

AN AKKAD CYLINDER-SEAL FROM LOGARDAN

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TYPOLOGICAL DESCRIPTION

The object LOG D P 236.1 is a cylinder seal made of serpentine (Fig. 1) with a longitudinal perforation (0.6 cm in diameter). It is around 1.7 cm in diameter and 3 cm high. It was found in the Trench D of Logardan, among the stones of a collapsed layer (locus 600) of Level 3a (late Akkad), near the kiln 638.

The technique of execution is exemplary: we can see the utilisation of an abrasive (sand or quartz) which served the seal-cutter using two different methods: filling with a thin file and micro-chipping with a kind of spatula-shaped tool for the larger motives (bodies of the figures). The details were made with a thin tip certainly in metal (the tool traces are still visible). Finally, the seal was polished with stone polishers or powdered hematite (“jeweller’s rouge”)¹. The creation technique of the star seems different; it has been made with a larger spatula-shaped tool with curved cutting edges that gives a gouged aspect to this motif. It could be a late addition, and shows no polishing. The seal perforation was drilled from each end with a drill tip (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1 - The cylinder seal LOG D P 236.1.



Fig. 2 - The perforation.

1. All these precisions about the creation techniques are possible thanks to the discovery, in Ur, of an Akkadian bead-maker's grave where a tool kit was placed (Sax et al. 1998 p. 2).

The state of preservation is variable. One face is very well preserved whereas the other is heavily eroded and worn, like if it was studded. It could be explain by a long period of exposure to the heat (Fig. 3a and 3b).



Fig. 3a - Illustration of the preservation of the cylinder seal.



Fig. 3b - The "studded" face of the cylinder seal.

DATING

The strong parallels with the « classic akkadian style - [arad-zu] » seals allow us to suggest a relative dating between ca. 2250 and 2100 BCE. Indeed, this type of cylinder seal is associated with the radical change in the administrative practices under the reign of Naram Sin. So it was probably in use from this reign to the end of the Akkadian Empire, and certainly also during the post Akkad period. Frankfort dates this type from the "Mature phase" of the Akkad period (on the basis of stylistic criteria, the style becoming more and more modelled and realistic)² and Boehmer from the "Akkadische III period" (on the basis of iconographic features, compositions becoming more and more "simple" with only two pairs of contestants)³. However, most of those seals are dating from the reign of Shar-Kalli-Shari⁴. Thus, we can suggest a more precise dating around 2190 BCE. From a stratigraphic point of view, level 3a has provided a C14 dating, that fits perfectly well with our stylistic expertise of the object: 2201-2131BC (68.2% probability, see Appendix B).

2. Rakic 2003 p. 83 and p. 122.

3. Boehmer 1965 p. 136.

4. Rakic 2003 p. 336

STYLISTIC AND ICONOGRAPHIC DESCRIPTION (FIG. 4 AND 5)



Fig. 4 - The cylinder seal and its impression.

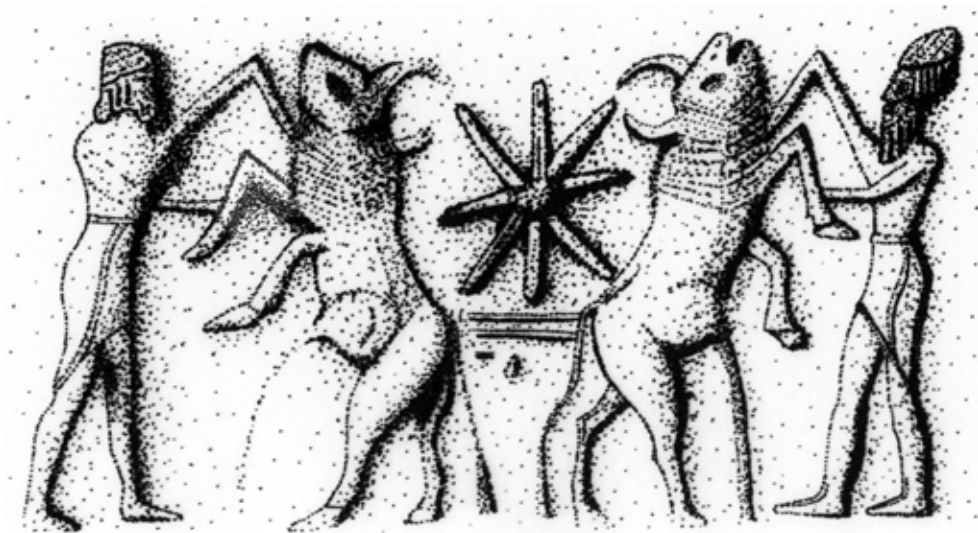


Fig. 5 - Drawing of the impression (C. Paladre).

The composition is symmetric, elaborated and elegant showing perfectly balanced figures. The style is precise with an emphasis on the physical details and on the modelling of the figures. Thus, an impression of strength and dynamism is put forward. The seal is a perfect example of the “mature Akkadian glyptic”, which entire characteristics are here illustrated: details (anatomic features, clothes, hairs and hats ...), naturalistic rendering of the figures and emphasis on the muscles. However, the motif of the star is more schematic and crude. It can be characterised as a “gouged motif”.

There are two pairs of contestants organized in a mirror-like composition. Two half faces bearded heroes are wearing a wrap-over skirt with curved ends and sandals. They are back-to-back. The right side hero is wearing a conical cap whereas the left side hero is wearing a bobbed hairstyle. Both are mastering a bull (*bos primigenius*⁵) with their hands holding one

5. Collon 1982 p. 35.

of the bull front legs. At the same time, they are hitting the bulls with a dagger. Bulls are standing on their hind legs with an impressive fleece on the chest. They are looking at the sky and ejaculating. Between these two contest scenes, we can see a star with eight points (a characteristic feature of the contest scene⁶). Just below, we can see two horizontal and parallel lines and a small circular depression (Fig. 6).

The composition could be understood as the struggle between wild and civilized worlds⁷, it clearly expresses the power of the beasts as well as the completeness of its defeat.

DISCUSSION

This cylinder seal belongs to the “classic akkadian court seals” series. It is clearly related to the “[arad-zu] seals”, intended for imperial officers, characterized by their compositions, consisting of two pairs of contestants, perfectly balanced, and by a framed inscription, that carries the name, the title and affiliation of the owner⁸ (Fig. 7). The quality of execution and the material itself, since the serpentine is the most frequent material during this period, connect this seal to the official Akkadian production. The absence of inscription is singular but not surprising. Indeed, Rakic mention a subgroup with no inscription⁹. Instead of it stands a secondary motif, here a star (Fig. 8). This subgroup illustrates the iconographic influence, popularity and prestige of the Akkadian motifs in the peripheral regions. Thus, it should be a local production¹⁰.

However, the presence of a roughly carved star that differs from the rest of the figures is not anecdotic. Two theories can here be suggested:

- It could be a failed seal. The two thin parallel lines and the circular depression would then be some mistakes made by the seal cutter, who drew the star in order to fill the space originally devoted to the inscription and transformed the seal into an ornamental object. By doing so, it prevented also to use the object as a seal. It could explain why the star is not polished. We can mention here an observation made by Zettler: the great majority of the seals and impressions with inscription [arad zu] presenting this kind of scene are well-planned, with a high quality and seem to be the product of a specific state-controlled workshop, since these seals were the prerogative of persons close to the royal administration¹¹. Thus, it could be understandable



Fig. 6 - The star, the two parallel and horizontal lines and the circular depression.

6. Rakic 2003 p. 81.

7. Rakic 2003 p. 78.

8. Pittman 2013 p. 334.

9. Rakic 2003 p. 117.

10. Rakic 2003 p. 369.

11. Zettler 1977 p. 36.

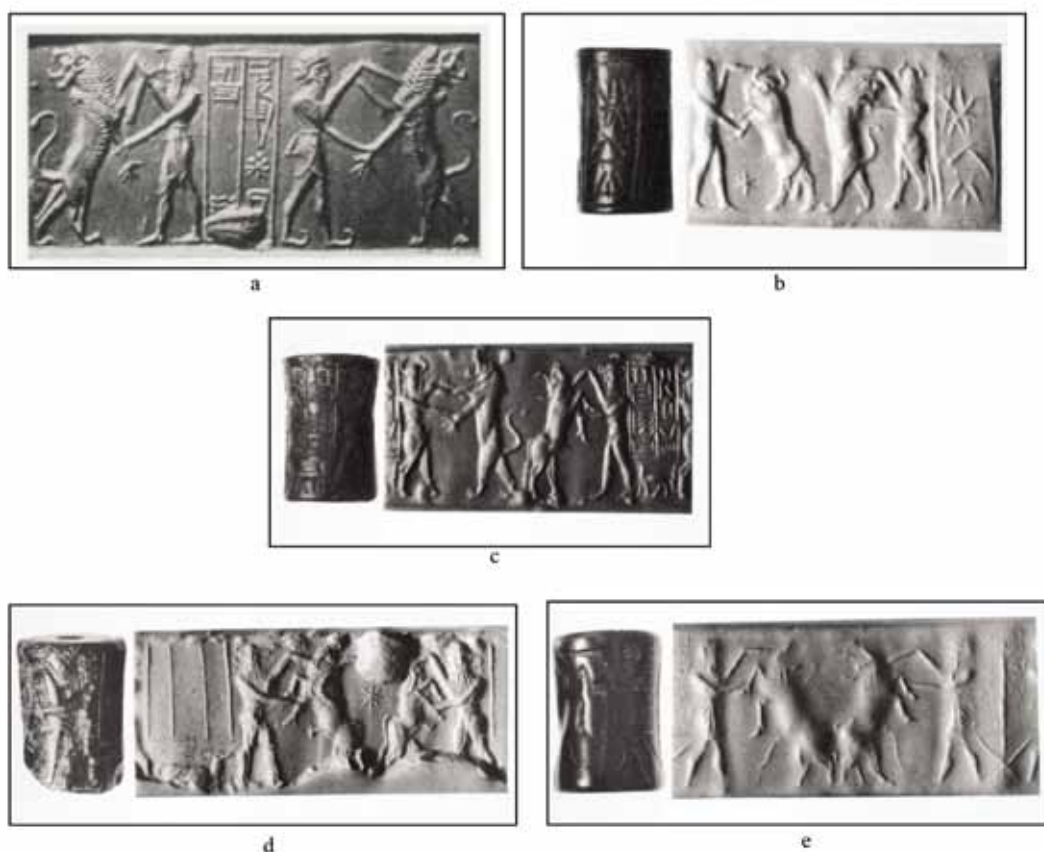


Fig. 7 - Examples of “[arad-zu] cylinder seals” – comparative plate.

- 7.a: cylinder seal, two pairs of contestants and inscription, Guimet Collection (abb. 195 taffel XVII Boehmer 1965).
 7.b: cylinder seal, lapis lazuli, two pairs of contestants, star and inscription, British Museum (fig. 74 pl. X Collon 1982).
 7.c: cylinder seal, green stone, two pairs of contestants and inscription, British Museum (fig. 83 pl. XI Collon 1982).
 7.d: cylinder seal, serpentine, two pairs of contestants, a star and an empty frame for inscription, British Museum (fig. 99 pl. XIII Collon 1982).
 7.e: cylinder seal, serpentine, two pairs of contestants and inscription, British Museum (fig. 100 pl. XIII Collon 1982).

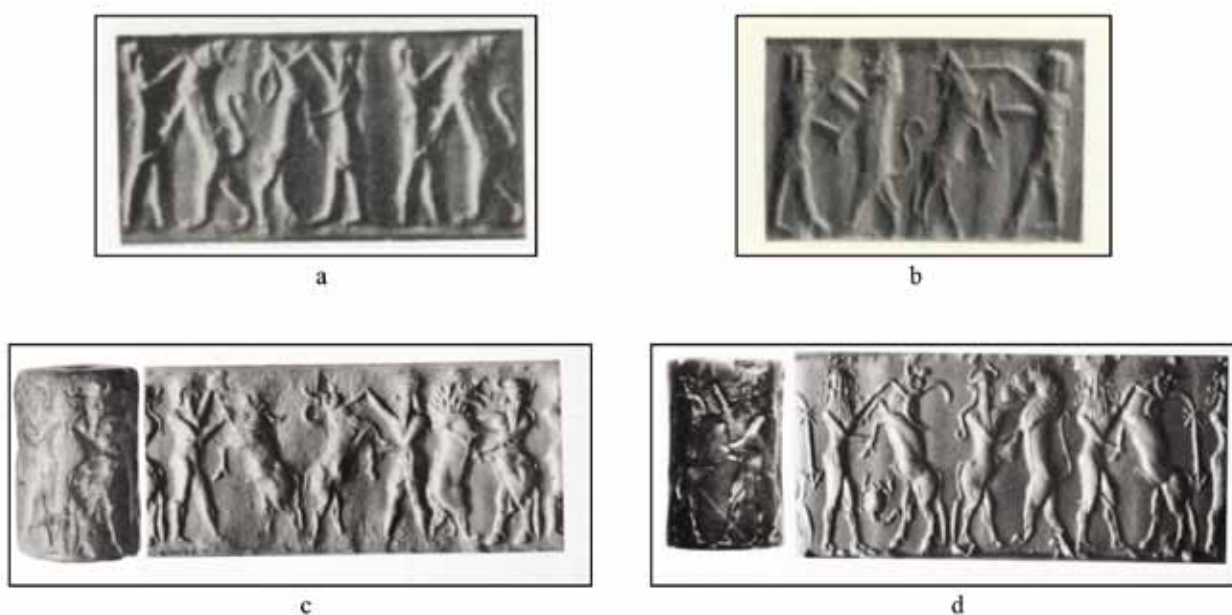


Fig. 8 - Examples of non-inscribed “contest scene cylinder seals” – comparative plate.

- 8.a: cylinder seal from Tello, two pairs of contestants (abb. 267 taffel XXIII Boehmer 1965).
 8.b: cylinder seal from Kish, limestone, two pairs of contestants, Ashmolean Museum (fig. 309 pl. 25 Buchanan 1966).
 8.c: cylinder seal, two pairs of contestants, British Museum (fig. 19 pl. IV Collon 1982).
 8.d: cylinder seal, chalcedony, two pairs of contestants and scorpion, British Museum (fig. 33 pl. VI Collon 1982).

that the seal cutter abandoned the making of this failed seal that did not fit into the criteria of this prestigious type. Indeed, the ordered seal had to be perfect to satisfy the “sponsor”, otherwise the seal cutter could to abandon its making¹². It can also be corroborated by a reflexion of Frankfort who precises that only the best seals of this type have an inscribed panel¹³.

- Or it could be a re-used cylinder seal. The two lines could be understandable as the rest of the inner edge of the frame originally devoted to the inscription, a good parallel is possible with a seal without provenance (Fig. 3a). Frames situated in the upper part of the space are attested and if inscriptions between two “adversaries” are scarce (it uses to be situated between the two heroes), it is not unknown. We can mention an example of the Louvre, coming from Suse (Fig. 3b). Another example from Tello is also a good parallel since the inner edge of the frame is made with two parallel lines (Fig. 3c).

For Zettler, they are used only in an official context and never in a personal one, because it is the mark of affiliation of the owner to the power¹⁴. So we can imagine that if the owner of the seal wants to use it in a personal context or offers it as a gift to someone else, he needs to erase the inscription. Hence, it seems logical to find a secondary motif to fill the space originally devoted to the inscription.

CONCLUSION

Whatever the answer to the matter of its specific secondary motif, this seal is a new evidence of the direct relations between the Akkadian imperial system and the Qara Dagħ area in both administrative and economic fields, since the “two pair contest scene” attests an imperial administration controlled by the court¹⁵. However, it also demonstrates the presence of local elite in the Qara Dagħ region (or perhaps of an officer at Logardan), who wants and needs prestige brands and adornments, which were appreciated and popular at this time.

12. Collon 1982 p. 22.

13. Frankfort 1955 p. 31.

14. Zettler 1977 p. 36.

15. Rakic 2003 p. 368.