

# BULLAE FROM THE SHARA TEMPLE

Nawala Al-Mutawalli, Khalid Salim Ismael,  
Walther Sallaberger



Cuneiform Texts  
from the Iraqi Excavations  
at Umma (Jokha)

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with contributions by Hamza Shahad Al-Harbi  
and Adelheid Otto

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# The Images of the Seal Impressions<sup>1</sup>

Adelheid Otto

Seal images are rare among the hundreds of seal impressions on the bullae. Sizeable figurative scenes besides the inscription have been preserved on few of them. Only six out of 14 seals were impressed in a way that remains of the image are visible.

The study of the seal images was done on the basis of photos which were provided to me by Nawala Al-Mutawalli and Walther Sallaberger. Unfortunately, the details could not be checked on the originals. But as many motifs are quite standardized at this period, they can be recognized with some certainty. The drawings of the images were made by myself and Manfred Lerchl, the drawings of the legends by W. Sallaberger. The numbering of the seals follows the edition above.

In total, five different seal images could be recognized and restored in composite drawings. Two seals (Seals 3, 7) had inscriptions of two lines, two had three lines (Seals 6, 11), two seals were anepigraphic (Seals 13, 14). Every seal shows an audience in front of a king or god. The audience scene of a worshipper, followed by a suppliant goddess, in front of the enthroned king was depicted on all of them, except for Seal 7, where an audience of four figures – including the standing king – in front of a seated god was depicted. The seals were quite large with heights between 2.5 and 3.6 cm, and at least two of them (Seals 7, 13) had a cap mounting. All the seals must have been of good or exquisite workmanship. The slender and elegantly shaped figures were carefully modelled, the faces and garments rendered with fine details. The style and craftsmanship of the seals is even more exceptional if compared to contemporary original seals in collections.

The uniformity of seal motifs, combined with the excellent quality and the precious caps suggest that the seal owner belonged to a privileged upper level of the inhabitants of Umma – a hypothesis that is further corroborated by the following considerations. Similar audience scenes are found on other seals dating to the time of Sumuel (Buchanan 1981, no. 753; Blocher 1992a, nos. 31, 32, 36, 49) and on contemporary sealings from Tell Harmal (al-Gailani Werr 1988, nos. 41a, 42a), Sippar (al-Gailani Werr 1988, no. 182b) and Nippur (Seidl 2016, no. 3). The audience scene of a worshipper with clasped hands in front of the enthroned ruler is a motif that can be found already on Ur III seals. Although the audience scene is less frequent than the introduction scene in the Ur III period, the audience scene is especially frequent on seals belonging to the highest officials in the bureaucracy of the Ur III state, if the seals and sealings in collections are taken into consideration (Winter 1987). Winter explained that “the imagery also conveyed general information regarding the place of the seal owner within the system”, and that the audience or presentation scene in particular “articulates the legitimate authority of the seal-owner, as granted by the king, to exercise his office within the Ur III bureaucracy” (Winter 1987, 60).

Also at Umma, the motif had clearly marked the seal owner as being of highest rank within the Ur III bureaucracy. Ur-Lisi, the governor of Umma at the time of Šulgi and Amar-Suena, Ayakala, the governor of Umma at the time of Amar-Suena and Šu-Suen, and Dadaga, the governor under Ibši-Suen – they all show the audience scene on their seals (Winter 1987; Mayr 2002). After the decline of the Ur III state, this motif continued to be the standard official seal motif for high-ranking officials in southern Babylonia. Dated examples prove this from at least the time of the Isin and Larsa kings Lipit-Eštar (Legrain 1951, no. 440) and Gungunum to Šîn-erībam

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Nawala Al-Mutawalli for her invitation to contribute to this volume; additionally, I thank her, Khalid Salim Ismael and Walther Sallaberger for providing the photos and for discussing the sealings with me.

(Blocher 1992a), which date back to approximately 1934–1841 BCE (MC). We propose here that the audience scene before the enthroned king or god was the standard motif for the seals of an urban elite at Umma from the Ur III period onwards until at least the time of Sumuel. As has been remarked earlier (Porada 1950; Blocher 1992a, 19), the slow and gradual change in seal iconography from Ur III-like motifs to typical Old Babylonian motifs began only after 1900 BCE (MC).

The most exceptional seal, however, is the one of Šin-eribam (Seal 7). The two lines of inscription give only his name and his father's name. But his seal is absolute outstanding in workmanship, details and fine modelling, and it was mounted by a metal cap. The most striking feature is its iconography: The audience of three persons in front of a seated god, who holds rod and ring and puts his feet on an animal – quite certainly a gazelle – is unique so far. Since the attributes rod and ring are held by major gods only, more precisely by the city gods that select a national ruler (Wiggermann 2006-2008, 417), I wonder if this might be the first attested depiction of the god Šara. This god was apparently associated with agriculture on the one hand and with the steppe as pasture for the herds on the other hand (Huber Vulliet 2009-2012) – qualities that are perfectly symbolized by a gazelle.

In the following the remains of the seal images will be described and analyzed. For further comments on the seal inscriptions and the seal owners see the introduction and the preceding edition of the seal inscriptions above.

### Seal 3: Etel-pī-Šîn

Several impressions on the obverse and the edges of bulla no. **107** (Um 2467, IM 174878). Since the bulla was not inscribed, the seal was rolled over the whole obverse of the bulla. For further impressions see the edition above.

Preserved height of seal: 2.3 cm; reconstructed original height c. 2.5 cm; preserved max. length of impression: 5 cm.

Depiction: Inscription of two lines. Audience scene (three figures) with suppliant goddess and worshipper facing the enthroned king.

Inscription:

- 1 'e-te-el-pi<sub>4</sub>-<sup>d</sup>EN.ZU<sup>1</sup>
- 2 dumu x-x-la-nu-u[m]

Description: The remains of three figures are visible on both sides of the inscription. A suppliant goddess, turning to the right, is depicted to the right of the inscription. She is dressed in the flounced robe. The tips of the horizontal divisions are slightly protruding. A long counterweight is pending down her back. Her head with a beautifully modelled face, with a horned crown and bent-up hair is visible. She raises both hands in front of her face. A worshipper, dressed in a long garment, which leaves his right shoulder free, stands with hands clasped in front of her. The shoulders and arms are beautifully modelled with elegantly swelling muscles. Only the lower part of his head remains, but this is enough to know that he must have been shaven-headed and beardless. There is a roughly oval object with undulating outlines in the field between the two figures approximately at the height of their thighs. The shape corresponds best to a Humbaba head, but the remains are too shallow to be certain.<sup>2</sup> At the left side of the inscription, a person sits on a padded stool and raises his right arm. The left arm is covered by his mantle, of which three pleats over his left shoulder and wrinkles in the elbow region are visible.

The craftsmanship of this seal seems to have been quite fine, as can be seen from the elongated, slender figures, the beautifully modelled muscles of the worshipper, the finely carved face of the goddess and the fine flounces of her robe.

<sup>2</sup> The Humbaba face is extremely rare on seals of this period.

## Seal 6: Nūr-Eštar, cult-priest of Šara

The impressions on the two bullae only, especially of no. **49** (Um 2432, IM 174843), show remains of the image, although the seal was impressed on 28 more bullae. For further impressions see the edition above.

Height of seal: 2.8 cm; preserved max. length of impression: 4.3 cm, reconstructed diameter c.1.4 cm.

Depiction: Inscription of three lines. Audience scene (three figures) with suppliant goddess and worshipper facing the enthroned king.

Inscription:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| 1 | nu-ur <sub>2</sub> -eš <sub>18</sub> -tar <sub>2</sub> |
| 2 | dumu puzur <sub>4</sub> - <sup>d</sup> MAR.TU          |
| 3 | gudu <sub>4</sub> <sup>d</sup> šara <sub>2</sub>       |

Description: The suppliant goddess, turning to the right, is depicted to the right of the inscription with three lines. Her head with a horned crown, her bent-up hair, and the flounced robe is visible. No counterweight is visible, but this can be due to the shallow impression of the seal (the vertical flounces are also not visible). At the other side of the inscription, the king with a long garment and a brimmed hat sits on a padded stool. Shallow remains of a crescent and a disc are visible in front of him. A shaven-headed man in long garment, standing hands clasped, is facing him.

Judging from the face and beautifully modelled body of the goddess, the craftsmanship of this seal seems to have been quite fine.

## Seal 7: Sîn-irībam

Seal impression on no. **1** (Um 2395, IM 174806); for other impressions see the edition above.

Height of seal: 2.7 cm; length of impression: 5.3 cm, reconstructed diameter c.1.7 cm. Metal caps, 0.1cm wide.

Depiction: Inscription of two lines. Audience scene (four figures): the king, followed by a suppliant goddess and a short kilted figure, are facing a seated male god (Šara?).

Inscription:

- |   |                               |
|---|-------------------------------|
| 1 | <sup>d</sup> EN.ZU-i-ri-ba-am |
| 2 | dumu e-di-du-um               |

Description: Three figures are facing a seated god. The first one is the king as a worshipper, dressed in a long garment with curved ends and a short kilt, his left leg is protruding. He stands with hands clasped wears the brimmed hat. He is followed by the suppliant goddess, dressed in the flounced robe. A very fine and elegantly curved counterweight is falling down her back. She raises both hands with finely carved fingers. Behind her is standing a man, dressed with a kilt, his right arm is pending behind his back, the left arm is bent. Unfortunately, the head is not well preserved, and it is impossible to know if the head was shaven-headed or if he wore the brimmed hat.<sup>3</sup> In general, a fourth person in an audience scene to a god is not very frequent.<sup>4</sup> The three figures are facing a seated bearded person in a flounced robe, wearing a horned crown with multiple horns and a circle on top. The god raises the right hand and holds rod and ring. He

<sup>3</sup> In the latter case, this would be an early form of the victorious king. A similar depiction of a slightly different victorious king as fourth person in an audience scene is known from a servant of Sumu-El: Buchanan 1981, no. 753.

<sup>4</sup> There is a similar seal with the triumphant king from the time of Immerum: Blocher 1992b, no. 7.

is sitting on an architectural façade throne with a very explicit rendering of a niched façade and finely curved sides. The throne and the animal footrest are placed on a shallow dais.

The god's feet are resting on the flat body of an animal. It has a long neck, a head with a triangular head and a fine muzzle, and two straight vertical horns or long ears. The head is rendered half frontally and half in profile, the muzzle is pointing downwards. Its two forelegs are also rendered: one is bent below the body, the other one is set forwards.

The craftsmanship of this seal is absolutely exceptional. All the figures are extremely slender and elongated, show elegantly curved silhouettes and extremely fine details. The flounces of the seated god's robe are especially noteworthy: they are separated into vertical compartments each of which consists of three separate flounces.

The audience scene of the king facing a deity is less frequent than the audience scene of a bare-headed man facing the seated king, but more relative for us since it allows insights into the local importance of specific deities. Usually the attributes reveal the gods' identity. But the rod and the ring symbolize divine order and are held by major gods only, more specifically by city gods who demonstrate their divine selection of the ruler which approaches the deity.<sup>5</sup>

The other identifying attribute is the animal below the god's feet, but I could not find any direct parallel for this animal. So far, only the goatfish of the god Enki or the *mušhuš* of the god Tišpak (al-Gailani 1988, no. 76a; Collon 1986, no. 104) have a horned head. On a few Ur III seals from Umma, the feet of the god rest on an animal, which is either a waterfowl (Mayr 1997, nos. 120, 446) or a goatfish, but in the latter case the god is clearly Enki who holds a flowing vase (Mayr 1997, nos. 601, 782). But the body of this animal on Sîn-iribam's seal is neither fish-like nor dragon-like. Additionally, the rendering of this animal's head is different from that of a goatfish, which is always depicted in full profile, often has a short goatbeard, a much shorter neck and slightly curved horns. The seal of Tūram-ilī, servant of Simat-lštaran, depicts a bearded god (identity unclear) whose feet rest on a goat. However, it is rendered in a slightly different way with the head in full profile and the horns slightly curving (Mayr 2011, 229, Figs. 3, 4). Since the animal on Sîn-iribam's seal has a very long neck, a fine head with a concave nose and a round muzzle, I am convinced that the depicted animal is not a goat, but a gazelle.

Mayr (1997, 70) made an attempt to identify the god Šara on Ur III seals from Umma by studying the deities on those seals which mention Šara; but the harpe-sword is the only attribute which appears three times associated with a standing or sitting god (his seals 617.1 and 859.1). This weapon, however, can also be the attribute of other deities in other cities.

Therefore, I propose to interpret the enthroned figure with the gazelle as footrest as the god Šara. The iconography of this god is still unknown, but since he was associated with the steppe as pasture ground, this interpretation seems quite fitting.

## Seal 10: Seal of Šara-andul, cult-priest of Šara

Two impressions on the left edge of the bulla no. **61** (Um 2431, IM 174842) on either side of the perforation, many more impressions on 40 other bullae (see edition above).

Preserved height of seal: 3 cm; preserved max. length of impression: 3 cm.

Depiction: Inscription, suppliant goddess. Probably audience scene in front of an enthroned deity or king.

Inscription:

- 1     <sup>d</sup>šara<sub>2</sub>-an-dul<sub>3</sub>
- 2     dumu ur-<sup>d</sup>šara<sub>2</sub>
- 3     gudu<sub>4</sub> <sup>d</sup>šara<sub>2</sub>

Description: Despite the fact that the seal was rolled on more than 40 bullae, the image is barely visible, since only the inscription seems to have been important. Only the back of a standing

<sup>5</sup> Wiggermann 2006–2008.

figure, which is turning to the right, is visible on the right side beside the inscription. A part of the head with a horned crown and a part of the back shoulder of this figure are visible, as well as its waist and lower part. Since a long counterweight is pending along the back of the figure, it can be interpreted as a suppliant goddess. Another impression shows a part of the lower part of her garment, but also on this impression the flounced material is not visible. Through comparisons with contemporary seals from Umma it is probable that a presentation or audience scene in front of an enthroned deity or king was depicted.

## Seal 13: Anepigraphic seal 1

Impressions on the left edge (twice) of bulla nos. **33** (Um 2428, IM 174839) and on the upper and lower edge (each twice) of bulla no. **32** (Um 2427, IM 174838). On no. **33**, the seal has been impressed twice upside down on either side of the cord's hole at the pierced edge. Sealing beside Nūr-Eštar on nos. **32** and no. **33**.

Height of seal: 3.6 cm; preserved max. length of impression: 2.3 cm.

Depiction: Audience scene in front of the king, small man upside down.

Description: A worshipper, shaven-headed and beardless, is standing in front of the enthroned ruler. The worshipper's long garment covers his left shoulder, three pleats of the garment are visible on the shoulder and near the elbow of his left arm. His hands rest on his waist. Along the lower part of his garment, two vertical lines are visible in the middle. His two feet protrude from under his garment. He is facing the king which sits on a padded stool and raises his right hand. The shallow impression of a crescent and a disc is preserved above the king's hand. This scene was probably completed by a suppliant goddess standing behind the worshipper, but no traces are visible.

Between the two large figures there is a small male figure, depicted upside down. The small man is wearing a short skirt and a flat cap. He raises his left hand, his right hand rests on his waist. A line is bordering the scene at the bottom. No traces of an inscription to be seen. Since the inscription of a seal was usually impressed with more care than the image, the seal was probably anepigraphic.

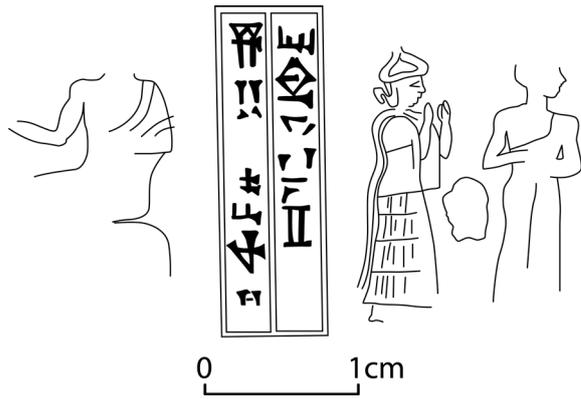
The height of the seal is unusually tall, and the craftsmanship of the original cylinder seal must have been of excellent quality: The face of the worshipper was rendered in a very detailed way with a fine nose, chin and lips. His bald head and the arms are beautifully modelled. The proportions of his figure are perfect, his body is slender and elegantly formed.

The main scene is standard for high officials in this period. The small man with raised front hand, however, is only rarely depicted in similar audience scenes (e.g. Collon 1986, no. 53; Moortgat 1940, nos. 285, 291), and this has so far been the only seal where he appears upside down. Reversed figures in general are not very frequent on seals of this period, only a few occur on contemporary seals with audience scenes (Collon 1986, nos. 55, 59). The reversed small man appears at least in one other scene on a contemporary seal (Collon 1986, no. 594). The interpretation of this man is still uncertain; but since he appears on an impression from Sippar (al-Gailani Werr 1988, no. 167) standing on a high pedestal which is decorated as a niched, temple-like façade, I wonder if he might have been a member of the temple personnel. One could even go one step further with speculations and suggest that the owner of the Umma seal wanted this figure to be emphasized by depicting it upside down, and that he had the figure inserted between the main protagonists of the seal image, because he himself was part of the temple personnel.

## Seal 14: Anepigraphic seal 2

Sealing beside Šara-andul on no. **65** and no. **66**.

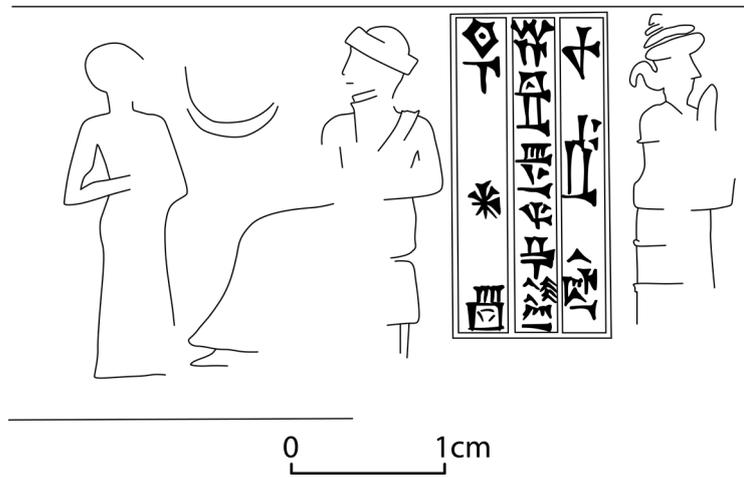
Only the faint remains of the back of a suppliant goddess with a counterweight are visible.



Seal 3: EteI-pī-Sîn



Seal 3: EteI-pī-Sîn



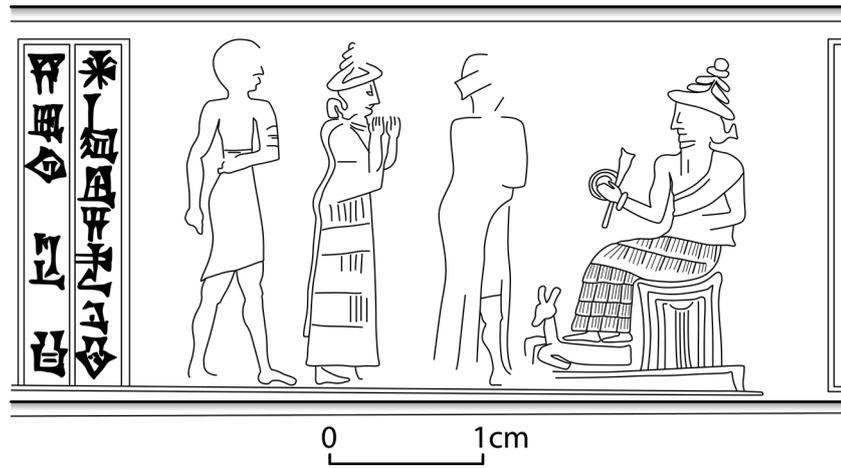
Seal 6: Nūr-Eštar



Seal 6: Nūr-Eštar



Seal 6: Nūr-Eštar



Seal 7: Sîn-irībam



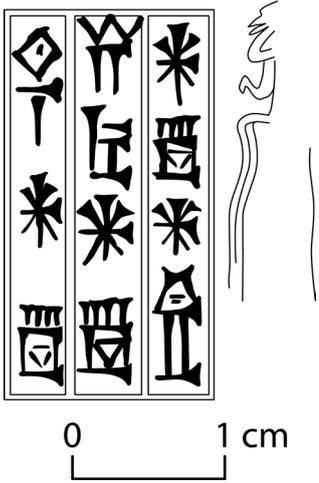
Seal 7: Sîn-irībam



Seal 7: Sîn-irībam



Seal 7: Sîn-irībam



Seal 10: Seal of Šara-andul



Seal 10: Seal of Šara-andul



Seal 13: Anepigraphic seal 1



Seal 13: Anepigraphic seal 1



Seal 13: Anepigraphic seal 1