

TELL EL-DAB^CA SEALINGS 2009–2011

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In the latest excavations in Tell el-Dab^a several seal impressions with non-Egyptian motifs have been found.¹ Some of them are represented here.

The photographs were taken by Axel Krause, the shaded drawings and sections are by Maria-Antonia Negrete-Martinez and show the sealings and their impressions drawn 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 describes the location of the impressions coming from Area A/I and A/II, while Sandra Müller has provided further information about the seal impressions from Area R/II.

Note: The finger impressions of the person smoothing the clay and applying the seal are visible on many of the sealings. 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 are also used to describe types of guilloche – a term applied to running spirals frequently used on Syrian seals during the early centuries of the second millennium BC.

Sealing 9430Y (fig. 1)

General information:

This sealing (H=1.31, W=1.22, T=0.66 cm) was excavated in 2009 in Area A/II of the Tell and was found among the bricks of a Late Period house (see LEHMANN 2011).

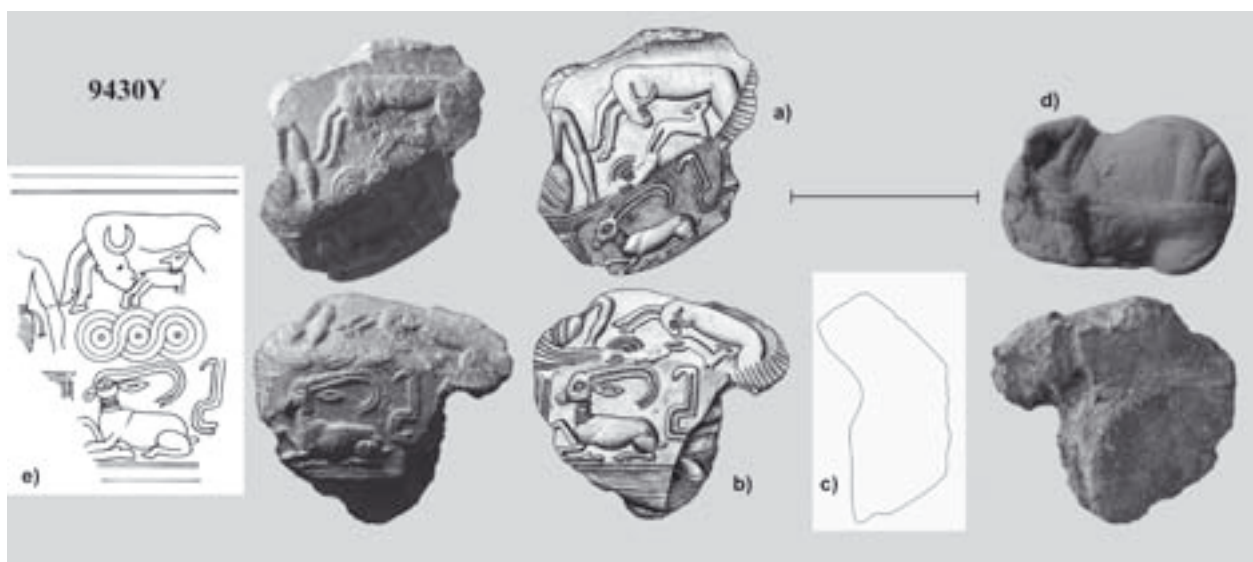


Fig. 1

¹ See also COLLON and LEHMANN 2011.

The clay used is very fine, with some mica; the colour is grey. It is an angled piece of clay with the partial impression of almost certainly the same seal on the two adjacent faces. The reverse shows a flat area and impressions of two strips, possibly of leather, folded over and knotted together (see the modern impression 9430Y, Fig. 1d). Here the line drawing by Dominique Collon is an attempt at reconstructing the two parts of the design as they may have been in relation to each other on the actual seal, using the line borders as guides.

Motif:

The surviving section of the design shows part of a secondary motif divided into two registers by a guilloche. As these are on two separate rollings, with part of the guilloche appearing on both and coinciding with the angle of the clay, the details are not clear, but it has been restored on the drawing as a three-strand Z-guilloche with at least three coils, probably round central dots. As the upper and lower line borders are shown, the total height of the seal would have been c. 1.52 cm.

The upper part of the motif shows what is probably a cow (with short horns depicted frontally) leaping towards the left and turning her head back towards the back of the calf she is suckling. Her rear, and its relation to the guilloche are not clear. To the left of the cow and guilloche is the right shoulder and arm of a standing figure who faces left and wears a skirt or kilt draped diagonally and tied at the waist by a very fine cord ending in two tiny balls. The figure probably occupied the whole height of both registers of the design.

Below the guilloche, on the lower face of the sealing, is a recumbent antelope with two long parallel horns ending in a semi-circular curve (see OTTO 2000, nos. 267 from Aleppo, and 406), facing left, with the nearer foreleg bent under it and the further one raised and bent. Its pointed ear is shown horizontally beneath the horns and its short neck is ridged. Before its head are the remains of a small motif which cannot be distinguished. To the right of the antelope is a distinctive type of *harpe*-sword shown by double parallel lines. The closest parallels, also with double lines and held by full-height figures alongside double registers, are assigned by Otto to her Carchemish Hofstil (OTTO 2000, nos. 122 held by Ishtar, and 148 held by the king). An identical bronze *harpe* – sword (Inv. Nr. 9809) has been excavated at Dab^ca and is to be dated to the Stratum F from Tell el-Dab^ca (see FORSTNER-MÜLLER 2008, 50).

Discussion:

The motif of an animal suckling its young, generally, as here, a cow and her calf, is well-attested at all periods in ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern art. Examples were collected by Keel (1980), and a large number are on Near Eastern cylinder seals. One particularly close parallel is depicted on a Syrian cylinder seal of the Middle Bronze Age where it too is part of a secondary motif above the same type of guilloche (KEEL 1980, 100 – 101, fig. 66 and pl. II:1) from the *Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire* in Brussels (= SPEELERS 1943, 160, no. 1393). The suckling animal has long, parallel, gently curving horns, unlike either of the animals on the Dab^ca seal, but with a similar short tail and ridged neck as the animal on the lower register. Most importantly, the suckling animal on the upper register of the Brussels seal has the same unusual dangling or leaping legs as on the Dab^ca seal. See the close parallels listed in Otto's volume on Classic Syrian seals (OTTO 2000, especially no. 128 from Kültepe) and see the list of suckling animals on her p. 255 [no. 14.5.17]).

The composition was clearly partly divided into two registers, with a full-height figure holding a *harpe*-sword to the right, facing the figure to the left of the guilloche, possibly with some other feature between them. The design was skilfully executed by a master craftsman using incredibly fine tools (note in particular the ties of the belt of the surviving figure). The seal may well have been produced in a royal workshop.

Sealing 9536T (fig. 2)

General information:

This sealing (H=1.10, W=1.4, T=0.71 cm) comes from Area A/I of the Tell and was excavated in 2011 (see LEHMANN 2012). It was found in a water channel which cuts into a Ptolemaic house and is therefore later, though no detailed date can yet be given.

The grey micaceous clay is of a fine consistency and on the reverse there are two parallel impressions of a smooth cord, 0.2–0.26 cm thick. Transverse to those there are two further impressions, possibly both Z-twist string and 0.22 cm thick. On the front one can see a roughly horizontal strip across the middle of an incomplete seal impression about 1.39 cm long.



Fig. 2

Motif:

Even though the sealing was found in a much later context, its iconography is clearly derived from Classic Syrian from around 1800 BC. In the centre, just below the upper break, there is a very cursory three-coil pseudo “guilloche” between two horizontal lines; the coils seem to have been formed by a thick line, it may have been a Z-guilloche but the interlocking of the coils does not seem to have been understood and, instead of central dots, there are short horizontal lines through the centre of the coils. Below the “guilloche” there may have been a lion facing left, with part of its mane visible and either its paw or its tail raised; in the latter case, because of the closeness of the head and tail, it may have been seated, but this is unclear. The “guilloche” is flanked by two figures of which the heads and lower parts are missing. To the left, and facing left, is the back of a suppliant goddess (only her jawline and the lower curve of her hair are visible) with both hands raised, wearing a flounced robe and two necklaces with a necklace-counterweight hanging behind. To the right of the “guilloche” there seems to be part of a naked frontal “goddess”; the points of her elbows on either side of her waist, and the curved notched line curving around her on the left, would indicate that she is holding the corners of her skirt and opening it to reveal her nudity, and the fringed horizontal line just below her elbow on the left would be the front edge of her skirt, here continuing across the front of her body. (NB A small chip is now missing on the right of the impression, below the waist of the naked “goddess”, and visible as a lighter area when the photograph was taken; it was probably dislodged by a small cream stone inclusion beneath it.)

Discussion:

As stated above, the seal is in the Classic Syrian Style, but it is so crudely executed that although the seal cutter may have been familiar with the basic composition, he was unfamiliar with the details of the scene and its meaning. His execution of the “flounced” robe of the suppliant goddess is barely recognisable, and he shows the naked “goddess” with the fringes of her garment crossing in front of her waist, but see OTTO 2000, nos. 155 and 162 showing the garment hanging down and partially open, and nos. 158–159, 226–229 where the “goddess” is opening it by lifting the two tasselled corners. However, it is quite logical for the open skirt to have been attached to a belt (see the Brussels seal illustrated above in connection with seal 9430Y), particularly if the figure were dancing.

Sealing 9528N (fig. 3)*General information:*

This sealing (H=2.58, W=1.38, T=0.75 cm) was also excavated in 2011 in Area A/I of the Tell, and was found in a filling layer between Ptolemaic houses.

This is a vertical, curved fragment of dark grey clay bearing part of an impression. The rear shows impressions of a cord which was 0.18 cm thick. The broken upper and left edges bear the impression of an S-twist string and there are finger impressions on the lower edge of the sealing below the impression. The original height of the seal must have been about 1.9 cm, and there were probably single line borders at each end.

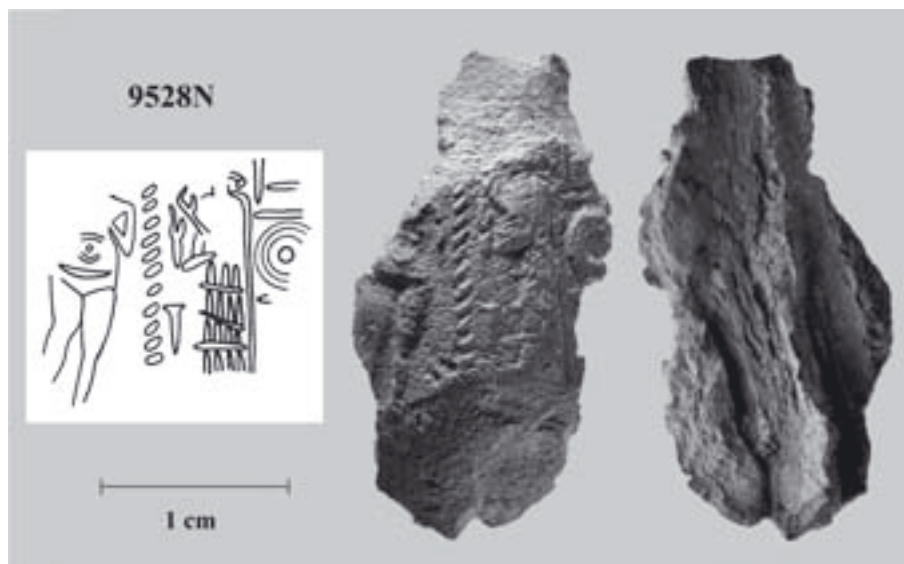


Fig. 3

Motif:

A naked frontal “goddess”, her head, feet and one side missing, is shown on the left, with broad hips (clearly visible on some photographs), with hands probably clasped below her breasts, standing tilted at an angle in relation to a vertical band of diagonal hatching that separates her from the suppliant goddess with hands raised, wearing a flounced robe and a necklace counterweight; her neck and the lower part of her hair can be distinguished. There are parts of a short vertical and a horizontal line behind her head, and there is a vertical wedge in front of her skirt. The remainder of the scene may have been divided into two registers by an imitation guilloche of which one coil survives, consisting of two concentric circles around a dot. However there is no trace of anything in either of the registers, which must have been of different heights, with the upper one smaller than the lower.

Discussion:

Although the subject-matter is much the same as that of sealing 9536T, the quality seems to have been better.

Sealing 9552Y (fig. 4)*General information:*

This sealing (H=1.49, W=0.85, T=0.51 cm) also comes from the excavation of the Tell in 2011 and was found in a filling layer on top of a Ptolemaic building.

The colour of the micaceous clay is dark grey and the reverse shows the longitudinal undulating impression of a cord that is 0.17 cm thick and is partially overlaid by a thin vertical S-twist string.

Motif:

This is part of a sealing with its distorted design divided either entirely or, more probably, partly into two registers by what are almost certainly the first four coils of a two-strand Z-guilloche enclosing short horizontal lines and set between single horizontal lines. Nothing survives of the lower register which is obliterated by a lump of clay. The upper edge of the sealing (indicated by two rows of dashes) does not include the very top of the seal design, and any line borders are missing. What survives shows a frontal bird (part of the right side missing) with wings spread, with one indistinct and partial head facing left and possibly leonine, its legs extended on either side, and a flaring tail (a mark on the far left, visible in the photograph, is a crack in the clay).

Discussion:

The bird in the upper register, with legs with double articulations, is distinctive and rare. Contemporary examples on cylinder seals (PORADA 1948, no. 936; OTTO 2000, no. 175), show respectively the heads of two lions with legs ending in talons; and the heads of two birds of prey with legs ending in paws. As the surviving head on the present impression is unclear on the left, though

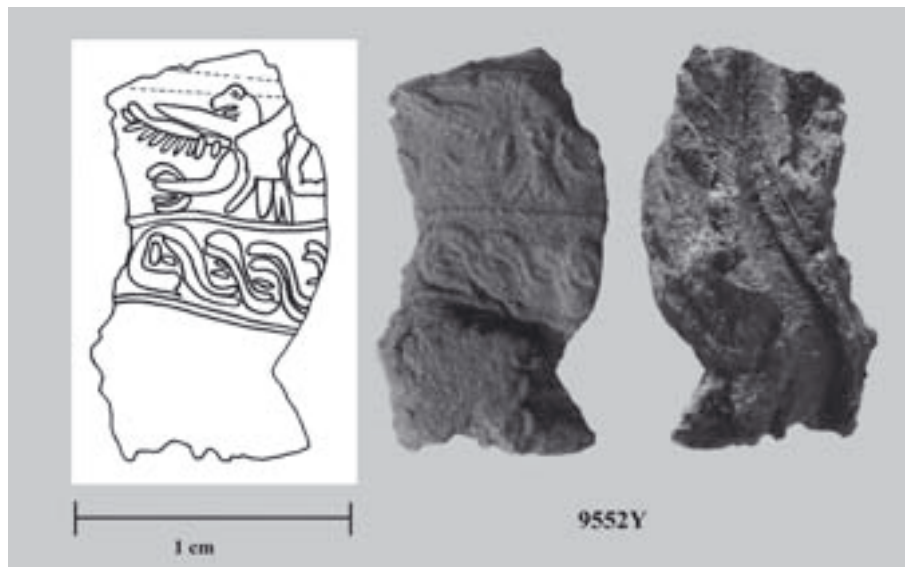


Fig. 4

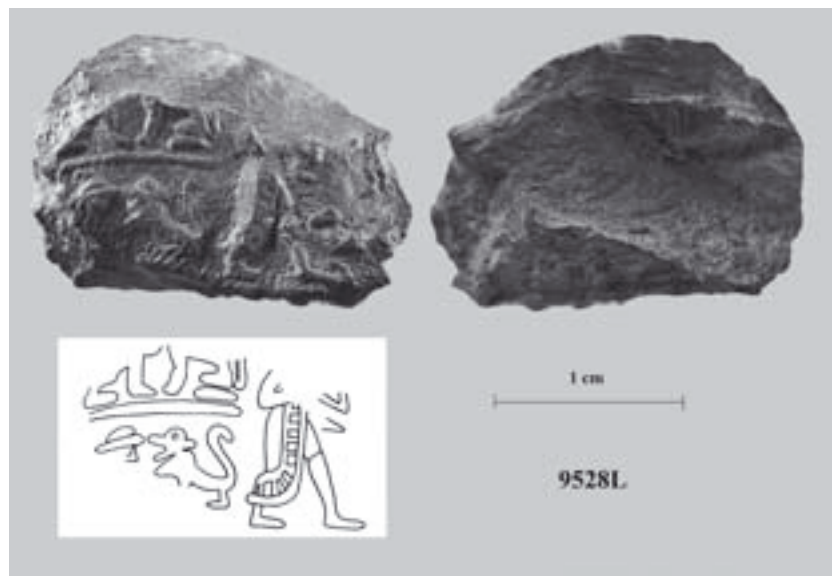


Fig. 5

possibly leonine, and any other head is lost in the break on the right, so the bird could have had the head or heads of either a lion or a bird, and its thick legs could well be those of a lion, but it is not clear if they end in paws or talons, although talons seem more likely. It would therefore differ from the clearer examples just cited, in having the head of one species and the legs of the other, but the evidence here is so unclear that it cannot be used as demonstrating this third option.

Sealing 9528L (fig. 5)

General information:

This sealing (H=1.39, W=1.98, T=0.73 cm) was also found in Area A/I of the Tell and comes from a pit between two Ptolemaic houses.

The sealing is on a lump of dark grey clay that was moulded by hand, judging from the palm impressions, and the top, bottom and ends of the design are missing. The reverse shows impressions of a narrow piece of flat, longitudinally-grained wood,

a broader rounded piece of wood (?) (0.54 cm wide), with a diagonal wooden peg (?) (0.2 cm thick) possibly linking the two.

Motif:

Again, part of the design is in two registers, but here they are divided by a single horizontal line rather than a guilloche. There are two paws at the left end of the upper register, turned towards the lower part of an animal seated on its haunches facing left, with part of its vertical tail visible. The upper parts of the animals are missing.

The lower register is even less clear but seems to show a similar scene with perhaps, on the left, a creature with a head facing right, possibly a sphinx, as it seems to have a bearded human head wearing a domed, narrow-brimmed headdress, although its tail, shaped like a diagonal walking-stick, could be that of a lion.

On the right, with his back to the two-register scene, is the lower part of a male figure striding towards the right, wearing a calf-length robe, with its curved, ladder-patterned edge hanging open over a short, plain kilt; his right arm stretches diagonally across his body and he is probably raising his left hand; alternatively he could be holding an animal as an offering. The area before him is damaged and unclear. Beyond is what resembles a loop of thin thread covered in clay – perhaps part of the ties of a package. They are not part of the seal impression.

Discussion:

This is a crudely-cut seal, but the robe with curved fringe of the main figure is normally worn by royalty (see OTTO 2000, nos. 175 and 176). Dominique Collon has found no parallel for the “sphinx”.

Sealing 9528X (fig. 6)

General information:

This sealing (H=1.17, W=1.37, T=0.70 cm) was found in a Ptolemaic house, excavated in 2011 in Area A/I of the Tell (see LEHMANN this volume, building F; see also 9528W).

The sealing is of light reddish brown clay with mica inclusions and shows a slightly bubbly surface due to the many tiny grains of mica. It is carinated, and the seal impression was on what was presumably the upper part. The interior surface bears the impression of two slats (0.15cm thick), possibly of wood or bark and one side bears the impression of what may be three vertical canes of a small basket

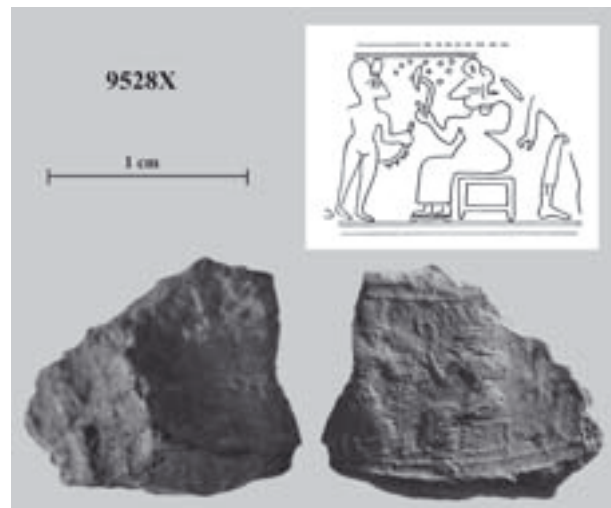


Fig. 6

and some very fine flat cane work. The seal’s whole height is preserved (1.02 cm).

Motif:

The scene consists of a figure, taken to be a woman in view of the elaborate hairstyle, wearing a plain robe, seated facing left on a stool with a horizontal cross-bar, with her feet on a low footstool. Her nose is pointed, her chin recedes and her eye seems to consist of two short horizontal indented lines. The figure holds in her hand a plant with a crescent-shaped bud on a curved stalk, probably a lotus (see TEISSIER 1996, 162, 166), and above there are several dots, some of which may be intentional rather than due to bubbles or inclusions in the clay.

At least two figures approach from the left. The first is probably the naked “Syrian goddess” judging from her elaborate headdress in two sections that differs from that of the seated figure, and she too has a large pointed nose. In her left hand (and probably also her right) she holds the fringed corner of her skirt, thus unveiling her nakedness. Behind the right foot of this figure is a toe that would belong to the second approaching figure; most of that figure appears on the right side of the sealing, where he stands with his back to the seated figure: a foot with only the toe on the ground, and an arm hanging behind, thumb down and fingers curled, and probably wearing an open robe over a kilt. Single line border top and bottom.

Discussion:

The iconography of this seal is unusual and does not fall into any particular category, although the

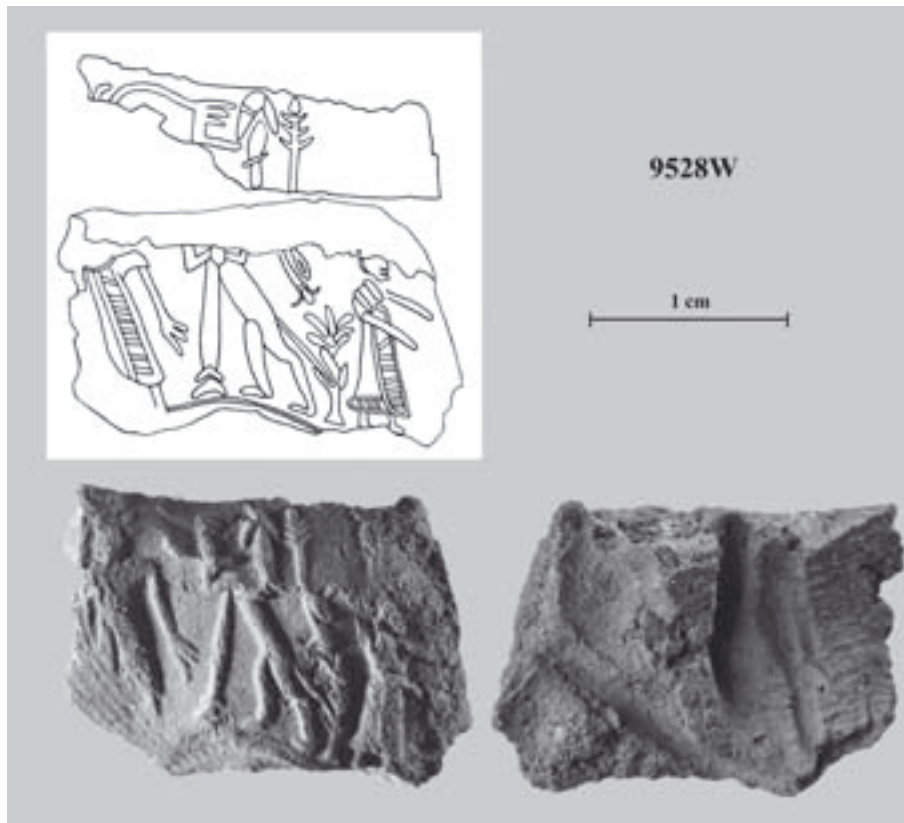


Fig. 7

lotus could point to Egypt, or to Syria where it was adopted and widely used. The most distinctive feature of the first advancing figure is her elaborate hairstyle, which is that of the naked or half-naked Syrian “goddess” (her identity as a goddess is not clear; see OTTO 2000, nos. 225, 228, 229; and see no. 162 with a similar elaborate hairstyle, where she is followed by a king who wears a different type of robe, and nos. 152–155 and 166). The seated figure, probably also a goddess, is not normally part of this type of scene, and it may be that the seal was locally made, although the quality is good (see the General Discussion below).

Sealing 9528W (fig. 7)

General information:

This sealing was also found in the Ptolemaic house, building F in Area A/I, as 9528X.

The fragment (H=1.48, W=2.13, T=0.88 cm) shows two distorted seal impressions angled towards the left, on a roughly rectangular piece of reddish brown clay that displays mica and some grains of quartz on the surface of both sides. On the reverse the clay is fired orange and shows an impression of an almost flat piece of wood (0.9 cm

wide) and two pieces of wood at an angle to it and three impressions of longitudinally striated cord (0.16–0.2 cm thick) binding them together.

On the front there is a hand impression on the lower left corner, and the right edge has been burnt. The narrower upper part is at an angle in relation to the lower and bears a secondary impression. There are differences in scale between various parts of the design, so that it is not clear whether more than one seal is involved. As a result, the upper strip and the main impression have been drawn separately with no attempt at straightening the figures and aligning them on the lower line border.

Motif:

The main impression:

On the left there is a robed male figure moving towards the left, with his left arm hanging by his side. He wears an open mantel with a vertical edge decorated with a diagonal ladder-pattern; the garment beneath it seems to have been plain. His head was obliterated by a finger-print and by the secondary impression. To the figure's right there seems to be a column with a double base, or perhaps a stylised tree, against which leans a long-tailed animal or demon, standing on its hind-legs on a surviving

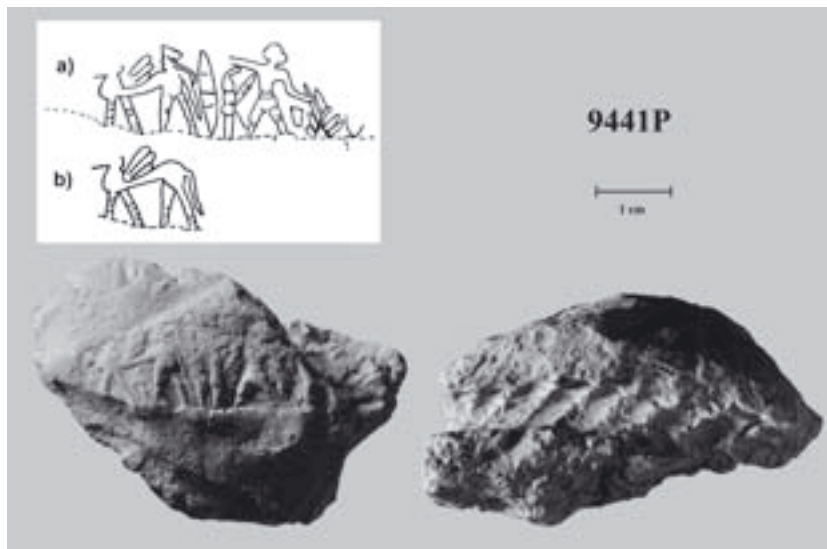


Fig. 8

section of the base-line; its forelegs or arms seem to have been wrapped round the “column” but its shoulders and head have been obliterated by the secondary impression. Further to the right there seems to be a hanging blossom above a small feather-like tree. Last in the scene is a small figure wearing a robe with a diagonal ladder-pattern down the front, and a diagonally striated hem, facing right, with both arms extending diagonally downwards, and its head largely missing under the secondary impression.

The secondary impression:

The only clear features of it are a small feather-like tree that is different from the one below it, and an elongated arm similar to the one below it, but it differs in that it undulates and the length of the fingers are in a different order to the ones on the main impression. The middle symbol is not easily identifiable. The right end is fire-damaged.

Sealing 9441 P (fig. 8)

General information:

This sealing (H=3.25, W=4.90, T=2.50 cm) was found in ^cEzbet Rushdi in 2009 during the removal of a red layer close to wall M 92 in Area R/II at a level of 4.10 – 4.17 above sea-level and dates to the late 13th Dynasty or to the early Hyksos period. Most probably it belongs to stratum E/2 (see MÜLLER 2012).

A very distorted and fragmentary seal impression appears on a very large piece of clay almost 5 cm long; the clay is yellowish-brown with very few inclusions. On the reverse there is the deep

impression of a two-strand S-twist string about 7 mm thick. Further impressions are probably of two pieces of wood or bark: 1. About 1.0–1.2 cm in width with about 3.7 cm in length surviving, divided into three sections. 2. A curved piece (diam. about 1.4 cm) horizontally striated with two small raised dots (i.e. holes on one side), held together by a two-strand S-twist string (thickness c. 5 mm). Neither the height nor the length of the seal impression are preserved, and the line seemingly forming the lower edge of the seal is clay pushed up from below.

Motif:

The design can be interpreted in two completely different ways:

Top (a): It may show fighting figures: a figure, seemingly naked apart from a possible hat with streamer at the back, facing left and holding a weapon (sword or knife) behind him in his right hand, leans forward and extends his left arm towards the groin of a figure (head missing) who faces him and leans back; diagonal lines might be a wing.

Bottom (b): The diagonal lines on the left are indeed a wing attached to the side of a large horse-like animal facing left, with its forelegs forming an inverted ‘V’ at the left of the impression, and the remainder of its body being that of the fighter of the first hypothesis, his extended arm forming the belly of the animal beneath the wing, his two legs being its hind-legs, and his lowered weapon forming the animal’s tail.

To the left are fragments of repeat rollings. Another figure, further right, stands with legs wide apart and he could be facing right and leaning slightly forwards as drawn here, or facing left and leaning backwards. He may be grasping a short javelin which he is preparing to throw. This javelin may be in a rack of similar weapons or it may be part of a plant. Study of the original has not clarified the matter.

Discussion:

The ambiguity of these impressions precludes any categorisation by subject, date or origins.

General Discussion

The eight seals catalogued here are all known through their sealings. They are generally small, with estimated heights ranging from 1.02 to a possible 2.5 cm (the scales on the drawings are 1 cm).

They vary in quality and style. The impressions are generally distorted, but in the drawings the distortion has been rectified where possible.

Seal 9430Y is by any standards, a high quality seal in the Classic Syrian style with parallels indicating an origin in western Syria with access to main north-south trade routes by land and sea.

This quality is not reflected in the other seals impressed on these sealings.

9536T, 9528N, 9552Y and 9528L show scenes which, like 9430Y, have part of the design divided into two registers. On 9528L this division consists of a horizontal line, but the scenes on the other seals are divided by a type of guilloche. The guilloche necessitated high expertise in seal-cutting, and its quality (as restored on from the surviving section on 9430Y) would indicate not only the level of craftsmanship of the seal-cutter, but also the status of the seal's owner. The poor quality of the other seals in this group is in marked contrast. The guilloche on 9552Y is slightly better than its counterparts, but comparison with the restored guilloche on 9430Y shows how far it falls short. The others would be better termed "pseudo" guilloches.

On seals 9528N and 9536T the guilloche is associated with the Babylonian suppliant goddess Lama, and with the frontal naked Syrian "goddess" in two different forms. 9528N is of better quality than 9536T, judging from the small section that survives, but the attempt at a guilloche on 9536T was a failure by any standards. On the basis of the incompetent guilloche and depiction of the two deities, I would suggest that the latter seal cutter had no idea what he was cutting and had an almost

total lack of expertise in seal cutting, at least on cylinder seals.

Seal 9528X was most likely of Syrian inspiration, but probably not made in Syria. It has the two distinctive line borders of Syrian seals, often not visible on the fragmentary sealings, but also present on 9430Y, 9528W (only the lower one), and 9552Y (only the upper one).

Conclusion

The recovery of such small sealings at Tell el-Dab'a is a tribute to the use of sieving. It may, through systematic recording of their various characteristics, be possible to establish a pattern of which types of sealings were found where, and reasons for their discard, perhaps in relation to their origins and date, and whether they were associated with gifts, tribute, items of trade, bureaucracy or record keeping.

It should be noted that there is strong evidence that some of the seals found in the most recent Dab'a excavations were imitations of Syrian seals. Syria produced some of the finest seals in the Near East for over a century, beginning around 1800 BC, with a dynamic and original subject matter carved with great expertise in many of the new Syrian kingdoms. It is scarcely surprising that the possession of these seals was an indication of status. Nor is it surprising that they should have been copied (and, indeed, still are!).

There is growing evidence of ancient copies associated with Levantine trade: an "omega group" of miniature faience seals, bearing an identical and enigmatic design, most unusually in relief on the seal, has been found all along the route from Central Anatolia, through coastal Syria to southern Palestine, where the shape changes to that of a miniature scarab although the design remains the same (Collon 2008, 95–6). An Anatolian style of the period was copied near Gaza (Collon 2002, 2008). At Dab'a itself a seal was found that is also based on Syrian iconography and shows the storm god striding over the mountains, while a ship plies its trade in the background, and which Porada describes as "carved in a style dependent on, but not belonging to, known Syrian cylinder seals and that ... may be the product of a local seal cutter" (Porada 1984, 488).

I would suggest that the poor-quality seals discussed here were cut either locally at Dab'a, or perhaps in the back streets of a Levantine port, by a rogue seal cutter for a rogue merchant, both of whom wished to claim a status to which neither was entitled.

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