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*Four Assyrian Cylinder Seals
from Polish Excavations in Northern Iraq*

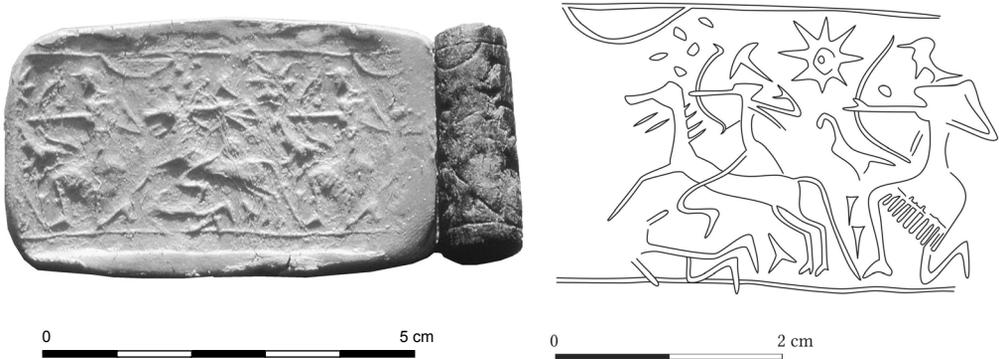
The site of Tell Rijim in the valley of the Tigris river in northern Iraq was investigated by archaeologists from the Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology (University of Warsaw) in the course of three seasons of fieldwork carried out between the spring of 1984 and December 1985 as part of an international archaeological salvage project mounted in connection with the building of a dam on the Tigris in the region of the city of Eski Mosul.¹ It was a relatively small site (just over 130m in diameter) occupying the top of a small promontory on the western riverbank. Occupational accumulations were about 2m thick and represented remains from five different cultural phases, from the fourth millennium BC through Sassanian times, apparently separated by long periods of abandonment and intensive erosion. For two phases, Ninevite 5 culture and Sassanian, there are cemetery remains, for the other three, Uruk, Khabur ware and Neo-Assyrian, settlements. The Neo-Assyrian occupation was represented by two layers of remains, both of which proved to be severely eroded. Some sherds suggest that the lower one can be dated to the very beginning of the Neo-Assyrian period, but it needs confirmation by further analyses. Virtually nothing but the lowest courses of stone walls or rather foundations of walls had been preserved, along with fragments of associated stone courtyard pavements and a number of domestic installations. These remains were either on the ground surface or just below it. The general impression of the architecture was that it represented a farmstead with large residential building.

Artifacts from the Neo-Assyrian phase at Tell Rijim included four cylinder seals, two (including the one damaged piece, preserved as only half a cylinder) from the surface and the other two from severely disturbed sub-surface layers either just above or on the upper courtyard pavement. Considering the stratigraphic sequence for the site as a whole, one need not doubt in the clear stratigraphic context of these finds.

No. 1. Inv. No. Ri 268; surface find. Seal in the linear style; greenish steatite with spots of lighter coloring, height 3.14cm, diameter 1.1cm at mid-height, diameter at top almost two millimeters less; extensive damage to the surface of the seal and its top end, probably due to long exposure to the elements on the surface of the site. Corroded remains of a presumed mounting shaft of bronze observed in the perforation. Diameter of the pierced opening approximately 2mm at the bottom end of the cylinder, reaching almost 3mm at the top end (**Fig. 1**). Decoration: kneeling archer to left aiming at mounted rider before him, also turned to left. Headless body of a victim depicted prone under the horse's hooves. Silhouette of a bird between the archers, six-armed star above it and two cuneiform signs, one above the other, below it. Five dots and a crescent by the top edge, just in front of the rider. Simple border margin at top and bottom. Part of the body of the lying victim overlapping the lower margin. Images of mounted archers are fairly rare in Assyrian glyptic art, especially compared to the known number of chariot representations. Moreover, in those cases when they are depicted, the mounted archers are turned back to shoot at a target

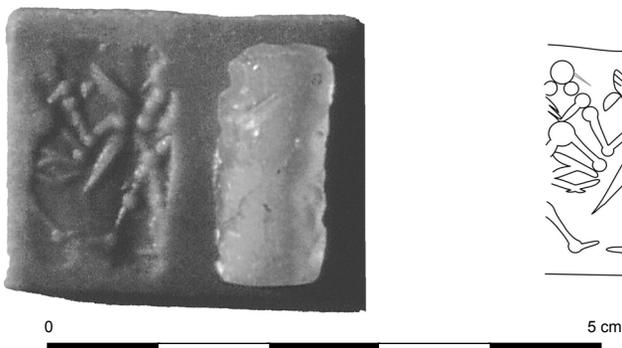
¹ P. BIELIŃSKI, Preliminary Report on the Third Season of Polish Excavations on Tell Rijim, [*in:*] *Researches on the Antiquities of Saddam Dam Basin Salvage and other Researches*, Baghdad 1987 [= Preliminary Report], pp. 24–32; *Id.*, Tall Raffan and Tall Rigm. Two seasons of Polish Excavations 1984–85, *AOF* 34, 1987, pp. 206–208.

behind them rather than forward as on the seal from Tell Rijim.² A juxtaposition of two archers, mounted and kneeling, who are moreover apparently not enemies, is extremely rare. The composition suggests a battle scene with the sole enemy being the dead body below the horse's hooves.



1. Seal No. Ri 268 and its impression (Phot. A. Reiche; Drawing: M. Momot and M. Puzskarski).

No. 2. Inv. No. Ri 1928; surface find. Seal in the Neo-Assyrian Late Drill Style; whitish rock crystal, height 1.85cm, approximate diameter 0.9cm; half of a seal broken along the long axis of the cylinder, revealing the perforation, which was drilled in from the two ends; opening diameter exceeding 1mm at the cylinder ends, less than 1mm at mid-length (**Fig. 2**). Decoration: four-winged genius shown to left, turned toward another figure, too fragmentary for identification. A rhombus between the figures. A reconstruction of the whole scene is impossible, but it is likely that the composition depicted a genius battling some monster.³



2. Seal No. Ri 1928 and its impression (Phot. F.M. Stępiński, Drawing: M. Momot).

² Cf. C. DOUMET, *Sceaux et cylindres orientaux: la collection Chiha*, Fribourg 1992, No. 136; B. TEISSIER, *Ancient Near Eastern Cylinder Seals in the Marcopoli Collection*, Berkeley, Los Angeles-London 1984 [= Marcopoli Collection], No. 233; E. PORADA, *Corpus of Near Eastern Seals in North American Collections I. The Pierpont Morgan Library*, Washington 1948 [= Corpus], No. 624.

³ TEISSIER, *Marcopoli Collection*, Nos 258 and 259.

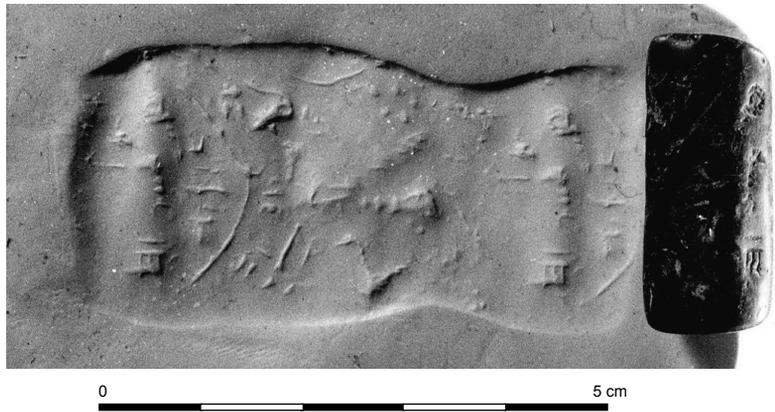


3. Seal No. Ri 6785A and its impression
(Phot. A. Reiche, Drawing: M. Momot).

No. 3. Inv. No. Ri 6785A; sub-surface layer on a stone pavement linked to Assyrian architecture in trench 'G'. Seal decorated in the linear style, greenish serpentine, bronze pin with head approximately 2mm in diameter inserted into the perforation with the pointed end pointing towards top of the decoration. Height 3.8cm, diameter 1.4cm; well preserved except for some minor damage by the top edge (**Fig. 3**). Decoration: seated goddess (most probably Ishtar) on a throne marked with astral signs, the head in a polos, a three-legged table in front of her holding a bird offering and behind it a figure of a worshipper in richly decorated robes, the head lost in the damaged part of the cylinder. Symbol of Nabu behind the human figure. A crescent above the figure of the goddess, followed by a seven-armed star and the Pleiades in the upper part of the composition. Two simple cuneiform signs above the body of the bird on the table. Scene common on Assyrian seals, which but for the most part in the Early Drilled Style, not linear as in the case of the Rijim seal.⁴ The is noteworthy that the three-legged offering table shown between the goddess and the worshipper is an element characteristic for early linear style banquet scenes.⁵

⁴ This type of scene is noted on seals from, among others, the British Museum: D. COLLON, *Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum, Cylinder Seals V*, London 2001 [= *Cylinder Seals V*], Nos 135–138, 141 and 172, the Newell collection: von der H.H. OSTEN, *Ancient Oriental Seals in the Collection of Mr. Edward T. Newell*, Chicago 1934, No. 437, and the collection of the Pierpont Morgan Library: PORADA, *Corpus*, Nos 694 and 699.

⁵ COLLON, *Cylinder Seals V*, p. 66.



4. Seal No. Ri 4472A and its impression (Phot. A. Reiche).

We may then assume that we have deal here or with one of the oldest examples of this kind of scene or that outside larger urban centers the seal cutters where executing such type of decoration still using traditional technique.

No. 4. Inv. No. Ri 4472A; stone pavement of Assyrian date in trench 'F'. Seal with linear decoration, steatite, height 2.6cm, diameter 1.2cm; surface heavily worn, minor losses at top and bottom ends on the same side of the cylinder, also due probably to excessive wear (**Fig. 4**). Decoration: The interpretation of the composition is extremely tentative due to heavy wear of the cylinder surface, hence the absence of an accompanying drawing, which could have been biased. A winged bull to left in the center of the scene, the front legs with hooves distinct, the rump and tail less evident. Crescent and the Pleiades above the back of the animal, below it a silhouetted bird much like a goose, also to left. Small elements scattered in front of the bull resembling cuneiform signs. Human figure in front of the bull, separated by an arched object, which was first taken to be a large bow. Initially, the figure was interpreted as aiming the bow at the bull, which would have allowed the composition to be assigned to a fairly common category of representations found on Assyrian seals of the linear style.⁶ Upon more minute analysis, the figure proved to be turned to the left, not facing the bull but rather leading it, and in any case the bow appeared much too big in comparison to other bows depicted in Assyrian iconography. The hand gesture of the figure is obscure due to the state of preservation of the seal surface. All things considered, I am presently inclined to interpret the representation as a winged bull followed by a human figure that is turned toward him (possibly a priest); the arched object between them could be a floral element, preserving only the trunk or stem, possibly symbolizing a sacred tree.⁷ It would thus be a fairly rare example of a composition depicting a winged bull with a priest in a scene of a peaceful nature.

⁶ BIELIŃSKI, Preliminary Report, p. 31.

⁷ An example of what this tree could have looked like can be seen in COLLON, *Cylinder Seals V*, Nos 27 and 34.

The four cylinder seals from Tell Rijim represent a random sample of Assyrian glyptic art coming from a small settlement context in northern Assyria. The winged-bull-and-‘priest’ seal appears to be the oldest of the lot (possibly end of the ninth or beginning of the eighth century BC), while the seal decorated in the drill style is apparently the youngest (beginning of the seventh century BC); the other two seals should be located somewhere in the middle of this chronological sequence. The rock crystal seal would have been made in some larger urban center and the same can be said of the seal bearing a scene of offerings to the goddess Ishtar. On the other hand, the seal with the mounted archer is provincial to the core in terms of the glyptic art style. The set of seals sits comfortably in the eighth century BC as far as their dating is concerned, only the rock crystal seal being possibly of slightly younger date.

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