

## An Old Assyrian Colony Period Cylinder Seal in the Wellesley College Library Special Collections

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One of the oldest items in the Wellesley College Library's Special Collections is an ancient Mesopotamian cylinder seal, dated to the beginning of the second millennium (ca. 1920-1850 BC). The seal very likely belonged to an Assyrian merchant engaged in overland trade with Anatolia.

### ***Background***

Ancient Mesopotamia, the fertile plain bounded by the rivers Euphrates and Tigris, has a long history that spans close to four millennia. During this period a succession of city-states, kingdoms and empires arose, flourished and collapsed. The one thing that remained constant and provided cultural continuity was the use of the *cuneiform* script, the distinctive wedge-shaped writing incised onto clay tablets by means of a reed stylus. Cuneiform was developed to write the Sumerian language and adapted for Akkadian, the language of the Semitic inhabitants of Mesopotamia.

The impetus for the invention of writing was the need to record complex economic activities. The earliest clay tablets were inventory lists and records of the transfer of commodities. Throughout Mesopotamian history the use of cuneiform writing to record economic and legal transactions went hand in hand with methods of sealing to confer ownership,

authority and authenticity to documents. The earliest seals were stamp seals. These were made of clay or stone and incised with the picture of an animal or divine symbol. They were pressed into wet clay or wax to seal jars or the doors of storage rooms, but were not generally used on written documents.

### *Cylinder Seals*

More suited to the sealing of clay tablets was the later *cylinder seal*. These are small cylindrical objects carved with images and inscriptions. The cylinder was rolled against the surface of the tablet, and produced a continuous impression of decorative or narrative scenes. Such a design is called a *seal impression*. Since both seals and seal impressions on clay tablets survive in great numbers, there is a specialized area of study within Art History, called *glyptic studies*, devoted to their analysis. In addition, Assyriologists (experts in reading cuneiform texts), also have an interest in seals. They provide valuable information regarding business and legal practices, contributing to our knowledge of Mesopotamian culture.

Many cylinder seals were carved from relatively soft materials such as bone, shell and limestone. More desirable seals, however, were made from such semi-precious stones as marble, calcite, serpentine and hematite, or from rare colored stones like lapis lazuli, carnelian, alabaster or obsidian.

Such seals were conspicuously displayed and closely associated with their owner. In most cases the cylinder was drilled through the center so that it could be worn on a cord as a pendant or suspended from a pin as part of a brooch.

### ***Making the Seal Impression***

While teaching a course in the Religion Department at Wellesley College entitled, *Myth and Magic in the Ancient Near East*, I learned that the Library's Special Collections owned several clay tablets and a cylinder seal. The cylinder seal was of particular interest since there was no indication that it had previously been studied

On March 26, 2002 I came to Special Collections to make an impression of the Wellesley cylinder seal. I was pleasantly surprised at the sense of anticipation on the part of the library staff. It was exciting to unveil an image that may not have been seen for thousands of years!

The Wellesley seal is made of a gray-black stone called hematite (iron oxide) and is very small (17mm. X 1mm.). This makes it difficult to determine the designs and impossible to fully appreciate its esthetics. The first step, therefore, was to make an impression in clay.<sup>1</sup> This process is

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Ulla Kasten of the Yale Babylonian Collection for demonstrating this technique to me.

carried out much as it would have been done in antiquity with a few concessions to modern gadgetry. Equipped with rolling pin and modeling clay, I rolled the clay into a long flat strip with a smooth surface. Then, using my fingers, I pushed the cylinder seal along the surface of the clay making at least two repetitions. I made several impressions in the clay applying different amounts of pressure. Each successive attempt revealed a more detailed image.

I was not able to date the seal immediately. Such indicators as material, size, shape, techniques of workmanship, style and iconography are factors in making an assessment. I needed to study the seal impression at length, and compare the design with others in books and catalogs. I also wanted to consult with others more expert than myself in the field of glyptic art.<sup>2</sup>

### *Old Assyrian Colonies in Anatolia*

I soon discovered that the style and iconography of the Wellesley cylinder seal is consistent with seals of the Old Assyrian Colony period (1920-1850 BC). This is a unique and fascinating chapter in Mesopotamian

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<sup>2</sup> Suzanne Herbordt of the University of Leipzig was most helpful in directing me to the appropriate sources for the study of Anatolian and Old Assyrian seals.

history. Assyrian traders<sup>3</sup> from the city of Assur on the Tigris River (modern-day Qalat Shergat) were engaged in overland trade with a network of colonies in central Anatolia. Many of the details of this trade are still unclear, but its general pattern can be reconstructed. The Assyrians acquired tin from the mountains of Afghanistan to the east and fine textiles from Babylonia in the south. These items were assembled in Assur and loaded onto donkey caravans traveling overland to the colonies in Anatolia, where they were exchanged for silver and other local products. There is evidence that the Anatolians used the tin to alloy with copper to make bronze.

We would know almost nothing about this extensive trading network were it not for thousands of clay tablets found at the site of Kultepe, ancient Kanesh, located north of Kayseri in the region of eastern Turkey known as Cappadocia. Excavations have uncovered the ancient *karum*, or trading area, directly below the citadel of the local ruler. Here the Assyrian traders lived and conducted business. The trade appears to have been mutually beneficial and relations between native Anatolians and Assyrians were amicable. Clay tablets found in the living quarters of the traders record their business practices, especially loan and partnership agreements, legal and business contracts with the local population, and letters to and from family

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<sup>3</sup> Assyria is the northern portion of Mesopotamia and is roughly equivalent to the Kurdish areas of modern

members back home in Assur. Many tablets were enclosed in clay envelopes and sealed with cylinder seals. Studies of these seal impressions have enabled scholars to develop a typology of native Anatolian and Old Assyrian seal types based on distinctive stylistic and iconographical features.

Prior to the arrival of the Assyrian traders there is no evidence that the Anatolian population wrote in cuneiform script or manufactured cylinder seals. This changes, however, in the Old Assyrian Colony period when "an indigenous craft of cylinder seal carving" emerges.<sup>4</sup> Although the cylinder seal is new, the art it utilizes is already highly developed. It includes native imagery as well as Mesopotamian motifs. The composition of the Anatolian seal designs is complex with a dizzying array of figures, symbols and filling motifs. Side by side the Anatolian style is the style adopted by the Assyrian traders. This Old Assyrian style is more static and restrained than the native Anatolian. It utilizes traditional Mesopotamian iconography, but also incorporates Anatolian elements. Seals belonging to the Assyrian traders were probably carved in Assyria, which may account for the differences in the two styles. The Wellesley cylinder seal is of the Old Assyrian type.

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Iraq. The southern portion of Mesopotamia is known as Babylonia.

<sup>4</sup> Nancy Leinwand, "Regional Characteristics in the Styles and Iconography of the Seal Impressions of Level II at Kultepe," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society*, vol. 21 (1992), 142. Much of my analysis of the Wellesley cylinder seal is based on the research she presents in this article.

### *Description of the Wellesley Cylinder Seal - Style and Iconography*

The figural and symbolic elements on the seal have a flat, static appearance: there is little movement. The figures are square and boxy and there is no attempt to model the figures. Instead, details are indicated by hatch marks: for instance, hands look like forks. The composition is clean and uncluttered with each element of the design occupying its own space and there is no inscription.<sup>5</sup>

The images on the seal form a continuous frieze, which is read from left to right. The first part of the seal depicts a sequence of three figures in profile. The first two figures face right and the third, seated figure, faces left. This is known as an *introduction* or *presentation scene*. The iconography derives from southern Mesopotamia and was fully developed in the preceding Ur III (ca. 2112-2004 BC) period. The first figure is a human suppliant or petitioner. He raises his hands in the traditional gesture of prayer. He wears a rounded cap or turban. The fringe on the front of his garment is indicated with hatching. This figure is believed by some scholars to represent the owner of the seal. The next figure is a deity, possibly the suppliant's protective or personal goddess, who serves as intercessor.<sup>6</sup> The horned crown or helmet and the flounced garment are well-established

attributes of divinity. This deity also raises her hands in supplication.

Between the intermediary deity and the next figure there is a star disc inside a crescent moon. Although this symbol appears frequently in presentation scenes, it is difficult to interpret. The crescent is the symbol of the moon god Sin and the star disc is the symbol of the goddess Ishtar (the Venus "star"). Since there is no explicit reference to either of these deities elsewhere on the seal, I suspect that this imagery serves to locate the scene in the divine or celestial realm.

Two types of presentation scene appear on seals: presentation to a god and presentation to a ruler. In the first type a human suppliant is introduced by an intercessory deity to an important major deity. The Wellesley cylinder is of the second type. A human suppliant is introduced to a ruler wearing a rounded cap or turban.<sup>7</sup> In his hand he holds a cup, perhaps to receive a libation. The scene reflects the persistence of iconography from the preceding Akkadian and Ur III periods, in which kings were deified and had their own cults. There is no indication that the Assyrians considered their rulers divine, nor was it an Anatolian belief. The use of this imagery can be attributed more to the persistence of decorative motifs than to ideology.

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<sup>5</sup> Although many seals are inscribed with the owner's name, this was not essential. Most seals are uninscribed; apparently the seal's unique design was sufficient to indicate ownership.

<sup>6</sup> The seal is damaged here and the figure partially obscured.

<sup>7</sup> He has neither the horned headdress nor the flounced garment.

The space directly behind the ruler is divided into two registers, each containing the image of an animal. The top register depicts a bull. It is shown in profile except for the horns, which are in frontal position. Perched on its back is a bird, also in profile. It would be easy to interpret this as a scene from nature, but we know from other Anatolian art that this is a god in the shape of a bull.<sup>8</sup> Such a god can reliably be identified with the weather or storm gods worshipped in Anatolia from earliest times.

These weather gods were an important component of Near Eastern pantheons, especially in northern areas where water for agriculture was dependent on adequate rainfall. Native Anatolian style cylinder seals depict the weather god in anthropomorphic form standing on the back of a bull, holding a lightning bolt. Some Old Assyrian seals also display this iconography but the bull alone is also common. On the Wellesley cylinder seal, the bull supports a triangular shape and the bird is atop this. This is one of the more perplexing features of the seal, and scholars are unsure of its interpretation.<sup>9</sup> The bird may represent some attribute of the weather god, or possibly indicate his abode in the sky.

Underneath the bull in the lower register is a figure often described as a lion-dragon. This beast is shown in profile with an elongated neck and

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<sup>8</sup> Nancy Leinwand, *A Study of Anatolian Weathergods of the Old Assyrian Colony Period*, (Ph.D

gaping mouth. The carving is crude, but conveys a sense of ferocity. In Mesopotamia the lion-dragon is a mythological, binary animal, combining features of a lion and a bird of prey and is often associated with Adad, the storm god. Adad is often depicted stepping up onto the back of the beast in a triumphant pose. On the Old Assyrian seals, however, only a remnant of this iconography remains. The lion on the Wellesley cylinder seal shows little, if any, bird characteristics, and the striding god is missing. The position of the lion-dragon underneath the bullgod/weather god may be an abstraction of this iconography. This again demonstrates the Old Assyrian tendency to reduce and simplify traditional Anatolian and Mesopotamian motifs.

The final figure on the seal is a vertical, curved serpent with its head at the top of the impression. When the design is repeated, the serpent serves to "frame" the scene on each side.

It is tempting to interpret the scene as a unity, but there is no consensus among scholars of how, or if, the various elements work together. B. Teissier cautions that there is "no ironclad interpretation of the various scenes represented on the seals and identification of the various figures are

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dissertation, Bryn Mawr College, 1984), p. 90.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

often not possible."<sup>10</sup> However, there is enough consistency in Old Assyrian iconography to suggest that the seal cutters chose designs from a standard repertoire of Anatolian and Mesopotamian motifs. The Assyrians no doubt chose to represent their trading activities and their presence in the colonies on their seals by incorporating emblematic icons of local identification.<sup>11</sup>

The cylinder seal is an important artifact of Mesopotamian Civilization and "a hallmark of Mesopotamian influence wherever that influence spread."<sup>12</sup> The Wellesley cylinder seal attests to the importance of cuneiform writing and the sealing of clay tablets for the history of business, commerce and legal affairs. It also illuminates a period in Mesopotamian history when two peoples, Anatolian and Assyrian, came together as trading partners, not only to exchange goods, but also to share their artistic and cultural heritage.

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<sup>10</sup> Beatrice Teissier, *Ancient Near Eastern Cylinder Seals from the Marcopoli Collection*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), *Introduction*, XXVii.

<sup>11</sup> Familiar examples of this phenomenon include the depiction of camels on Roman coins minted in the Eastern provinces and the depiction of elephants on the seal of the British East Indian Trading Company.

<sup>12</sup> William Hallo, *Introduction to Briggs Buchanan, Early Near Eastern Seals in the Yale Babylonian Collection*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), Xiii.

***Addendum: How were seals used? Legal aspects***

Seals were used primarily on business or legal documents and it is therefore tempting to liken them to modern signatures. However, there are important differences. In modern practice, the act of signing and exchanging copies of a written contract constitutes a legal act and makes the agreement binding. In ancient Mesopotamia, however, the tablet was a written account in the past tense of a transaction or decision made verbally, accompanied by oaths and symbolic acts. As such, the tablet functioned as a piece of evidence that could be summoned in the event the contract was challenged. The seal impressions recorded on the tablet attested to the presence of the parties and their witnesses at the transaction. To further assure its authenticity, the tablet was wrapped in a *clay envelope*. A summary of the transaction would then be written on the envelope and the seals would be re-inscribed. If a dispute arose between the parties to an agreement, the witnesses could be summoned and the tablet would be presented to the judge as evidence. In the event the tablet was brought to court without its envelope, there would be strong suspicion that the tablet had been altered and it would be discredited as evidence.