

# REPORT ON THE SEALINGS FOUND IN THE 2009 EXCAVATIONS AT TELL EL-DAB<sup>c</sup>A

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In the excavation of 2009 in Area A/II<sup>1</sup> three Mesopotamian seal impressions were found. These shall be presented here in detail.

The shaded drawings and sections are by Maria-Antonia Negrete-Martinez and show the sealings and impressions as objects. The line drawings by Dominique Collon are attempts at clarifying or, in some cases, reconstructing the designs. She is also responsible for describing the motifs and for discussing their historical and cultural background. Manuela Lehmann studied the reverse and location of the impressions.

The following terms and abbreviations have been used:

- cord: smooth
- H = height; W = width; T = thickness; D = depth; diam = diameter. In each case these are maximum measurements in centimeters, unless otherwise specified.

- string: twisted from more than one strand.
- “S-twist” indicates a diagonal from top left to bottom right
- “Z-twist” indicates a diagonal from top right to bottom left. These terms are valid from whichever direction the string is viewed. They also apply to types of guilloche – a term applied to running spirals frequently used on Syrian seals during the early centuries of the end millennium BC.

Note: The finger impressions of the person smoothing the clay and applying the seal are visible on many of the sealings.

## SEALING 9436 (Fig. 1)

There are two partial rollings of seal 9436, both incomplete, on a clay bulla of a grey, very fine, levigated clay, measuring 2.53 × 2.0 × 0.98 cm, that

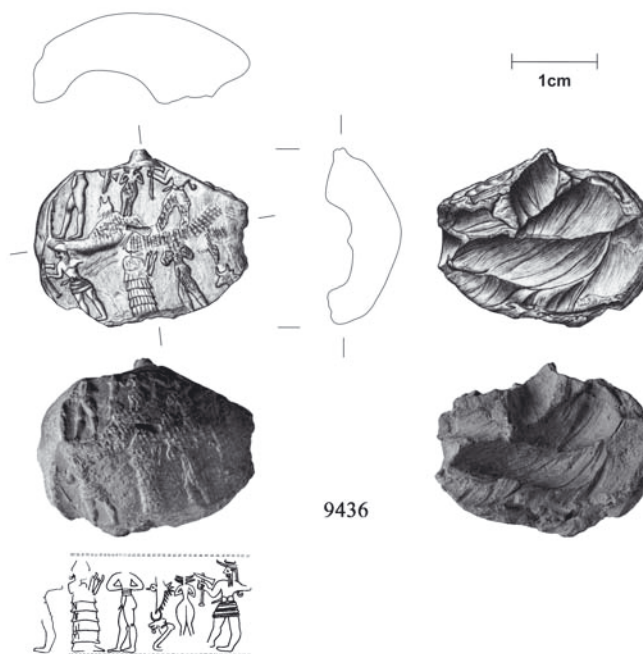


Fig. 1

<sup>1</sup> See M. LEHMANN, this volume, 47–65.

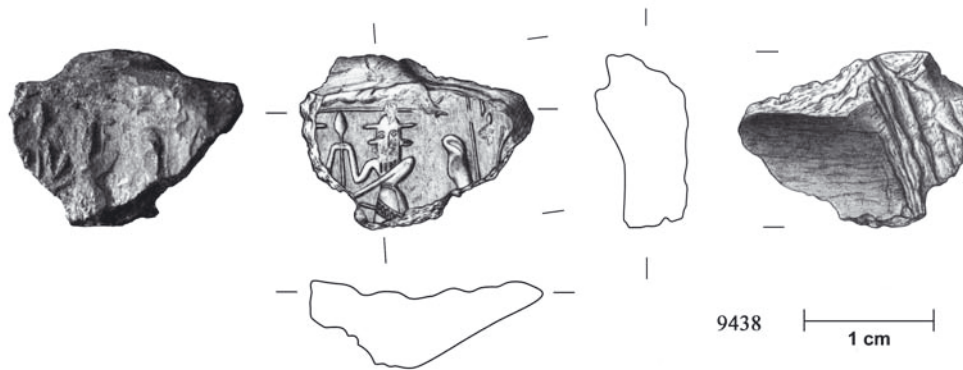


Fig. 2

may have been burnt; there are impressions of what looks like a loosely-woven textile obliterating the upper part of some of the figures and most of one of the rollings. The back of the bulla shows multiple impressions in several directions of thick Z-twist string, with each strand measuring at least 0.7 cm. The seal must have been about 1.7 cm high, and most of the design can be reconstructed, but many of the details are missing or unclear.

The design is Classic Syrian of the early second millennium BC, and consists of two groups of figures; the line borders have been reconstructed, as this is a feature of Syrian glyptic of the period, but the edges of the seal would have added another 2 mm at each end. The main group (on the right in the drawing) depicts the Syrian storm god facing left, with his right arm probably brandishing a mace in the characteristic Smiting Posture, and holding an axe before him in his right hand, with its blade towards him (for representations of the Syrian storm god from Alalakh, on the Orontes between Antakya and Aleppo, see COLLON 1975, pls. XXV–XXVI). He wears a short, horizontally-ridged kilt, with a dagger that protrudes in front of him, stuck into his broad, round-ended belt; similar belts have been found at Tell el-Dab<sup>a</sup>. Behind him, the customary curl of his hair is just visible. His headdress is not clear, but must have been broad-brimmed and conical. Before him, the naked goddess is depicted frontally, with hands clasped or cupping her breasts, on the back of a bull that is reclining towards the left. Part of her elaborate hairstyle can be seen on her shoulders. The Storm god is her consort, on whose bull she stands; to the left is a bird in flight (for the goddess, see especially OTTO 2000, nos. 158–160).

The second group, behind the storm god, consists of the Babylonian goddess Lama, with both hands raised, facing right, and wearing her charac-

teristic tiered and flounced robe, and probably a horned headdress (damaged). The figure facing her is bare-legged and naked apart from a belt. His hands were probably clasped against his torso; he could have been holding a vase but it would have contained flowing water, which is not visible on either of the impressions, on which he appears. He also frequently accompanies the naked goddess.

Interestingly, the storm god faces left on the impression, which is, indeed, the way deities normally face; however, the Syrian Storm god is an exception and he almost invariably faces right, for example on the sealing Tell el-Dab<sup>a</sup> 7669 (See COLLON 2006, 99–101, fig. 2). Furthermore, when Lama faces a royal figure, she almost invariably faces left, and the king faces right, as on the Old Babylonian prototypes of this scene, but here again the group is reversed from what is customary. This reversal of figures and scenes is characteristic of the royal glyptic of Carchemish under King Aplahanda, around 1800 BC (Middle Chronology. See COLLON 1987/2005, 50, nos. 188–190, 539 and 541; COLLON 1999). Sometimes the reversal of a scene indicates that the seal was a provincial copy from a seal impression; however, there is nothing provincial about the Carchemish seals, nor, for that matter, about the present seal. This reversal must have been a deliberate ploy, probably to indicate the origins of a seal in Carchemish.

Whether or not Sealing 9436 from Tell el-Dab<sup>a</sup> was impressed by a seal that originated in Carchemish around 1800 BC, it was certainly impressed by a Classic Syrian seal of that date, despite the fact that it was found in a 27<sup>th</sup> Dynasty mud brick pavement in Area A/II.

#### SEALING 9438 (Fig. 2)

This fragmentary seal impression measures  $1.23 \times 1.40 \times 0.9$  cm and was found in a layer of debris of

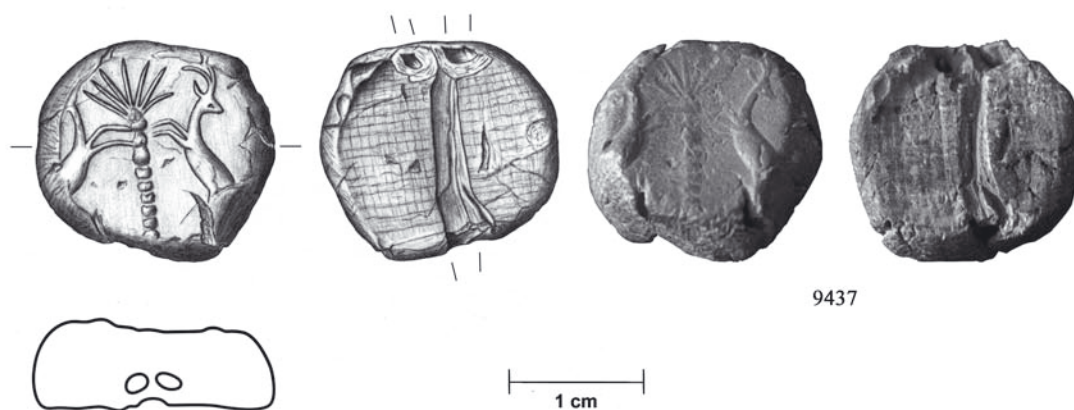


Fig. 3

the 27<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, used to fill the space between the foundations of two houses (M. LEHMANN this volume, 47–65).

The clay is very fine and dark, with a few mica and quartz inclusions, the back of the bulla shows the impression of a curved organic (wooden?) object like the bar of a locking device, and several impressions of a thin, curved cord and an S-twist string perpendicular to the probable bar.

The seal that made this impression must originally have been approximately 1.4 cm high and depicted a pair of frontal bullmen grasping a spear or spear-shaped standard between them. The bullman on the right wore a kilt with a diagonal ladder-pattern border. Only the forearm of one and the torso of the other survive. There may have been a line, or more, of inscription (possibly cuneiform) on the right, but this area is very worn and the traces are not clear. A possible motif beside the vertical frame, and a star at the very top of the seal (shown on one of the drawings) probably reflect damage either to the seal or to the impression. Bullmen are bearded, with a bull's ears, have a human torso, are bulls below the waist, and are often ithyphallic. Part of an upper line border survives.

Bullmen were a favourite Mesopotamian motif from the first half of the third millennium BC onwards. They were beneficent mythical beings, and they generally helped heroes in the defence of their flocks against predatory lions. This motif continued to be popular in the second millennium BC and is often highly stylised. In Syria, however, bullmen generally retained their heraldic role and are shown frontally in pairs holding an emblem between them. The seal that made the Dab<sup>a</sup> impression belongs to this group. Examples appear on

Middle Bronze Age impressions from Tell al-Rimah in northern Iraq (OTTO 2000, nos. 466–467; c. 1750 BC according to the Middle Chronology) and from Tell Atchana (ancient Alalakh), on the Orontes (c. 1700 BC; COLLON 1975, no. 110, 113 and 116). However, there are several Late Bronze Age examples: some have been illustrated by MATTHEWS 1990, no. 472 (= British Museum 130671, unfortunately unprovenanced, with frontal bullmen holding a stylised tree and supporting a winged disc), and no. 484 (= FRANKFORT 1939, XLIIo from Tiryns, where they are holding a mace-headed staff below a winged disc) and they are depicted in a style that is an Assyrian version of the Elaborate Mitannian style. One is a fragmentary glass seal found in the recent excavations at Atchana on the Orontes (COLLON 2010, no. 12, Seal A03-R1326, 95, nos. 13 and 97, fig. 7.4.5.). The present sealing could therefore belong to the Middle Bronze or the Late Bronze Age, and note that the Orontes provided access to the coast and ultimately to Egypt.

#### SEALING 9437 (Fig. 3)

The third sealing measures  $1.82 \times 1.58 \times 0.7$  cm and may be the impression of a conoid stamp seal, with a convex sealing surface as the impression is slightly concave. The sealing was found in the same 27<sup>th</sup> Dynasty debris layer as Sealing 9436, although chronologically the two objects are separated by over a millennium. The clay is dark grey and very fine, and the back of the bulla shows papyrus impressions.

The design consists of a central palm tree with a rough trunk and radiating fronds, but the customary date-clusters, normally shown hanging below the palm fronds, seem to be missing. Two gazelles or

antelopes, with long slender necks and one horn shown, leap up on either side of the trunk, and each looks back over its shoulder. The scene is a common one, but the style, with its slender proportions, is unusual.

The closest parallel is an impression excavated in the Persian-period palace at Memphis, but the animals are described as “bird-headed gryphons”, and they face each other. It was one of dozens of impressions found in debris that had fallen from an upper floor office; none of these sealings was associated with papyrus impressions (PETRIE *et al.*, 1910, Sealing nos. 28, 41–43 and pls. XXXV–XXXVI, and cf. No. 24 – a fragment with a similar subject). There are also two close parallels on first-millennium faience conoids in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (BUCHANAN and MOOREY 1988, 75, nos. 501, 502). Surprisingly, no. 501, is “said to have been found in the Nile Delta, and no. 502 was bought in Cairo!” Buchanan’s commentary (BUCHANAN 1988, 74) implies a date in the Achaemenid period.

The Egyptian provenance of the three parallels cited would suggest that the seal used for Sealing 9437 may have been made, perhaps in Egypt, for officials working in Egypt for the Achaemenid administration. The presence of a palm tree in the designs implies a connection with the royal administration, and it is particularly well attested in the reign of Darius I (522–486 BC). A specific type shows trilingual inscriptions naming Darius, in two cases used by high officials on docketts from the Persepolis Fortification Archive, with the scene showing the “Royal Hero” and framed by the date-palm (GARRISON and ROOT 2001, 68 and 88); a third example is the well-known “Darius Seal” – an actual seal acquired in 1835 by the British Museum, said to have originated in Lower Egypt (MERRILLEES 2005, No. 16, and see also nos. 44 and 65; 135, fig. 20a). The present seal would probably have been used by the local Achaemenid administration in the 27<sup>th</sup> Dynasty – precisely the date of the level in which it was found (see also GIOVINO 2006).

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