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CXVI

CORRELATES OF COMPLEXITY

ESSAYS IN ARCHAEOLOGY AND ASSYRIOLOGY
DEDICATED TO DIEDERIK J.W. MEIJER
IN HONOUR OF HIS 65TH BIRTHDAY



Diederik J.W. Meijer at work in Iraq. Photograph by Victor Klinkenberg.

Cover: Tell Hammam et-Turkman (Syria) seen from the south. Photograph by Ben Claasz Coockson.

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Essays in Archaeology and Assyriology
Dedicated to Diederik J.W. Meijer
in Honour of his 65th Birthday

edited by

Bleda S. Düring, Arne Wossink, and Peter M.M.G. Akkermans



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Honour of his 65th Birthday / edited by Bleda S. Düring, Arne Wossink, and Peter M.M.G. Akkermans

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Table of Contents

Foreword	vii
<i>Bleda S. Düring, Arne Wossink, and Peter M.M.G. Akkermans</i>	
Publications by Diederik J.W. Meijer	ix
<i>Compiled by Bleda S. Düring and Arne Wossink</i>	
1. Foundation or <i>Rendezvous</i> ? Constructing Platforms in Late Neolithic Syria	1
<i>Peter M.M.G. Akkermans, Merel Brüning and Akemi Kaneda</i>	
2. Agricultural Revolutions	15
<i>John Binliff</i>	
3. The Metsamor Seal	27
<i>Dominique Collon</i>	
4. ‘Demuddification’	39
<i>Ben Claasz Coockson</i>	
5. The Artist as an Archaeologist: The Archaeologist as an Artist	47
<i>Theo De Feyter</i>	
6. The Exchange of Sacrificial Gifts Among Old Assyrian Merchants	59
<i>Jan Gerrit Dercksen</i>	
7. Fortifications and Fabrications: Reassessing the Emergence of Fortifications in Prehistoric Asia Minor	69
<i>Bleda S. Düring</i>	
8. An Unusual Middle Bronze Age Seal from Syria	87
<i>Jesper Eidem</i>	
9. The Archaeological Park Emar-Balis	97
<i>Uwe and Brigitte Finkbeiner</i>	
10. Near Eastern Archaeology and the Public in the 17 th to Early 20 th Century in the Netherlands	105
<i>Gerrit van der Kooij</i>	
11. Urbanism in the Assyrian Homeland	143
<i>Hartmut Kühne</i>	

12. Notes d'Archéologie Levantine XXIX. Prospection Archéologique au Nord de Qara (Qalamoun)	153
<i>Michel Al-Maqdissi et Eva Ishaq</i>	
13. The Gods and <i>Rapi'uma</i> of Yamkhad: An Interpretation of a Rare Old Syrian Cylinder Seal	161
<i>Paolo Matthiae</i>	
14. Late Chalcolithic 1-2: Tell Hammam et-Turkman and Tell Brak	177
<i>Joan Oates</i>	
15. Jebel el-Hamam: A New Site between Selenkahiye and Emar	187
<i>Ferhan Sakal</i>	
16. Some Remarks on RS 34.141: A Letter from the Urtēnu-Archive	193
<i>Wilfred H. van Soldt</i>	
17. Passing the Torch	201
<i>Folkert van Straten</i>	
18. Houses in the Ancient City of Assur	211
<i>Klaas R. Veenhof</i>	
19. Taking a Stab at Archaeological Thought on Ancient Near Eastern Economics	233
<i>David Warburton</i>	
20. Tribal Identities in Mesopotamia between 2500 and 1500 BC	261
<i>Arne Wossink</i>	

An Unusual Middle Bronze Age Seal from Syria¹

Jesper Eidem

Leiden, Netherlands Institute for the Near East

Abstract

In 2008-9 a joint Syrian-Danish team carried out preliminary investigations at the site of Qala'at Halwanji on the Sajour River in Northern Syria. In a destruction level dated to the MBA II period (ca. 18th century BC) a small group of burnt sealing fragments was found, representing four different cylinder seals, all of excellent quality. In this short article I present a provisional study of the most interesting of these seals, as a modest *cadeau* to my Leiden colleague and friend Diederik, a *connoisseur* of Syrian archaeology, the Middle Bronze Age, cylinder seals, and many other things.

Archaeological context

Qala'at Halwanji, first identified as an archaeological site in 2007 (Eidem 2008a),² is located on the south bank of the Sajour River ca. 15 km west of the Euphrates junction at Aushariye (Eidem 2008b). The site lies high on a limestone cliff, and appears as a roughly square, fortified enclosure with wide ramparts, on two sides broken by gullies which may represent ancient gates (*fig.* 8.1). The main level represents a brief Middle Bronze Age II occupation destroyed by fire.³ An identification of the site with ancient Dur-Shamshi-Adad - a fortress established by Shamshi-Adad I on the west bank of the Euphrates ca. 1786 BC, and lost to Jamhad ca. 1779 BC - is possible, but in any case remains to be verified by epigraphic finds.

In 2008 and 2009 a joint Syrian-Danish team conducted brief preliminary investigations at Qala'at Halwanji (Eidem 2010; in press a; in press b). This work was generously sponsored by the Augustinus Foundation (Copenhagen) and the Danish Cultural Institute in Damascus. The author was Danish co-director and was assisted from the Syrian side by Messrs A. Nasser (2008) and M. Fakhru (2009).

The work included surveying and mapping of the site, a systematic surface collection, and a series of small sondages. While much of the site is heavily eroded,

¹ I am grateful to the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums of the SAR for the support and cooperation which produced the objects presented here, and to all the participants in the fieldwork in Syria. The composite drawing of the seal image (*fig.* 8.3) from photos of the project is due to Dr. P. Del Vesco (NINO), who also produced the images of the site (*fig.* 8.1) from project data.

² Qala'at Halwanji should not be confused with *Tell* Halwanji, located on the north bank of the Sajour (Sanlaville ed. 1987: 74). Collections of Palaeolithic materials were made at sites designated 'H(alwanji) I-VI' (Copeland 2004), but apparently not at the site of the Qala'at itself, where early flints, however, are found in abundance on the eroded interior surfaces.

³ The MBA II level is reached immediately under the modern surface, and its foundations cut earlier, EBA IV structures. The surface survey has produced a few Roman coins and Islamic sherds, evidently traces of transient activity.

exceptionally well-preserved MBA remains are found in its south and southwestern portions. In sondages on high ground near the south edge of the site a nearly six metres wide wall was exposed, no doubt the main fortification wall. Inside this are small rooms with domestic installations, apparently terraced down the inner slope of the site. Provisionally we interpret these rooms as ‘barracks’ for the garrison of the fortress.

In the southwest corner of the site are ruins of a major building, which we interpret, also provisionally, as the ‘Governor’s Palace’, and the administrative centre for the fortress. Sondages in this area show massive walls preserved up to three metres high, and inventories of complete ceramic vessels and other objects *in situ*. Among the finds are burnt clay sealings made with some exceptionally fine cylinder seals. Design and style of these seals point to a workshop in Northwest Syria, and their high quality confirm the official nature of the building.

The sondages 2008-2009 produced sealings representing a total of four different seals. Three of the seal images can be nearly completely reconstructed while the fourth is fragmentary. The fragments presented here were found in 2008 in Sondage 1 (four by two metres), located on the floor of the earliest phase of a room with built-in ovens(?) similar to those found in Room 167 of the Mari Ville III palace (Parrot 1958: 24-6).⁴ The sealings were lying close to the right hand aperture seen on *fig.* 8.2, mixed with pieces of charcoal. The fragments studied here have marks on their reverse showing that they were attached to a reed package / bundle tied with a string (cf. Otto 2004: 115). Another fragment (QH.0508-2), sealed with a different seal, came off the rim of a small jar. It thus seems likely that the sealings had arrived with goods sent from elsewhere, and consequently that the original seals were not used by residents at the site.⁵

The seal

The two fragments (QH.0508-1a-b) possibly derive from the same sealing, but cannot be directly joined. The larger fragment measures 70 by 37 by 15 mm. The seal image can be almost completely reconstructed from the several rollings on the fragments. The seal had seven registers, each slightly convex on impressions, and hence was a rare heptagonal seal. The composite drawing (*fig.* 8.3) was made from photographs, and has not been checked

⁴ As can be seen on *fig.* 8.2 large storage vessels were embedded in the ‘oven’, unlike the empty installation in Room 167 of the Mari palace, and a similar installation recently excavated in room P of the eastern place at Mishrifeh / Qatna. Finds in the Qatna room would indicate a function as workshop for metal rather than a kitchen, which tends to support the reservation expressed by Margueron about the ‘kitchen’ function of Room 167 in the Mari palace (Morandi Bonacossi et al 2009: 70). No animal bones or other indications of cooking activity were found in Sondage 1. The installation was left *in situ* and back-filled, but as far as could be ascertained the apertures do not provide access to the interior of the embedded jars, and possibly they were used to light small fires to keep the jars and their contents warm. Further discussion of this question, however, is best deferred to a later occasion, when more of the room has been exposed.

⁵ The sealings from Qala’at Halwanji presumably followed shipments dispatched from somewhere in NW Syria / SE Anatolia. This unfortunately does not help an identification of the site: whether ancient Dur-Shamshi-Adad or not the site would have had, at least initially, some friendly contacts with agencies in Jamhad or other local kingdoms. For the recent proposal to identify Dur-Shamshi-Adad with Tell Qitar on the Euphrates (opposite Dur-Addu *alias*(?) Tell Bazi) see Otto (2009), and Ziegler (2009).

with the original objects now in the National Museum in Aleppo.⁶ This, and indeed the possibility of finding further fragments with the same seal at Qala'at Halwanji, mean that details may be subject to later revision.

These sealings certainly represent one of the finest cylinder seals known from this period in Syria. The carving, in extreme miniature, is exquisite, and the richness and variety of subject matter without parallel. The heptagonal shape is rare, but may be related to a few examples of octagonal seals from Alalah (Collon 1975: 86: 156, and 90: 163). A hexagonal seal with a slightly similar design is the younger(?) Chiha 281 (Doumet 1992: 137), which is divided in six vertical registers with several figures.

Evidently the multi-register design provides significantly more space for the seal-cutter, and in our case this space has been put to good use, almost as if the artist wanted to display all his repertoire on a single piece. One may simply marvel at the ability of the seal-cutter to produce so many details on a seal surface only some 3.5 by 2 cm large, and indeed the images are not easily discernible in detail to the naked eye, so that a quick glance at a sealed surface would have given a brocade-like impression.

The drawing and description of the seal image presupposes that the focus and centre of orientation for the image is the prominent deity in register four.

First register

- i) Standing kilted figure (left) stabbing kneeling girdled figure in chest with right hand while holding victim's right wrist with his left hand. Both figures are beardless.
- ii) Animal contest: lion (left) jumping bull from rear; turned 90° anti-clock-wise.
- iii) Contest scene: hero (left) fighting lion(?); turned 180°.

Second register

- i) Crossed male figures, naked and holding each other's ankles.
- ii) Animal contest: lion (left) jumping back of *cervus* with elaborate horns; turned 90° clock-wise.
- iii) Unclear scene only partially preserved, apparently involving two crossed animals.

Third register

- i) Three pairs of acrobats or wrestlers turning each other upside down; flanked right by single kneeling similar figure; all figures turned 90° anti-clock-wise.

Fourth register

- i) Winged deity with horned cap and layered inner and long outer garment facing left; rays / weapons emanating from shoulders; standing on snake-like animal; leash / chain held in right hand in front of body reaches mouth of animal; left arm bent before chest, right leg striding forward; behind small Lama goddess facing left.
- ii) Pair of lions back to back and crossed, facing left and right.

⁶ It should be noted, however, that the digital treatment of photos allowed magnification and identification of many details. The composite drawing was prepared with CAD software.

iii) Below nude female kneeling, holding right ankle (knee on ground) with left hand and right hand on upper right thigh (leg bent with foot near ground). Seems to interact with a second, similar(?) figure, but bottom of register unclear; turned 90° anti-clock-wise.

Fifth register

- i) Contest scene: bull-man (left) fighting lion.
- ii) *Lahmu* (right) holding lion(?) upside down; turned 180°.
- iii) *Lahmu* (left) holding *Lahmu*(?) upside down.

Sixth register

- i) King(?) (left) embracing nude female.
- ii) Animal contest: prancing gazelle (left) fighting prancing leopard or panther; turned 90° anti-clock-wise.
- iii) Animal contest: lion (left) and bull(?); turned 180°.

Seventh register

- i) Contest scene: kilted hero (left) slaying kilted monster-faced man, both double-girdled.
- ii) Below from bottom (turned 90° clock-wise) four archers, unbearded, wearing kilts, marching left holding bows in front of body - headed by lancer, similarly dressed, and holding spear upright in right hand and left arm along body, apparently holding knife / sword, in front bare-headed archer with arrow ready on bow - all apparently approaching contest pair.

The style and several individual elements place the seal firmly in the region of Northern Syria and Jamhad. The clearest parallels, e.g., to the athletes in the third register is found in Otto's group 4b ('Wasserwesen- und Flechtbandgruppe' (Otto 2000: nos. 333 and 332)), and the scene in the fifth register / iii likewise has a parallel here (Otto 2000: no. 334).

What may have been the central fourth register is crowned by a winged deity (see *fig. 8.4*), whose identity is not easily established. The wings and rays (weapons), as well as the crossed lions below the scene all point to identification with Ishtar, but the snake on which the figure stands is not known to be associated with Ishtar. Since a 'Syrian' deity is expected, it could be thought that we here have a representation of Ishhara (Prechel 1996), known to have a snake (Akk. *bashmum*) as symbol in an Old Babylonian text from Sippar (Herles 2006: 160). If so, it would be the first example of an anthropomorphic depiction of this goddess, in later times represented by the scorpion (*ibid*: 223-5). The importance of Ishhara at Ebla, and her special relationship with the royal house, and a number of cult centres in the North Syrian area, can be noted, (Pomponio, Xella 1997: 214-7), but it must be stressed that the identification can only be a tentative proposal.

Another important register is certainly the seventh, which seems of narrative content (see *fig. 8.5*: fourth register from right). The row of six armed men seems to approach the two fighting figures at the top. Their identity cannot be established with certainty, but a mythical tale of some sort certainly seems involved. The face and stance of the monster-faced figure being slayed has a very close parallel on another Syrian seal (Otto 2000: no. 321 = Seyrig 1963: no. 1; see *fig. 8.6*). One distinct possibility is that the scene depicts the slaying of Huwawa by Gilgamesh (cf. Lambert 1987). Dominique Collon has recently

collected the scenes with ‘giants’, and places the seal just referred to in her group four, where:

“Humbaba is held by the hair and pulled over so that his body is bent. This version ... is restricted to Syrian seals of the second quarter of the second millennium BC.” (Collon 2002: 39).

On this seal ‘Huwawa’ is being pulled by a figure with the divine headdress, and although the details of the slayer in our seventh register are not completely preserved, it may well be a similar figure. A small figure, also with the horned cap, between the two protagonists, is shooting arrows at Huwawa, clearly an ‘abbreviation’ of the row of archers on the Halwanji seal. This row of soldiers could represent the 50 companions from Uruk featured in the Sumerian account.⁷ On both seals Huwawa has already been hit by two arrows.

Pursuing the parallels between these two seals further it may be noted that a ‘Syrian Goddess’, though without a snake, is placed to the right of the contest pair (in Otto 2000: 321), and in the register below are two lions, seemingly congratulating each other on the capture of a gazelle trampled by their feet. To the left of the lions is a bull catching an athlete by the horns, a scene not found on the Halwanji seal, where, however, several scenes in the second, third, and fourth registers show acrobats or wrestlers, probably reflecting some kind of ritual festivity. One is reminded of the *huppû* ‘acrobat’, and *sha humāsīm* ‘wrestler’ known from Syrian texts of the Second Millennium BC. In the famous Ishtar Ritual from Middle Bronze Age Mari they perform during the proceedings (Ziegler 2007: 261).

Although some elements on these seals may be purely emblematic it seems very likely that they both depict scenes from a festival involving series of events, among them a kind of ‘games’, possibly involving both human and animal performers. Focus for the festival would seem to have been the goddess Ishhara, a ‘Syrian Goddess’ who on the Halwanji sealing perhaps for once steps out of her anonymity. How the ‘Huwawa’ scene enters the picture must remain speculation, but since it is argued that the Akkadian Huwawa narrative existed as an independent story which preceded the formation of the Gilgamesh epic (Fleming, Milstein 2010), it seems possible that it was inspired by a Syrian prototype, with perhaps differently named figures fighting it out in the cedar forest. Such a connection would not be surprising in view of the ‘western’ origin of the core plot of *Enuma Elish* (cf. Durand 1993). An ‘original’ story may thus have had, to us as yet dim, ties to Syrian royal ideology and the cult of Ishhara.

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⁷ The row of soldiers may clearly be related to the frequent motif of ‘marching men’, often, however, unarmed, on Syrian seals from the early to mid-second millennium BC (Otto 2000: 240).

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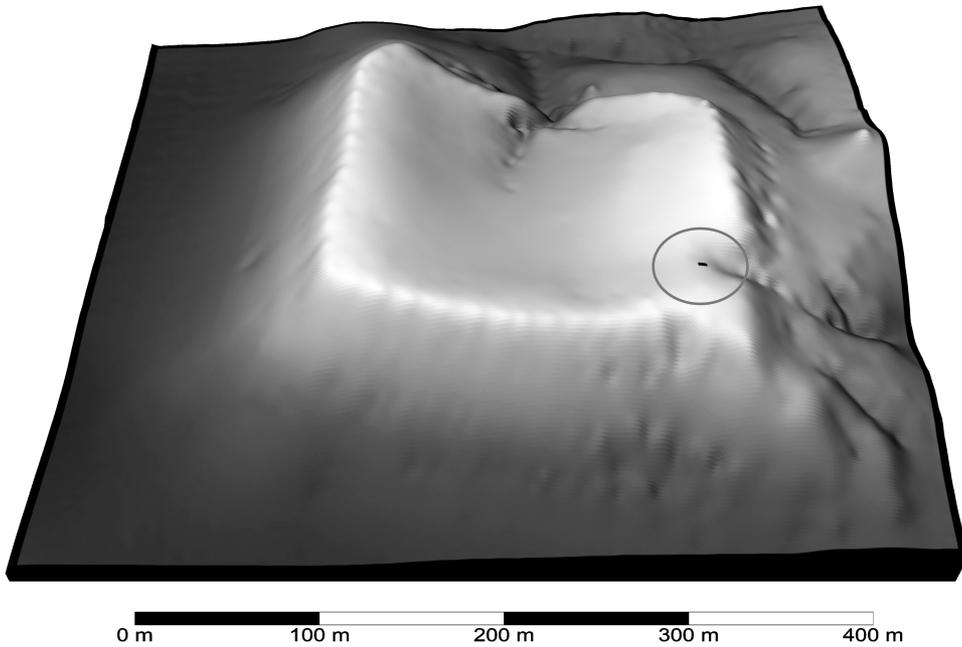


Fig. 8.1: 3D view of Qala'at Halwanji. Sondage 1 marked.



Fig. 8.2: Sondage 1.

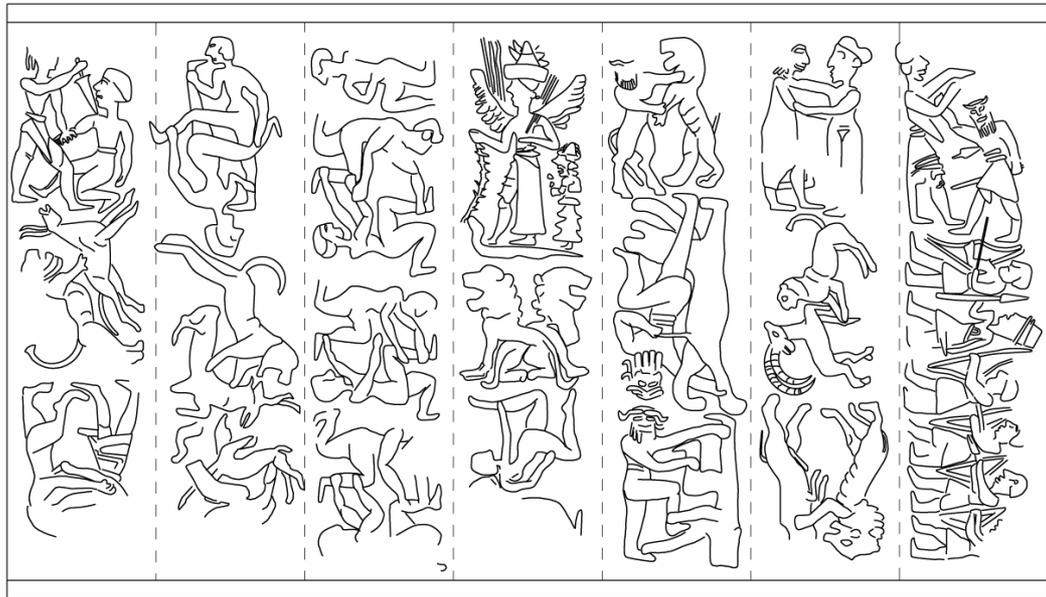


Fig. 8.3: Reconstructed seal image.



Fig. 8.4: Close-up of sealing QH.0508-1a.



Fig. 8.5: Close-up of sealing QH.0508-1a.



Fig. 8.6: Syrian seal (Otto 2000: no. 321; after Seyrig 1963: Pl. XXXI, 1).