



Figure 1. Seal image on QH.09-01.

Corks, broken jars, and the God of Wisdom.

A seal image from ancient Syria in context

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In the NINO/NIT Annual Report 2009 (pp. 3-10) an article described the first investigations at the site of Qala'at Halwanji in northern Syria 2008-9. In this issue a seal image is presented, found on clay corks excavated at the site in 2009.

Introduction

One day in the 18th century BC a shipment of jars arrived at a hilltop fortress on the Sajour river in present-day northern Syria. The jars were closed with corks made of unbaked clay, and across the corks were images, produced by a cylinder seal rolled upon the clay when still moist. This had been effected by an as yet unidentified individual, who was responsible for the shipment, and wanted to prevent any tampering with it until it reached its proper destination. This person was evidently an important figure – to judge from the quality of the seal used. Let us take a closer look at the image on the seal, as impressed on one of the corks (Fig. 1).

The central element is a boat with the god Haya (a Syrian form of the Sumerian Enki; see the article by A. Archi, text box p. 7), enthroned on a lion-footed chair on a platform. He is approached by his double-faced vizier (in Mesopotamia known as Isimud) leading a supplicant king by the hand. Behind the god is a naked figure punting the boat, which in both prow and stern is supplied with water gods joining as a stylized stream under the boat.

Mari

Famous ancient city on the Euphrates in Syria, excavated since the 1930'ies by French archaeologists. In the Middle Bronze Age palace, destroyed ca. 1760 BC, large royal archives of clay tablets (ca. 20.000) inscribed with text in cuneiform writing were found. These texts provide a sometimes very detailed historical panorama of the last ca. 30 years before the destruction.

Next to this scene is a number of animal contest scenes involving lions, bulls, and a stag. Horizontal borders of guilloche bands frame the seal image.

Although the outlines and details of the impression are somewhat blurred, it is clear that the original seal image was executed with great skill. It was cut in negative on a surface of hard stone, probably haematite, and just a few centimeters square. The figures have realistic proportions and elegant poses; their faces, muscles, garments etc. are rendered with many details.

Who owned this seal? Where did the jars come from? What did they contain? Who was receiving them? What was the ancient name of the fortress? These are just some of the questions which intrigue us. Precise information is perhaps forthcoming as excavation of the hilltop fortress proceeds, but for now we must remain with some hints and suggestions.

Qala'at Halwanji

The modern name of the hilltop is Qala'at Halwanji, Arabic for “Castle of the sweet-vendor” – after the nearby modern village of Halwanji (Fig. 2). It is partly covered with the buried ruins of a fortress which was constructed here in the Middle Bronze Age, nearly 4000 years ago. The fortress existed briefly in the early 18th century BC until

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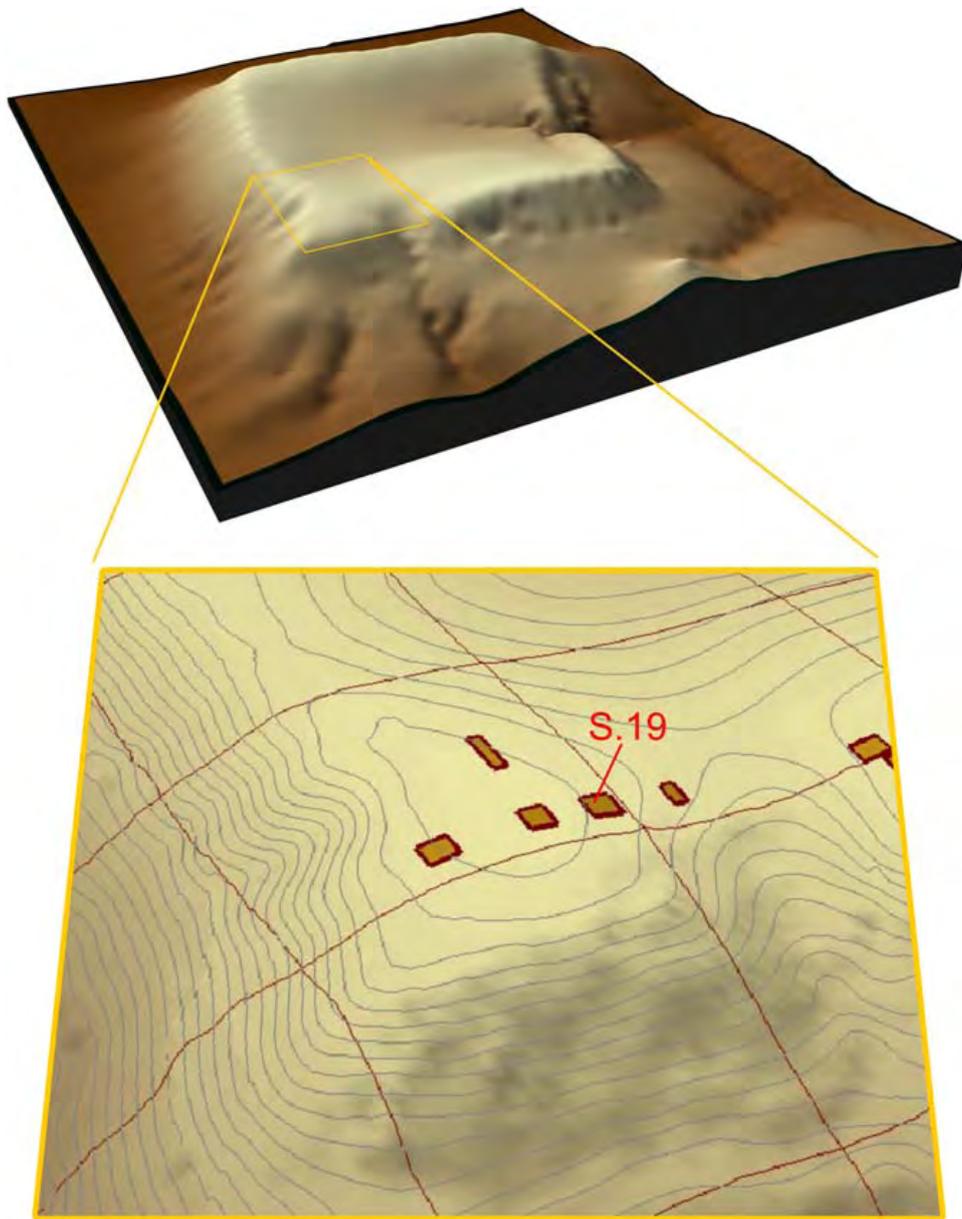


Figure 2. 3D model of Qala'at Halwanji with inset showing sondages in the area of the "Governor's Palace".

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destroyed by fire, probably as a result of warfare. Qala'at Halwanji was first identified as an archaeological site in 2007, and in 2008-9 a Syrian-Danish expedition carried out preliminary investigations, mapping the site and excavating the first small trenches to get an impression of the archaeological situation. It emerged that the site was eroded over much of its ca. 5 hectare surface, but in places exceptionally well-preserved. Walls still standing up to three meters high were excavated in the southwest corner of the site, and they probably belonged to the administrative center of the fortress. Provisionally we refer to this structure as "The Governor's Palace".

The small sections of the building exposed so far has walls ca. 1,6 m thick and made of grey bricks, similar also in size (34 x 34 x 14 cm) to those in the contemporary rampart sections excavated. If we assume that the southwest corner of the site was occupied by a single, large building, we can estimate that it covers an area of ca. 50 x 50 m = 2500 sqm. This would make it comparable in size to another Middle Bronze Age 'palace', excavated by German archaeologists at Tell Bi'a, some 120 kms southeast of Halwanji.

The clay corks were found in Sondage 19, which featured a northern wall, parallel with –

and partly beyond the edge of the trench (Fig. 3). The room/space south of this wall contained numerous crushed vessels, both items from the collapsed roof or upper storey, and items

originally placed on the floor. An interesting assemblage on the floor was found close to the wall. It consists of four cups, five trifoil jugs, and three medium sized jars, all heavily burned, and smashed into many small pieces – so that restoration of this set is not yet completed (Fig. 4). Together with this pottery were two clay jar corks and a small limestone lid,

certainly once used to close the three jars found (Fig. 5). The clay corks are conical covers which originally was used to seal the opening of a jar with a rim dm of ca. 10 cm.

They were supplied with rollings from a cylinder seal, from the broader base and across the pointed upper end to the opposite base. One specimen (QH.09-2) had two – the other (QH.09-1) three rollings made with the same seal (Fig. 4).

Interestingly a small fragment from the top of a similar object and sealed with the same seal was found in fill in Sondage 13 to the west. Similar objects have been found in Tell Bi'a (ancient Tuttul), where the sealings, however, were made on strips of

Vintage wine

Texts from Mari mention different qualities of wine, the best a kind of liqueur created by condensing wine of lower quality, and referred to as *simum*. Wine had to be consumed within a few years, and was usually diluted with water before serving.

The city of Karkemish (on the border between Turkey and Syria) was an important center for wine trade.

The price of wine

A ca. 10 litre jar with wine cost 60 "grain" of silver – including a mere 3 "grain" for the empty jar. 60 "grain" was 1/3 of a shekel (= 8 grams). It is not easy to translate this into a modern price, but we know it was possible to live fairly well (food, oil, firewood etc.) on 7 shekels a month.

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Figure 3. Floor with crushed vessels in Sondage 19. The bottom of cork QH.09-1 is visible in the lower right corner (indicated).

Figure 4. Close up of cork *in situ*.



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finer clay attached to the cap, itself made of coarser clay. Most of the corks found at Tell Bi'a were apparently applied locally, so that the contents of the jars were either produced close to the site, or 'rebottled' there. Such a scenario is less likely for the Halwanji corks.

The Historical Context

We plan to carry out a programme of residue analysis on ceramic vessels from Halwanji, but until firmer evidence is available it seems likely that the sealed jars from Sondage 19 could have contained wine. Wine was widely consumed in elite contexts, and from the archives of cuneiform texts excavated at ancient Mari (see separate text box) we have a good deal of information on this (see separate text boxes). Thus we know that wine was usually transported in jars containing ca. 10 litres each, and this could fit the examples from Halwanji, which had a maximum capacity of some 15 litres. Wine was traded or exchanged as gifts, and reached central Syria (Mari) from the region of modern Aleppo and a number of towns in northern Syria or southern Anatolia.

Also the seal fits into this geographical horizon. Actual cylinder seals or impressions with similar style and imagery found elsewhere mostly derive from the same general region. We may therefore assume that the Halwanji jars arrived from a location within that region, but unfortunately not with confidence point to

a specific town. The closest parallel to the Halwanji sealing is found on an envelope for a cuneiform tablet excavated in Kültepe, ancient Kanesh (see separate text box), in southeastern Anatolia, and shown here in Fig. 6. On this seal

Kültepe

Ancient Kanesh was the capital of an Anatolian kingdom. In Kanesh was also a colony of merchants from the city of Assur in modern Iraq (some 1200 km to the southeast). The merchants exported tin and woolen textiles to Anatolia, where they sold these goods for silver (see article in *NINO/NIT Annual Report 2009*, 22-25).

the god Haya is not seated in a boat, but the association with water is indicated by streams emanating from his shoulders and surrounding the swirl of water gods next to the main scene. The supplicant led by the double-faced vizier is beardless and bare-headed, in contrast to the counterpart on the Halwanji seal, who is a royal figure. Apart from the main

scene, otherwise rare in this period, one notes the similarities in details and not least in style which the two seals share. Interestingly the swirl of water gods on the Kültepe seal, also a fairly rare north Syrian feature, is found, virtually identical, on another seal impression from Qala'at Halwanji. The two seals clearly belong in the same tradition, and must have been made not very far apart in time and space.

The Kültepe tablet is dated with the name of an eponym official, Tab-silli-Assur, and since the sequence of these eponyms is known, it can be established that the envelope with its sealing was made in the year 1776 BC (according to the conventional chronology). Use of the two seals considered here may of course have extended over a fairly long period, but hardly more than 50 years, which would date the arrival of our jars to Halwanji between 1800-1750 BC.

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Figure 5. Partly reconstructed jars and jug from Sondage 19.



Figure 6. Seal image on tablet found at Kültepe.

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As mentioned the jars were found together with broken jugs, which could have been used to serve wine – into the cups found. Did the fire which destroyed the fortress perhaps disturb a wine-tasting session – or a night-cap in the “Governor’s Palace”? Perhaps we shall know one day...

Incidentally 1776 BC is exactly the year in which the famous north Mesopotamian king Shamshi-Adad I died (see separate text box). In earlier presentations we have discussed the possibility that Qala’at Halwanji could be identical with a fortress established 1786 BC by this king, and modestly named Dur-Shamshi-Adad, “The Fortress of Shamshi-Adad”. The fortress was intended to guard the frontier between his kingdom and the kingdom of Jamhad to the west, but was conquered by Jamhad in 1779 BC. Recently other scholars have suggested that this fortress should be sought more to the south, and this can not be excluded. More evidence is needed to solve this problem, and we hope it may appear in the new series of Syrian-Dutch excavations at Qala’at Halwanji planned to begin in late 2011.

Acknowledgments

In 2008 and 2009 the archaeological work at Qala’at Halwanji was directed by J. Eidem, then senior fellow in the Cluster of Excellence

Shamshi-Adad

Although less known than his famous contemporary, Hammurabi of Babylon, Shamshi-Adad (ca. 1850-1776 BC) was a key figure of his time. Originally king of a small area in central Iraq, he created a large, but short-lived empire covering most of modern northern Iraq and eastern Syria. He placed two sons as viceroys on the flanks of the empire. The older Ishme-Dagan in the east, and the younger Jasmah-Addu in Mari in the west.

‘TOPOI’, Freie Universität Berlin, and Syrian co-directors were A. Nasser (2008) and M. Fakhru (2009). The work was generously sponsored by the Augustinus Foundation (Copenhagen) and the Danish Institute in Damascus.

Photos Figs. 1 and 3-5 by Henrik Brahe; 3D model Fig. 2 by Paolo Del Vesco; seal image Fig. 6 after N. Özgüç, *Seals and Seal Impressions of Level Ib from Karum Kanesh*. Ankara 1968, Pl. XIc.

Further Reading

For a general description of the site of Qala’at Halwanji see:

▪ J. Eidem, Qala’at Halwanji: A 4000 year old fortress in Syria, *Annual Report NINO/NIT 2009*, 2-10.

Syrian seals from the Middle Bronze Age have been studied in:

▪ A. Otto, *Die Entstehung und Entwicklung der Klassisch-Syrischen Glyptik*. UAVA 8. W. de Gruyter 2000.

Texts from ancient Mari relating to wine have been studied in:

▪ G. Chambon, *Les Archives du vin de Mari*. FM XI. Paris 2009.

An alternative location of Dur-Shamshi-Adad (at Tell Qitar, some 35 kms south of Halwanji) is suggested by A. Otto and N. Ziegler in:

▪ Eva Cancik-Kirschbaum and Nele Ziegler (eds.), *Entre les fleuves 1*. BBVO 20. Berlin 2009.