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*A Third Millennium B.C. Cylinder Seal
from Tell Arbid*

From five years of research by a joint Syrian-Polish archaeological team, at Tell Arbid in northeastern Syria, there comes an extensive collection of cylinder seals and their sealings, dated to the third millennium B.C. One of the most interesting findings in this collection is a cylinder seal, discovered in the fall of 2000, within the sector “SS” situated at the top of the tell, in the northeastern corner of the dig. This seal was found within an accumulation of several layers of ashes and clay, belonging to a vast refuse heap, which covers whole eastern part of the tell’s summit and comprises materials ranging in time from the end of the third to the middle of the second millennium B.C.¹ It is difficult, therefore, to speak of an unequivocal stratigraphical context. Nevertheless, the close proximity of the so-called “public building”, whose later phases are dated to the Early Dynastic III period, allows us to place this artifact to the time when the summit of the Tell Arbid citadel was capped with this monumental structure.

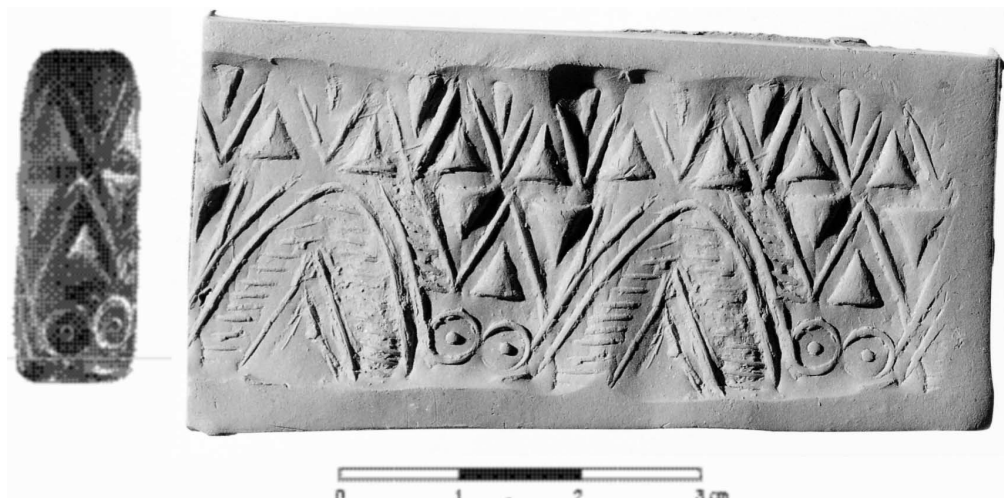
Made of dark, shiny stone, the cylinder is 2.9 cm high, and its maximum diameter is 1 cm. (Fig. 1 a–b). The decoration covering its surface has a typically geometric character with motifs drawn from the style characteristic to the Jemdet Nasr period. The decoration is composed in two registers, of which the upper, narrower one, is filled with deeply excised triangles pointing upwards. The space between them is filled with linear V-shaped motifs, on the inside of which there are tear shapes. The main element of the lower decorative band is an arched arcade, whose arms are covered with horizontal hatched lines. The internal surface of the arcade is formed from a double, straight, tall triangle. At the base of the right arm there are two regular circled dots, over which there are three also deeply etched triangles, framed with motifs in the shape of the letter “V”. Between the arm of the hatched arcade and the triangles, there is a motif of a hatched vertical band.

Such a combination of elements, well known from the early Mesopotamian glyptics allows the classification of this artifact as being of the so-called “fired steatite style”, sometimes also called the “glazed steatite style”. Here, the divergence in terminology is not solely based on the treatment of the cylinder’s surface with one process or the other. It is primarily based on a differing concept of the origin and territorial distribution of this type of seals.² Narrow and tall seals, most often carved in soft stone such as chlorite or steatite, fire hardened and sometimes buffed to a shine also bear the name of “Piedmont seals”.³ This name stems from the region of Zagros foothills, where this type of seals appeared the earliest, and thence spread to large portions of the Middle East, from southern Mesopotamia

¹ See reports from Tell Arbid in: *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean*, since 1997.

² See H. PITTMAN, *The Glazed Steatite Glyptics Style*, Berlin 1994 [= *Glazed Steatite*], *passim*; D.M. MATTHEWS, *The Early Glyptic of Tell Brak*, Freiburg 1997 [= *Tell Brak*], pp. 77–84.

³ H. FRANKFORT, *Cylinder Seals*, London 1939, *passim*; ID., *Stratified Cylinder Seals from the Diyala Region*, Chicago 1955 [= *Stratified Cylinder Seals*], *passim*; H. BUCHANAN, *Catalogue of Ancient Near Eastern Seals in the Ashmolean Museum I*, Oxford 1966 [= *Catalogue*], *passim*; D. COLLON, *First Impressions. Cylinder Seals in the Ancient Near East*, London 1987 [= *First Impressions*], *passim*.



1. a) Cylinder seal from the “SS” area on Tell Arbid. (Phot. J. Wierzbicki) and b) its impression. (Phot. Z. Doliński).

to southern Anatolia.⁴ It seems, however, that the most accurate terminology has been proposed by Donald Matthews, according to which the cylinder from Tell Arbid represents the “fired steatite style”.⁵ Because the decoration of this seal connects in an unusual way all of the indicative decorative elements of the “fired steatite style”, it is very difficult to put it into one of the subgroups identified by Holly Pittman and Donald Matthews. In spite of this, though, accounting for the character of the most important decorative element, it should be put in the “hatched arcade group”.⁶ Because of the essentially eclectic character of its decoration, the Arbid cylinder is reminiscent of cylinders found in Susa, Diyala Valley region, northern Mesopotamia, sporadically in the region of Khabour, and even in Palestine.⁷

It should be made clear that our artifact has no analogue among published materials. Thus, a more precise dating of this artifact entails many difficulties. Accounting for the quality of manufacture, and the kind of decoration, the blossoming of this style in the

⁴ Some scholars describe such seals’ style also as “Ninevite S” – cf. COLLON, *First Impressions*, p. 23; Matthews, despite not using this term directly, alludes to the Niniveh 5 culture as a certain chronological indicator – cf. MATTHEWS, *Tell Brak*, pp. 35 and 77–79.

⁵ MATTHEWS, *Tell Brak*, pp. 79–81.

⁶ Pittman lists six basic elements of decoration, defining this subgroup: bands, triangles, rhomboids, arcades, waves and circles. She also draws attention to the intensity of hatching of particular of motifs – cf. PITTMAN, *Glazed Steatite*, pp. 142 and 155, Figs. 9 and 10a.

⁷ Cf. BUCHANAN, *Catalogue*, Pl. 6: 74, 75; Pl. 47: 735, 736a, b; COLLON, *First Impressions*, p. 21, Nos. 41, 42; FRANKFORT, *Stratified Cylinder Seals*, Pl. 12: 100, 101, 102, Pl. 14: 199, 130, Pl. 44: 472; MATTHEWS, *Tell Brak*, Pl. XLIII: 52, 54, 58, 59, Pl. LV: 404; B. TEISSIER, *Cylinder Seals from the Marcopoli Collection*, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1984, cat. Nos. 23, 42 and 51.

glyptics of Mesopotamia occurred in the Early Dynastic I period. Our finding should also be dated similarly. However, the finding spot of our object alone, and the lack of any clear remains of the Early Dynastic I period in this part of Tell Arbid do not support this date. I suppose that in our case the end of the Early Dynastic II is more accurate, and it does not conflict with the chronological frames set out by the “fired steatite style”. Among known seals of this style, the cylinder from Tell Arbid draws attention to the remarkable standard of engraving, and elegance of its manufacture, which do not have comparables in published material, which comprises also numerous poorly preserved sealings on *bullae*. It is plausible that the cylinder served an Tell Arbid resident of higher than average social status.