

A Neo-Assyrian Cylinder Seal from Beth-Shan

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Toward the close of one of his journeys in the Galilee, the Irish archaeologist R. A. S. Macalister stayed in a hotel at Nablus (the modern Shechem). His host showed him some antiquities in his possession, among which was a cylinder seal. It caught Macalister's eye, and a drawing of this item was included in the article in which he reported his journey.¹ Unfortunately, Macalister did not include a photograph of this object, and we must therefore be satisfied with the line drawing. A number of questions concerning the figures depicted on it cannot, therefore, be answered, as will be seen below.



Figure 1.

Two human figures are seen in the seal. The left-hand figure stands upon the back of an animal. One hand is stretched forward, the other is held upward, holding an object of some kind. The figure wears a long dress decorated with a pendant tassel down the front, and has an ornamented belt around the waist. The second figure on the seal stands on the ground in the same kind of gesture. This figure is bearded and wears a dress ornamented around the edges.

A large object, apparently an altar, is placed between the figures. It has two basic parts—a long leg and a bowl. Some diagonal lines are depicted above the altar, as a symbol

1 R. A. S. Macalister, "Diary of a Visit to Safed," *PEQSt* (1907), p. 130, pl. 9.

of fire, smoke, or incense mist. Another object, made out of triangles, is placed behind the right figure, while behind the left one a decorated pole is depicted. The symbols of the eight-pointed star and the crescent are depicted in the upper part of the seal. The whole scene is bordered by two lines.

The combination of these figures and other elements indicates clearly that this seal belongs to the Neo-Assyrian world of glyptic art. The scene—of the worshiper facing the god—is found in numerous cylinder seals. Thus, a comparison of this seal to other Neo-Assyrian seals will enable us to reconstruct the elements that are unclear and the scene as a whole. It will also enable us to fix the place of this seal in the world to which it belongs. The following discussion will deal with typology; it will deal with shapes rather than meanings. In other words, our purpose is to focus on the way that the different elements appear, rather than on their religious connotations.

The way the left-hand figure is represented—standing on the back of an animal—is a common method of depicting a divine character in the Mesopotamian world. The hat the figure wears is somewhat like a “Turkish” turban—flat on the top and stiff all around—with a long stiff addition in the back. It belongs to a type usually seen on gods’ heads.² A similar hat, decorated with a circle on its flat upper part, is found in the seal of Belu-Ašarēdu³ and a more elaborate one—decorated with both the circle and two horns—is depicted on the stamp seal from Shechem.⁴ As the line drawing which we have is so schematic, we cannot be certain whether the artist intended to depict a beard or not, but considering similar representations it seems likely. The other features, eyes, nose, etc., are not seen at all, perhaps intentionally omitted.

This figure is wearing a kind of long dress, covering the whole body from the shoulders to the ankles, leaving the forearms bare. It is rather a simple dress, decorated only at the fringes. In many other instances the gods appear in more elaborate dress.⁵ Nevertheless, other figures of gods or kings dressed in this simple manner are also attested.⁶ The object held is not clear enough for identification.

The forward extension of the right hand, as seen here, is another common attribute of divinity. The palm of the hand in our seal is not clearly visible, but in other, more accurate

2 The usual representation of such hats, worn by the gods, is ornamented with a circle, a star, horns, or various variations of these. See: E. Porada, *The Collection of the Pierpont Morgan Library* (Washington, 1948), Nos. 691–93, 695, 702; H. Gordon, “Western Asiatic Seals in the Walters Art Gallery,” *Iraq* 6 (1939), No. 81; M. and H. Tadmor, “The Seal of Belu-Ašarēdu, Majordomo,” *Bulletin of the Israel Exploration Society* 31 (1967), 69–70 [Hebrew].

3 Tadmor, *Belu-Ašarēdu*, 69.

4 G. E. Wright, *Shechem* (New York, 1965), pl. 82:6.

5 Porada, *Pierpont Morgan*, Nos. 692–93, 695–97; L. Delaporte, *Catalogue des Cylindres Orientaux II*, (Paris, 1923), pl. 88:3; G. A. Eisen, *Ancient Oriental Cylinder and Other Seals with the Description of the Collection of William H. Moore* (Chicago, 1940), No. 84; A. Moortgat, *Vorderasiatische Rollseigel* (Berlin, 1940), Nos. 595–99.

6 Porada, *Pierpont Morgan*, Nos. 694 and 697—the god on the right has similar dress. See also M. E. L. Mallowan, *Nimrud and its Remains I* (London, 1966), p. 257, pl. 230. King Ashurnasirpal is seen wearing that dress during a religious ceremony after the lion hunt. See R. D. Barnett, *Assyrian Palace Reliefs* (London, 1960), 97; and R. D. Barnett and M. Falkner, *The Sculptures Assur-Nasir-Apli II, Tiglath-Pileser III, Asarhadon, from the Central and Southwest Palaces of Nimrud* (London, 1962), pl. XXII. The most elaborate dress of this kind is found in a wall painting showing the god Assur, found in the city of Ashur. See W. Andrae, *Colored Ceramics from Ashur* (London, 1925), pl. 10.

representations we can see that it is turned to the outside, the thumb being separated from the other four fingers.⁷

The animal on which the god stands is also not clear enough for identification. Even so, it has some special elements. It is not horned, and the way it crouches deserves attention. Its legs are stretched forward rather than being folded under its body as in numerous cases. Its straight neck is also an unusual feature, since in most cases the neck leans forward.⁸ The meaning of this difference is unclear to me at present.

The other figure—that of the worshiper—is represented in the most common way in Mesopotamian art. The worshiper has a rounded cap beneath which we see long hair, with a thick curl near the shoulders. His beard is depicted in the usual manner of the Assyrians; his eye and nose are slightly visible. One of his hands is extended forward, and the features of the palm are missing. His other hand is raised upward, and again the thumb faces the other fingers. This is the typical gesture of the Neo-Assyrian worshiper, pointing with the index finger.⁹ The worshiper has a long dress, different from that of the god. It consists of a long rectangular cloth, decorated all around. It winds around his body, covering one shoulder and leaving the other bare.

An altar, almost as high as a man, stands between the figures. Its long legs are decorated close to its center with two protruding rings. The bowl on top is squarish. Such altars are well known in Neo-Assyrian glyptic art,¹⁰ where they are found in several variations. In many cases they are not as high, and the bowl is usually rounded.¹¹

Behind the worshiper another object is depicted—a divine symbol. This symbol also appears in many variations on cylinder seals, and is therefore well known.¹² The object behind the god is very schematic. Similar signs appear as the back of a chair on which a divine figure is seated.¹³ Here it seems to appear separately, and no chair is depicted.¹⁴ The last two objects are both symbols of gods. The star belongs to the goddess Ishtar, and the crescent to the god Sin.¹⁵ Both symbols are very popular in glyptic art.

7 Tadmor, *Belu-Ašarēdu*, 70. One should notice that in many cases the rendering of the palm hand lacks any detail. See, e.g., Porada, *Pierpont Morgan*, No. 701.

8 See Gordon, *Walters Art Gallery*, No. 81; W. H. Ward, *The Seal Cylinder of Western Asia* (Washington, 1910), p. 254, No. 747; Mallowan, *Nimrud* p. 259, pl. 237; Porada, *Pierpont Morgan*, No. 692e; B. Buchanan, *Catalogue of Ancient Near Eastern Seals in the Ashmolean Museum I* (Oxford, 1966), No. 633.

9 See Porada, *Pierpont Morgan*, Nos. 691–92, 694–97 (especially 697); Eisen, *William H. Moore*, No. 84; M. Noveck, *The Mark of Ancient Man (The Gorelick Collection)* (New York, 1975), p. 55; Buchanan, *Ashmolean*, Nos. 635 and 638; Ward, *Western Asia*, p. 247, No. 750.

10 Porada, *Pierpont Morgan*, No. 701; see also Barnett, *Assyrian Palace Reliefs*, p. 170; and Andrae, *Colored Ceramics*, pl. 29.

11 Gordon, *Walters Art Gallery*, No. 104; Ward, *Western Asia*, p. 241, No. 722; p. 245, No. 745; and p. 249, No. 753. Such altars also appear in wall reliefs and wall paintings. See Barnett, *Assyrian Palace Reliefs*, pp. 105 and 107; Barnett and Falkner, *Sculptures*, pl. LX; and in quite a different way in a relief of Sennacherib. See, Paterson, *Assyrian Sculptures, Palace of Sennacherib* (The Hague, 1915), pls. 94–95 (lower left). See also Andrae, *Colored Ceramics*, pl. 26, where two figures are shown kneeling in front of such an altar.

12 Porada, *Pierpont Morgan*, No. 699, and more schematically in No. 697. See also Gordon, *Walters Art Gallery*, No. 104, where such a sign is seen on top of a stand, towards which three steps lead; and No. 15, on the back of an animal; in seal No. 8 a similar sign is placed inside a tripod stand. For simpler depictions of this sign see Nos. 80 and 83 and also Buchanan, *Ashmolean*, Nos. 636 and 638.

13 Porada, *Pierpont Morgan*, Nos. 699–701.

14 See also Ward, *Western Asia*, p. 252, No. 770, and p. 249, No. 755.

15 Tadmor, *Belu-Ašarēdu*, 72.

To sum up this description, we can easily see that both the different objects and the scene as a whole are well known in Neo-Assyrian art and in the Mesopotamian world. As we do not have the photograph of the seal, we cannot examine some important technical points concerning the way it was executed. The line drawing prevents us from being certain about whether it was drilled or cut entirely with rotating discs or a graver. The way in which various objects (such as the shoulders, or the body of the animal, etc.) were rendered is not indicative enough. Nevertheless, it seems that there are enough data to ascribe the seal to the "early drilled style."¹⁶ This group was characterized by Porada according to both scenery and technical elements, and several points of definition are found here. We should point out the clear manner in which the scene is depicted and the empty spaces between the various elements. Both manifest delicate execution. Ascribing the seal to the "early drilled style" fixes its rough date in the ninth or eighth centuries B.C.E.

The first question raised on the matter is whether the quality of execution and accuracy of rendering has any chronological meaning, or whether they reflect the ability of the artist only. Edith Porada observes a relationship between those two factors and shows that the earlier seals are the more accurate and better executed ones as they are still under the influence of Middle Assyrian glyptic art. As time passed, this influence weakened and the general standard of performance was lowered. Her approach is adopted by the present writer. There is no doubt that the personal skill of an artist, or of a workshop, dictates the standards of their products, but it is a non-exclusive factor. The decades that separate the original period of invention from the time when motives are merely copied cause a general deterioration of execution. Artists often copy elements which they did not create, and perhaps did not always fully understand. They may therefore lack sensitivity to the subjects and fail to maintain accuracy. This point of view suggests that the cylinder seal from Beth Shan is relatively late in the "early drilled style."

This seal was found out of context, or, at least, was shown that way to Macalister. The site from which it was taken, Beth Shan, is located in an area traversed by the Assyrians during their military actions in the second half of the eighth century.¹⁷ During the conquest of the Galilee and "all the land of Naphtali" (2 Kings 15:29) in 732 B.C.E., Beth Shan ("Upper V" level), an important city in the area, was destroyed. On top of the ruins small dwelling houses were rebuilt, and the new site—probably more of a village (level IV)—was included in the province of Megiddo.¹⁸ Very little foreign material, Assyrian or other, was found in both strata (V and IV). But in stratum IV another Assyrian cylinder seal, of the linear style, was found.¹⁹ It seems therefore that both points suggest that the origin of the seal concerned was level IV, that is, right after 732 B.C.E.

Another Assyrian seal that was found in archaeological context is the elaborate stamp seal from Shechem. This was found in stratum VII, destroyed by the Assyrians.²⁰ As Shechem was conquered in 722,²¹ both seals, are, stratigraphically speaking, close in date.

¹⁶ Porada, *Pierpont Morgan*, pp. 83f.

¹⁷ See Y. Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible, A Historical Geography* (London, 1967), 327–33 and Map 30.

¹⁸ See Sh. Geva, "A Reassessment of the Chronology of Beth Shean Strata V and IV," *IEJ* 29 (1979), 6–10.

¹⁹ F. W. James, *The Iron Age at Beth Shan* (Philadelphia, 1966), Fig. 117:6.

²⁰ See Wright, *Shechem*, 163.

²¹ Aharoni, *The Land of the Bible*, 333–34. Shechem is situated in very close proximity to Samaria.

The second half of the eighth century, B.C.E., and maybe even the last third of that century, is suggested here as the date of the cylinder seal.

One should notice the small quantity of Assyrian seals found in the ancient Land of Israel, including the area of the Kingdom of Israel, which was ruled by the Assyrians for several decades. There are also no examples of the "peripheral style", which is usually developed under such circumstances. Both points throw light on the meaning of our find as well as the others. It seems to the present writer that every seal was actually brought directly by the person who used it. Glyptic art in Israel during that period was almost non-existent, and most probably there was no demand for these items. In the Kingdom of Judah, where stamp seals were in use for administrative purposes, some Assyrian motives were adopted, but the seals were not copied. This phenomenon fits into the general picture of the character of Assyrian rule in the area of the Kingdom of Israel. It stands in contrast to other periods when the country was under foreign rule, such as the Egyptian hegemony in the Late Bronze Age or the Hellenistic and Roman periods; in those times there was a strong tendency to copy the art of the Empire, either in glyptic or in other forms. The different levels of Assyrian art remained foreign to Israel.