

The publication of catalogues of cylinder seals in collections throughout the world is invaluable to the art historian-archaeologist because it makes available one of the primary sources of his information.¹ Nevertheless, the purpose and scope of these catalogues make it impossible to deal with any one particular seal in a detailed and comprehensive manner. While the publication of statues, reliefs and vessels in excavation reports frequently functions as the impetus to further discussion of a particular object, any one seal rarely receives the same undivided attention. Considering the overwhelmingly large number of published seals, this is understandable. Yet, it is unfortunate that full advantage has not been taken of the available material.

One cylinder seal (fig. 1), originally published by Dr. Edith Porada,² justifiably merits such scrutiny. It is part of the collection of the J. Pierpont Morgan

¹ The most comprehensive catalogues are:

Briggs Buchanan, ed., Catalogue of Ancient Near Eastern Seals in the Ashmolean Museum, Vol. I (Oxford, 1966), hereafter = Ashmolean;

L. Delaporte, ed., Catalogue des cylindres orientaux et des cachets assyro-babyloniens, perses et syro-cappadociens de la Bibliothèque Nationale (Paris, 1910);

L. Delaporte, ed., Catalogue des cylindres orientaux, cachets et pierres gravées de style oriental (2 Vols.; Paris: Musée du Louvre, 1920-23);

Anton Moortgat, ed., Vorderasiatische Rollsiegel (Berlin, 1940);

Edith Porada, ed., The Collection of the Pierpont Morgan Library, in Corpus of Ancient Near Eastern Seals in North American Collections (2 vols.; Washington: Bollingen Foundation, 1948), hereafter = Corpus.

² Porada, Corpus, II, pl. XCV, #652.

Library and, as is the case with all the seals of this collection, was acquired through a dealer rather than through scientific archaeological excavation.³ Its exact provenance and date, therefore, can only be established by comparison with other, better documented material. Hence, similarities to dated Neo-Assyrian linear style seals⁴ allow us to put it in the same general category.⁵

Morgan seal #652 shows a closed gate next to which stands a bearded figure with right arm raised. Flanking the door, over which there is a parapet, are two towers topped with battlements and a third tower-like structure. In the vertical walls of these towers are carved forms. Between the figure and the gate there is a rhomb or lozenge, a form which doubtless had some symbolic meaning⁶ which does not appear to be of immediate relevance to the subject discussed here.

Gates, or entranceways, are represented in Mesopotamian seals from the earliest periods of seal production,⁷ but it is not until the Middle Assyrian period that we find seals showing gates with battlemented towers.⁸ The closed fortified gate with a figure seen in profile standing near it, as represented on the Morgan seal, appears, as far as I can determine, only one other time in ancient Near Eastern art, on seal #117 from the Musée Guimet.⁹ An open gate, through which a statue on an altar appears and next to which stands a figure, is seen on a Middle Assyrian seal (fig. 2),¹⁰ and battlemented gates through which figures are shown seated, appear slightly more often.¹¹ But fortified gateways appear

³ *Ibid.*, I, p. XXII.

⁴ Moortgat, *op. cit.*, pl. 79 #669, pl. 80, #677.

⁵ Porada, *Corpus*, I, p. 78.

⁶ E. Douglas Van Buren, *Symbols of the Gods in Mesopotamian Art*, *An. Or.* 23 (Rome, 1945), pp. 115-19.

⁷ Porada, *Corpus*, II, pl. I, #3E; pl. V; pl. XXVIII, to cite just a few examples.

⁸ Walter Andrae, *Das Wiedererstandene Assur* (Leipzig, 1938), p. 111, figs. 49 and 50.

⁹ Louis Delaporte, *Cylindres orientaux*, *Annales du Musée Guimet*, vol. XXXIII (Paris, 1909), #117. Perhaps the same theme is intended on Buchanan, *Ashomolean*, #610. However, the figure by the gate is shown facing front with both arms at his side. In addition, the linear style of the seal is unlike the typical Assyrian linear style and is considered by Porada to be Iranian (oral communication).

¹⁰ Andrae, *op. cit.*, p. 111, fig. 49.

¹¹ Eckhard Unger, "Der Obelisk des Königs Assurnassirpal I. aus Ninive," *MAOG* VI (1932), pl. III and XV.

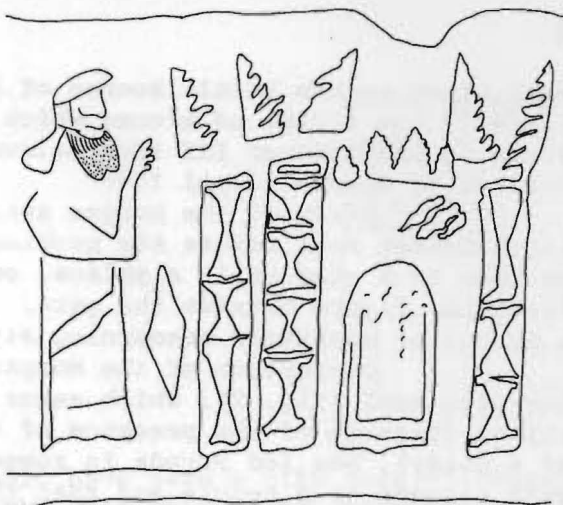


fig. 1 J. Pierpont
Morgan Library #652
Drab limestone.
Ht. 34mm, Dia. 12mm
Photograph courtesy of
Prof. Edith Porada



fig. 2 Middle Assyrian
seal impression from
Assur. W. Andrae, Das
wiedererstandene Assur,
(Leipzig, 1938), p. 11,
fig. 49.



most often on the battle scenes of the Assyrian palace reliefs,¹² the strips of bronze which are used to decorate the doors of Shalmaneser III from Balawat¹³ and on the White Obelisk of Assurnasirpal I.¹⁴

Study of the Morgan seal, and the closely related Guimet seal raises the problem of whether the gate belongs to a city wall, a palace, or a temple, and of identifying the figure outside the gate. Furthermore, there arise a number of questions concerning style.

Comparison of the Morgan seal with the Middle Assyrian seal (fig. 2), which seems to represent a religious ritual (because of the presence of a statue of a dog, symbol of a deity), has led Porada to suggest that the gate in seal #652 belongs to a temple and that the figure is a priest.¹⁵ In a different interpretation of the almost parallel representation on Guimet seal #117, Henri Frankfort suggested that it depicts soldiers standing outside city fortifications.¹⁶ He was probably influenced in this by the battle scenes shown in the Assyrian reliefs. However, there should be reservations about both of these suggestions.

There is a ritual text from Uruk, dating from the Seleucid period, which describes the procession of the god Anu during the New Year festival.¹⁷ This informs us that the last stop of the procession with the god's statue, before arriving at the Akitu house, was at the Royal Gate.¹⁸ If the Akitu house was outside the city walls in Uruk, as it was in Babylon, the Royal Gate through which the statue would have

¹² R. D. Barnett, Assyrian Palace Reliefs (London, n.d.), pp. 21-23, 25, 35, 38, 40, 136.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 138-9.

¹⁴ Unger, op. cit., pl. 1.

¹⁵ Porada, Corpus, I, p. 78. It should be noted that the figure appears in garments typically worn by personages engaged in ritual acts and is shown in the appropriate attitude. For examples see Corpus, I, pl. XCIV, #646-48. While one cannot see clearly whether or not the left hand of the figure is extended, which one would expect, this could be the result of the poor condition of the seal and the position of the rhomb.

¹⁶ H. Frankfort, Cylinder Seals (London, 1939), p. XXXV and pl. XXXIVj.

¹⁷ A. Sachs, trans., "Program of the Pageant of the Statue of the God Anu at Uruk" in ANET, pp. 342-3.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 342, ll. 20-5.

merlon (straight)
crenel

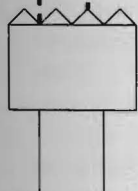


fig.3

merlon (stepped)
crenel

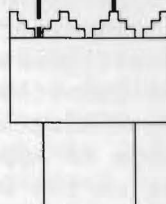


fig.4

been seen temporarily, would have been a city gate.¹⁹ Consequently, comparison of the gate on our seal with the gate on the Middle Assyrian seal (fig. 2) does not necessarily establish it as a temple gate.

Similarly, comparison with city fortifications does not establish our gate as part of a city wall, since towers were also found on temples²⁰ and palaces.²¹ In fact, when we compare the towers of the Morgan seal to the towers of city fortifications in Assyrian battle reliefs, we find that they differ considerably.²² The majority of Neo-Assyrian reliefs show us parapets made of a horizontal row of fairly evenly spaced crenels and triangular merlons,²³ the merlons either having straight²⁴ or stepped sides²⁵ (figs. 3 and 4).

¹⁹ According to A. L. Oppenheim, "The Mesopotamian Temple," The Biblical Archaeologist Reader (New York, 1961), pp. 162-3, in Assyrian temples the statue of the god could not be seen from the entrance to the building because of the bent-axis approach to the shrine. In Babylon, however, a straight-axis approach to the shrine enabled the statue to be seen from the entrance. In addition, he feels that the Assyrian images were kept in their shrines at all times, not paraded around the streets during festivals as they were in southern Mesopotamia. If this is true, one questions the origins of the seal in fig. 2.

²⁰ Ernst F. Weidner, "Assyrische Emailgemälde vom achten Feldzuge Sargons II," AfO 3 (1926), pp. 1-2.

²¹ Idem, "Die Bauten Tiglatpileasers I in Ninive," AfO 19 (1959-60), p. 141.

²² For a more detailed discussion of battlements, see E. Porada, "Battlements in the Military Architecture and in the Symbolism of the Ancient Near East," Essays in the History of Architecture, presented to Rudolf Wittkower (London, 1967), pp. 1-12.

²³ Barnett, op. cit., pp. 23, 24, 35, 40.

²⁴ André Parrot, The Arts of Assyria (New York, 1961), p. 14, fig. 17.

²⁵ Y. Yadin, The Art of Warfare in Biblical Lands, II, (New York, 1963), p. 435, 448.

The parapets on the Morgan seal, however, consist of two wing-like sections, each resembling a right triangle with a zigzag hypotenuse. If this were the only instance of exactly this type of battlemented tower, we could ascribe the style to the peculiarities of an individual artist, but since the same battlements, and even the same tower decorations appear on the Guimet seal, that explanation is impossible.²⁶ The zigzag character of the tower-tops on the Morgan seal does not seem to appear elsewhere in ancient Near Eastern art, except on the merlons over the door in this seal. Since we know from other sources²⁷ that the parapet over the door was frequently formed of merlons with stepped crenellations (as in fig. 4), we can assume that the zigzag on the towers was also meant to represent stepped crenellations.

Excavations at Toprak Kale, near Lake Van in Urartu (present day Armenia) have unearthed a small turret dated to the 8-7th century B.C., which was probably attached to a model of a building found at the same site.²⁸ The parapet consists of two merlons, each resembling a right triangle with stepped hypotenuse. A similar turret found at Karmir Blur,²⁹ also in Urartu, and also dated to the 8-7th century B.C.,³⁰ indicates that this architectural feature was common in Urartu.³¹

In the scene on the Balawat Gates, identified by its inscription as a siege of a city in Urartu,³² the towers of the city gates with double merlons, resemble the Morgan seal, even to the slightly outward flaring shape. A difference between the merlons on the Urartian turret and Morgan seal and those on this example is the absence of steps on the simplified rendering of the Balawat scene. On another section of the Balawat Gates which depicts a city in Asia Minor³³ we again find towers which are akin to the turret

²⁶ We have eliminated the possibility that both seals were made by the same person because, while the towers bear striking similarities, the figures standing by the gate are stylistically quite different.

²⁷ Yadin, *op. cit.*, p. 435, 448.

²⁸ R. D. Barnett, *Iraq* XII (1950), pl. I.

²⁹ B. B. Piotrovskii, *Urartu* (New York, 1967), fig. 40.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

³¹ Maurits N. van Loon, *Urartian Art* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1964), I, pp. 222-23.

³² Adolf Billerbeck and Friedrich Delitzsch, "Die Palasttore Salman-assars II von Balawat," *BA* 6 (1908), pl. I, scene B, upper.

³³ Billerbeck, *op. cit.*, pl. II, scene C, lower.

from Toprak Kale, including the steps on the two merlons. Finally, we find these battlements on a section of the Bala-wat Gates depicting a city near Lake Urmia.³⁴

While the earlier Middle Assyrian seal (fig. 2)³⁵ may suggest a native Assyrian source for the representation on the Morgan and Guimet seals, possible earlier contacts with Urartu impose on us reservations concerning a definite statement about the origin of our motif. We know from an inscription of Shalmaneser I that the area which was later a part of the Urartian kingdom was already in contact with Assyria in the 13th century B.C.³⁶ This area may have been exerting some influence on its southern and more powerful neighbors even at this early date. It has been demonstrated that the art of the Middle Assyrian period was largely the result of foreign influences,³⁷ especially Mitannian and North Syrian. Thus, if we knew more about the origins of the art and architecture of Urartu, we might find that that country too played an important role at this early date.³⁸

The Morgan seal exhibits a peculiarity not found on the Guimet seal. It is the third tower-like structure, with only one merlon, closest to the figure on the left. The simplest explanation would be that the seal maker originally intended to have a fourth structure flanking the tower on the right, in imitation of representations like those of the Middle Assyrian seal (fig. 2), but found that this would leave him no room for the figure. However, it is the two outer towers which look most alike. The number of decorations on both is the same, as is the style of these decorations. The height of the two outer towers, excluding the battlements, is also the same, while the middle tower is slightly taller. This

³⁴ *Ibid.*, pl. III, scene G, lower.

³⁵ See footnote 19.

³⁶ D. D. Luckenbill, Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926), I, p. 39, #114.

³⁷ Frankfort, op. cit., pp. 186-7.

³⁸ As pointed out by Van Loon, op. cit., p. 3, the Urartian and Hurrian peoples spoke closely related languages and might have sprung from a common ancestor before the fourth millenium B.C. In addition, he points out (p. 6) that pottery found near Lake Urmia, later a part of the Urartian kingdom, indicates that this area was under Hurrian influence before the second millenium. Since the Hurrians were the main ethnic element in the Mitannian kingdom, from which the Assyrians borrowed much art in the Middle Assyrian period, it is conceivable that the battlements of which we have been speaking ultimately derive from an ancestor of the Urartians and the Hurrians. Unfortunately we have no examples from Mitanni of battlements with double stepped crenellations.

probably indicates that the two outer towers were made first, but before completing the battlements on the left one, the carver realized that he was making the entranceway inappropriately wide, and added the middle tower to narrow the entrance.

While we know from textual evidence that towers in the ancient Near East were decorated,³⁹ the carvings on the towers of the Morgan and Guimet seals do not seem to be decorations, but windows. While most of the Assyrian battle reliefs show square windows, several towers on the Obelisk of Assurnasirpal, with typical Assyrian battlements, also have windows which are much like those on the Morgan and Guimet seals.⁴⁰ Further evidence that this feature represents windows might be found in a pictograph sign in the earliest Sumerian script which is somewhat similar to our tower decorations and which meant "hole" or "window".⁴¹ Since the earliest signs were stylized depictions of real objects,⁴² there might have been windows similar in shape to both the sign and the representations on the Morgan and Guimet seals, and the Obelisk of Assurnasirpal.

The many non-Assyrian features of Morgan seal #652, and the suggested similarities with areas to the north would seem to lead to the conclusion that we are dealing with a seal made outside of Assyria. Unfortunately, two Assyrian ivory fragments from Nimrud, dated to the 9th century B.C.,⁴³ weaken this conclusion. The fragments show a city wall, with a city gate composed of two towers topped by battlements with double merlons. On the towers stand musicians clapping their hands and clashing cymbals. Near one tower stands a figure, probably a king, in battle dress, in whose honor, according to Mallowan, the celebration is being performed.⁴⁴ While Hrouda suggests⁴⁵ (on the basis of the unusual style of the fortifications) that we may be looking not at an Assyrian city, but at one defeated and not destroyed by the Assyrians,

³⁹ Ernst F. Weidner, "Assyrische Emailgemälde vom achten Feldzuge Sargon II," AfO 3 (1926), pp. 1-2.

⁴⁰ Unger, op. cit., pl. XV.

⁴¹ R. Labat, Manuel d'épigraphie akkadienne (Paris, 1963), p. 94.

⁴² To cite a few examples, a picture of a bird meant "bird" (ibid., p. 72) and a picture of a head meant "head" (ibid., p. 90).

⁴³ M. E. L. Mallowan, "The Excavations at Nimrud (Kalhu) 1953," Iraq 16 (1954), pl. XXXI and p. 150.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 150.

⁴⁵ Barthel Hrouda, Die Kulturgeschichte des assyrischen Flachbildes (Bonn, 1965), p. 62.

it seems strange that an object, representing the celebration of a foreign king would be found at an Assyrian site. Also, we must keep in mind that the representations on the Balawat Gates indicate that Assyrians, or at least craftsmen working in Assyria, were producing representations of the type of battlements about which we have been speaking, even if it was done to represent only foreign cities.⁴⁶

Yet, while these last two examples weaken an argument for a non-Assyrian origin for the seal under discussion, the evidence from Urartu, and later material from the Achaemenid period⁴⁷ showing towers with battlements resembling those of our cylinder seal, may support our contention for a foreign, possibly Urartian inspiration for Morgan seal #652.

⁴⁶ In one section of the reliefs on the throne dais from Nimrud of Shalmaneser III (David Oates, "The Excavations at Nimrud (Kalhu) 1962" Iraq 25 [1963], pl. IVb and V) two tribute bearers to the king are shown carrying models of towns. Both have towers similar to the ones we have been discussing. An accompanying inscription, which is considered descriptive of the above scene (p. 11) lists items of tribute from the Chaldeans (p. 16). While no attempt is being made to connect the architecture of Urartu and Chaldea, this example again points out the non-Assyrian character of this type of battlement.

⁴⁷ As pointed out by Guitty Azarpay, "Some Classical and Near Eastern Motifs in the Art of Pazyryk," Artibus Asiae 22 (1959), pp. 313-39, the textile pattern on the robe of the Achaemenid archer from Susa (Roman Ghirshman, The Art of Ancient Iran New York, 1964, p. 190, fig. 2) may represent stylized towers (consisting of double merlons). The pattern is very similar to a decorated textile fragment found in a 5th - 3rd century B.C. Scythian grave at Pazyryk in the Altai mountains (Azarpay, op. cit., p. 337) and is probably a direct import or a copy of an Achaemenid textile pattern. Azarpay further notes (p. 336) the similarity between these textile decorations and the towers found at Toprak Kale. It should also be noted that some Achaemenid altars (Parrot, op. cit., p. 208, figs. A and D) look very much like the Urartian turrets. Since the origins of Achaemenid art and the relationship between the Persians, Medes, Urartians and Scythians is still the subject of discussion (Edith Porada, The Art of Ancient Iran, [New York], 1965, p. 140) I can do no more than point out the above similarities.