cylinder seals: the present study focuses on cylinder seals from Mesopotamia and Syria, dating from mid-3rd millennium BC, more precisely on the periods of Early Dynastic IIIA-B (ED) for Mesopotamia and Early Bronze Age III-IVA (EB) for Syria.² In particular, two seal impressions (figs. 1-2) with scenes of warfare come from Tell Mozan, ancient Urkeš, and they can be both dated to the Early Bronze Age (ED III/EB IVA):³ it is with great pleasure that I present these short reflections to Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati and Giorgio Buccellati who devoted themselves, with great effort, to the excavation and study of the ancient city of Urkeš in Syria, especially in the time when our beloved second Country needed the support and help of friends.

Both impressions are small fragments and the image impressed is only partially preserved: for this reason, they can be both described as chariot scenes (*Wagenszene*), while the implication of a warlike attitude and context is not automatically implicit – as for example in the impression of fig. 1. As rightly pointed out by P. Amiet,⁴ the representation of chariots on seals cannot be exclusively associated with

war action; in this respect, particularly in Mesopotamian seals, when a banquet is represented in the upper register and a wagon occupies the lower register, this combination is commonly understood as a reference to a military event – the banquet is the occasion for the celebration of the military victory (this implication is inferred from the scenes of the so-called Standard of Ur).⁵ However, only the presence of the corpse of an enemy beneath the legs of the animals and overwhelmed by the wagon can suggest that the scene precisely refers to a battle.

Several cylinder seals from Mesopotamia, dated to the Early Dynastic Period, bear representations of combats between animals that are represented standing on their hind legs (the so-called *Figurendband* composition) fighting each other with weapons (e.g. daggers): these representations have been interpreted as symbolic depictions of war,⁶ an allegory where animals stand in for men. The seal impressions from Tell Mozan do not enter this allegoric category of depictions but they can be more generally ascribed to the typology of third millennium seals with wagon and chariot scenes, being in a war context or not.⁷

The pottery fragment MZ99 C2-i0245 (fig. 1) bears three impressions of the same seal: a war chari-

¹ On visual monuments celebrating war and victory, see Börker-Klähn 1982; Nadali 2007; Bahrani 2008.

² For the chronological framework of Early Bronze Age in Syrian Jezirah, see Lebeau 2001; 2011.

³ MZ99 C2-i0245 and MZ01 C2-i0207: the former is a seal impression on a pottery sherd; the latter is a clay sealing. See Dohmann-Pfälzner, Pfälzner 2000, 226, fig. 29; 2002, 185-186, fig. 22, respectively.

⁴ Amiet 1980, 124.

⁵ Matthews 1997, 136; Mayer-Opificius 2006, 55-56; Marchesi, Marchetti 2011, 203. See Selz (Selz 2002, 168-169) who interestingly suggests that banquet scenes could indeed be also interpreted as an antecedent of war rather than simply the conclusion for the celebration of the victory.

⁶ Mayer-Opificius 2006, 55-60.

⁷ See the catalogue provided by Jans, Bretschneider 1998, 166-173 and the considerations by Pittman 2018 within a broader context that also encompasses Iran.

ot (it is equipped with the typical box of spears on one side), pulled by three equids, advances to the right, two men (one is the driver) stand on it; animals (one fish and three winged animals – ducks?) fill the scene with one dog following the wagon. The style of the seals recalls the so-called “Brak Style”:⁸ in particular, seal impressions from Tell Brak are very similar where however, based on Amiet’s assumption, war is explicitly referred to because of the presence of the corpse of an enemy between the legs of the draught equids and real fights between armed men.⁹ A military context cannot of course be totally excluded for the impression from Mozan since the scene is incomplete: anyhow, the recurrent detail of the enemy corpse between the legs of the draught animals is lacking. The detail of the dog following the chariot is particularly interesting: although few, other examples of cylinder seals from Mesopotamia do show the presence of a dog:¹⁰ a seal impression from Ur (fig. 3),¹¹ a seal in the Morgan Library Collection (fig. 4),¹² and a seal in the Vorderasiatische Museum of Berlin (fig. 5).¹³ Dogs are not frequently depicted, at least in military context scenes,¹⁴ and in fact only the seal impression from Ur can be clearly marked as a representation of a fight: a man, upside down, with a shield (?) in his right hand is pierced with an arrow or dagger at the stomach; in front of him, preceding the chariot, is a man holding a weapon (spear/javelin?). The seal impression from Ur shows the dog twice: behind the wagon and underneath the legs of the draught animals: a similar situation could be reconstructed for the seal in the Berlin museum where the figure between the legs of the draught animals is partially preserved, more probably an animal.¹⁵ With the exception of the seal impression of Ur, the presence of the dog – as the seal impression from Tell Mozan also suggests – seems to be related to non-military contexts, despite the presence of three armed men (two with an axe, the third with a spear) behind the wagon in the Berlin seal.

The clay sealing MZ01 C2-10207 (fig. 2) is even more fragmentary and the scene is very badly preserved: the fragments bear the picture of a wagon (only the upper part box containing the weapons is visible), pulled by an animal. To the left, the head of the driver of the chariot is preserved, while above the animal another man is represented, his face pierced with a spear hurled by the driver. As recognized by Dohmann-Pfälzner and Pfälzner,¹⁶ the preserved scene of the clay sealing from Tell Mozan recalls the representation on the Stele of the Vultures of King Eannatum of Lagash with the king himself in his chariot hurling the spear against the enemy.¹⁷ The pole of the spear is unclear and incomprehensible bunch-shaped objects hang: might they be a stylization of flames that would in fact prove the launch of inflamed weapons?¹⁸ No other figurative examples that can be compared to the scene of the Mozan seal are attested: therefore, the nature and function of the objects hanging from the pole are still unsolved and unclear.¹⁹

The two seal impressions from Tell Mozan testify a common figurative topic in 3rd millennium glyptic of Syria and Mesopotamia:²⁰ the representations of wagons, on one hand, and the representation of war, on the other. As already pointed out, not all wagon scenes can be interpreted as war scenes – including the Mozan seal impression MZ99 C2-i0245 (fig. 1); nevertheless, chariots seem to have been chosen as a preferred figurative theme, probably because it refers to the world of gods and rulers which are often represented on other visual documents (inlays, bas-reliefs) acting in chariots. In particular, the world of rulers: this is in fact particularly interesting if one thinks of the time when these types of scenes emerged and

⁸ Matthews 1997, 151.

⁹ Matthews *et al.* 1994, 193, fig. 13: 1-3. See also Matthews 1997, 151, cat. nos. 200-203.

¹⁰ Van Buren 1939, 16, fig. 13; Jans, Bretschneider 1998, cat. nos. 2, 15.

¹¹ Legrain 1936, cat. no. 298. This seal, coming from SIS 6, can be dated to the ED I (Marchesi, Marchetti 2011, 53-54; Pittman 2018, 324).

¹² Porada 1948, cat. no. 1081.

¹³ Moortgat 1940, cat. no. 145.

¹⁴ Jans, Bretschneider 1998, 169, n. 100.

¹⁵ Moortgat 1940, 96. Jans, Bretschneider (Jans, Bretschneider 1998, 169, n. 100) argues that if the figure between the animals’ legs is an enemy, then the seal enters the category of military context; should it be an animal (they suggest it might be another dog), then the seal should be rather part of the hunting scenes repertoire. For an interpretation of the scene as hunting, see also Bollweg 1999, 186, fig. 182.

¹⁶ Dohmann-Pfälzner, Pfälzner 2002, 185.

¹⁷ Romano 2007, fig. 2.

¹⁸ Indeed, the use of inflamed weapons seems to be suggested by the representations of the launch of an inflamed arrow to set enemy buildings on fire during a siege operation on a plaque from the palace of Mari, phase *Ville II* (Margueron 2004, 288-289, figs. 110, 278; Glibert 2004/5, 98-99; Collon 2008, 96).

¹⁹ It is known that wooden poles of spears and javelins could be reinforced with wool, bitumen, and leather strings (Schrakamp 2011, 632). Other representations of hanging objects from the poles of spears can be seen in the palace inlays from Mari and Ebla, to be dated to the second half of the 3rd millennium BC: here, soldiers carry spears on their shoulders from where the fringed robes taken from enemies hang. These scenes, however, occur in the aftermath, when soldiers of Mari and Ebla escort naked prisoners and carry the booty (Nadali 2007, 346, n. 30). Finally, in the second register of the Stele of Vultures of Eannatum, two strings hanging from the pole of a spear in the chariot quiver are visible (for a detail, see the picture in Strommenger 1962, pl. 68): the strings seem to be tied to a metal ring at the end of the wooden pole of the weapon, while the seal of Mozan shows hanging objects all along the pole.

²⁰ See the catalogue provided by Jans, Bretschneider 1998. See also Braun-Holzinger 2007, 48-51; Pittman 2018.

spread that corresponds to the moment, at the half of the 3rd millennium BC (in ED IIIA in Mesopotamian terms),²¹ when the concept of kingship started to be conceived, formulated, and thus visually represented.²²

Why did seal cutters choose the representation of wagons and war scenes? Can they be in fact linked to historical events? Can cylinder seals be considered a medium to visualize events and successes of the rulers? In 2009, starting from the analysis of the impressions of the seal of Ishqi-Mari from Mari and the seals from Tell Beydar, J. Bretschneider, A.-S. Van Vyve, and G. Jans proposed that “a historic fact is portrayed on all three seals seems likely”.²³ They follow in stating that “in this case the representation of historic battles, once depicted on monumental art in Southern Mesopotamia would have found a new and smaller bearer”.²⁴ The idea sounds really intriguing, but can we conclude that seals substituted monumental art for the representation of military events and victories? I wonder whether the conclusion might be different and whether one can suggest that the contents of cylinder seals have been inspired by the representations of war on monumental art instead of having simply substituted it. Maybe this monumental art that inspired the carving of the seal of Ishqi-Mari and Beydar has not yet been found, but assuming that cylinder seals acquired the status of becoming the way of visualizing and promoting rulers’ deeds might be a bit forced. What, for example, if archaeologists and historians relied the study and understanding of the policy of war by the Assyrians having only at their disposal the cylinder seals with scenes of siege,²⁵ without the large and more comprehensive corpus of the Assyrian palace bas-reliefs? Actually, I. Winter has shown that some Assyrian seal-motifs replicate Assyrian palace reliefs, noting in fact that the direction of the scene as carved on the seal is exactly the reverse of the one sculpted onto the bas-reliefs.²⁶

I am most inclined to think that a similar pattern can be inferred for the seals’ imagery of the 3rd millennium BC with scenes of chariots and particularly those with representations of war events:

cylinder seals do not substitute monumental art, but they were used to replicate and propagate the icons of the ruler in his chariot and while defeating the enemies. It is interesting to notice that, due to the reduced surface offered by cylinder seals, seal cutters operated a selection and reduction of the motifs, concentrating on the culminating event and often representing the chariot trampling over the corpse of the enemy only.

This conclusion does not deny the idea of the historical iconography of the cylinder seals of Ishqi-Mari and Beydar, as suggested by J. Bretschneider, A.-S. Van Vyve, and G. Jans: indeed, seals might have well represented true events and, in the case of warfare, real battles conducted and won by the rulers. But it seems odd to conclude that cylinder seals have been purposely and exclusively chosen to depict those important moments. If monumental art has too often and simplistically been targeted as the product of royal propaganda – a trend that has been recently reconsidered and re-evaluated – cylinder seals can be targeted as means of propagation: the image of rulers in their chariot, being in war or not, circulates impressed on several items within the palace (e.g. door sealings, vessels) and outside, even over a long distance (sealed goods, vessels, containers). One might in fact think that officials in charge on behalf of the king accomplished their administrative duties by using the certified palace/state seals that were carved with a specifically chosen image that constantly referred to the ruler. It is precisely this referential pattern and connection that guaranteed the officiality and validity of the operations of sealing, on one hand, and granted the officials of the administration with an object emanated by the central power and representing the authority and legitimization of the rulers, on the other.

Seal imagery reflects the religiosity and political ideology of the central power;²⁷ the several (one could say infinite) possibilities of impressing the seals guaranteed the diffusion of the message via the actions of the officials who have been entrusted precisely because they received the seal. It can be argued that propagation of the image via the action of sealing was the main task and objective: in this respect, the choice of representing the ruler in his chariot or a scene of military success was purposely done to make that image disseminate. It was a code, built upon a common shared figurative language that was therefore immediately clear to everyone who was seeing the enrolled scene,²⁸ and this in fact explains the similarity of the iconography. In the case of itinerant sealed objects, one can then wonder whether the recipient was able

²¹ The seal from Ur (fig. 3) dates back to the ED I. See n. 11.

²² Marchesi, Marchetti 2011, 87-96, 103-113, 205-207, 217; Pittman 2018, 334. Pittman interestingly observes that “the motif of the king in the cart does not continue into the imagery of kingship of the Akkadian or Ur III rulers” (Pittman 2018, 325): I wonder whether this choice not only reflects “a change in the practices of warfare” – as implied by Pittman – but it might also depends on the different needs and objectives kingship had at the end of the third millennium BC after the period of formation was probably considered fully accomplished.

²³ Bretschneider *et al.* 2009, 18.

²⁴ Bretschneider *et al.* 2009, 18-19.

²⁵ Bleibtreu 1994.

²⁶ Winter 2000, 64-65.

²⁷ Micale, Nadali 2010.

²⁸ Nadali 2007, 357.

to distinguish from which ruler or city the goods came and which ruler or city the seal belonged to.

Maybe the historicity of the carved image was not essential and fundamental; although we cannot of course exclude that it depicted a real event: real or not, the ruler presented himself via a clearly recognizable icon that places him on the same level as other rulers.

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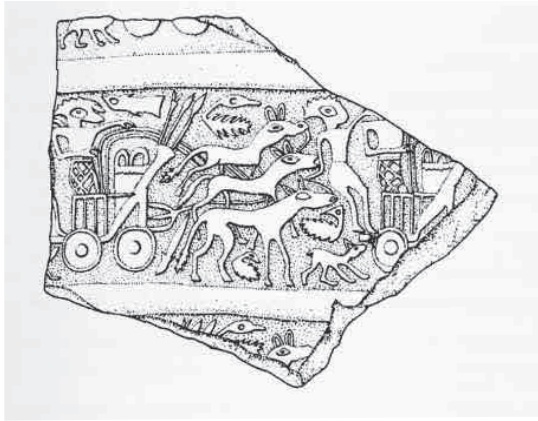


Fig. 1. Pottery sherd with seal impression, MZ99 C2-i0245, from Tell Mozan (after Dohmann-Pfälzner, Pfälzner 2000, fig. 29).

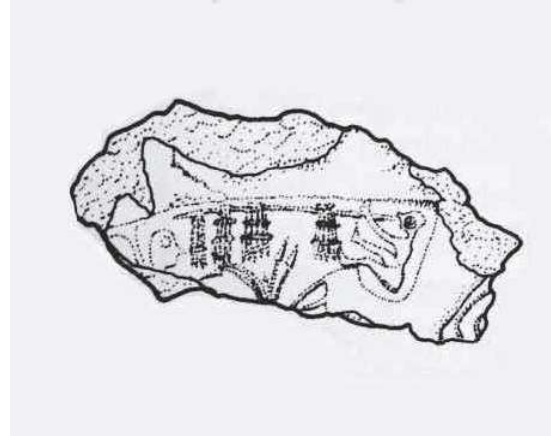


Fig. 2. Clay sealing with seal impression, MZ01 C2-10207, from Tell Mozan (after Dohmann-Pfälzner, Pfälzner 2002, fig. 22).



Fig. 3. Drawing of the seal impression from Ur (after Legrain 1936, cat. no. 298).



Fig. 4. Modern impression of the seal in the Morgan Library (after Porada 1948, cat. no. 1081).



Fig. 5. Modern impression of the seal in the Vorderasiatisches Museum (after Moortgat 1940, cat. no. 145).