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The Collapse of the Balance of Power in the Middle of the 18th Century B.C. and its Reflection in Syro-Mesopotamian Glyptic¹

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The 19th century BC is a little known period in the history of the Ancient Near East, especially in Syria and North Mesopotamia. Although it has been suggested that many settlements were abandoned, it is certain that there existed many small local kingdoms. At the beginning of the 18th century BC decisive changes occurred which mark a new direction for the political history of the region.²

It seems that a handful of sheikhs with Amorite names divided up the whole of Syria and North Mesopotamia between them, creating the five states of Yamḥad, Qatna, Karkemiš, Mari and the North Mesopotamian kingdom (Fig. 1). Perhaps the first generation of these tribal leaders was still semi-nomadic, and only their sons established capital cities and palaces, from which they ruled the consolidated kingdoms. The second generation assumed the title *lugal* for the first time, while previously the designation *lú* was used.

One can observe this for Sumu-epuḫ of Yamḥad, whose son Yarim-Lim was the first ruler of Yamḥad to take the title of king and made Halap his residence. Similarly in the earliest texts Aplaḥanda of Karkemiš has the title *lú*. The region of the middle Euphrates was probably partly under the control of Yagid-Lim, but there is no evidence for him having a residence. His son Yaḥdun-Lim extended the kingdom as far as Abattum, about 30 kms upstream from Tuttul, and established his residence in Mari. A semi-nomadic lifestyle may explain why we have so little information about Ila-kabkabu, the father of Šamši-Adad. One can assume that he controlled the region around Ekallatum on the Tigris, from where he exerted influence as far as the Euphrates, and he installed his sons as rulers in Ekallatum.

Although these Amorite kingdoms formed a network with close cultural, economic and political ties, they remained independent, as is shown by changing alliances as well as diplomatic and military confrontations and dynastic marriages. This led to a cultural blossoming that hardly existed in Syria before or later. This eventful and flourishing time, which is well known through the texts of Tall Hariri, Leilan, Rimaḥ and Bi'a, may be

¹ The conclusions presented here are discussed in more detail in my doctoral thesis which will be published as "Die Entstehung und Entwicklung der klassisch-syrischen Glyptik" by W. de Gruyter in 1999. I want to thank my supervisors H. Kühne and E. Strommenger, as well as G. Bunnens who gave me permission to publish the seal from Til Barsip. I thank E. Strommenger for allowing me to work on the glyptic material of Tall Bi'a which will be published in *Tall Bi'a-Tuttul IV, Die Siegel und Siegelabrollungen*. Figures 2a-b, 3, 5-9 were inked by C. Wolff, to whom I am very grateful.

² The absolute dates used here refer to the Middle Chronology.

called the period of the balance of power. However, this period lasted only for a short time.

At the same time that the residences were established, the administration of the kingdoms became more complex. Both the administration in the palaces and the city-states and the external relations of the kingdoms required a large number of bureaucratic procedures and the creation of efficient administrative structures. An effect of this was both countless written records and a sudden increase in the use of cylinder-seals. At the present time numerous seal impressions of this period have been recovered from excavations at various sites, especially from Mari, Tuttul and Šubat-Enlil. These dated impressions come almost exclusively from royal palaces and they are quite distinct from the numerous so-called Classical Syrian cylinder seals exhibited in various museums.

This is a striking phenomenon which represents a particular problem when dealing with the glyptic from the 18th century BC. In my opinion this has two causes:

1. The nature of the seal impressions found in the palaces. These impressions were predominantly connected to the administration of the kingdom, and the majority of the impressions comes from seals of state officials.
2. The fragmentary survival of evidence from the 2nd half of the 18th century BC, after the destruction of Mari. Seal impressions of this period have been found only in Tall Leilan (until Samsu-iluna 22 = 1728 BC) and in Karahöyük near Konya.

The seal impressions of officials found in palace contexts display particular characteristics which make one think that special seal motifs were present in the Amorite city states. Seals with this motif apparently had to be used in the administration, and these motifs became emblems of the states. This can be demonstrated in Šamši-Adad's kingdom.³

Seal impressions from administrative buildings of this kingdom have been found in Šubat-Enlil, residence of Šamši-Adad, as well as in Mari, residence of his son Yasmaḥ-Adad, and in Tall Rimaḥ. The largest number has been found in recent years in Tuttul, another residence of Šamši-Adad and his son Yasmaḥ-Adad at the western border of their kingdom. The majority of the seals belonging to servants of Šamši-Adad and Yasmaḥ-Adad exhibit one motif, namely the king with the mace standing in front of the goddess Lama (Fig. 2a-c). With few exceptions the king is always on the left, the goddess on the right. Of the 46 seals of servants of these two kings known today 32 of them have this motif. Within the seals showing this motif a variety of styles can be observed. Presumably the stylistic variations are the result of manufacture in workshops in the different centers of the extensive kingdom.

One may wonder what is the significance of this motif. Most probably the figure of the so-called "king with the mace" does not represent a

³ See also A. Otto, Zur offiziellen Ikonographie auf Siegeln aus der Regierung des Königs Šamši-Adad I, *AcPA* 24 (1992), 159-171.

protective spirit, as has been argued several times,⁴ but rather the king himself in a specific role which can be best described as victorious. The motif of the victorious king can be traced at least as far back as the triumphal ruler on Naram-Sin's Stele. The suggestion that the king is represented is supported by the study of the impressions of other kingdoms where the king in another aspect appears on official seals.

On a very few seals of servants of Šamši-Adad the king appears in another role, as on the seal of Ḥazip-Aranziḥ (Fig. 3)⁵ where he is shown worshipping before a seated god, a motif which is strongly reminiscent of the Hammu-rapi stele. Most of the few seals which show other motifs date to the earlier part of Šamši-Adad's reign, probably before his capture of Mari. Since the motif of the victorious king is attested on the seal of a servant of Yagid-Lim,⁶ it may be that Šamši-Adad adopted this motif after his conquest of the middle Euphrates and Mari.

Back to the seal impressions from the palace in Tuttul. Here more than 100 different seal impressions from the time of Šamši-Adad have been found during recent years. About 26 of these impressions are of seals of officials who are called servants in their inscriptions. With the exception of 2 examples all of these seal impressions show the typical motif of the victorious king and the suppliant goddess. In particular all the seal impressions on cuneiform tablets, that is on official administrative documents, had this motif, altogether about 10 examples.⁷

Completely different seal impressions are found on sealings which were attached to sacks, pots or wooden boxes. They occur in isolated examples only and presumably entered the palace with imported goods.⁸

The door sealings, which were certainly sealed within the palace, show typical impressions of seals of officials like the one of Šikip-wari (Fig. 2b), as well as of other seals, either crude seals with simple persons in a stick-and-drill style⁹ (Fig. 4) or even more crude ones which were probably made of clay and bore a design made by fingernails. One may wonder, why some, but not all of the people who sealed the doors in the palace, used an official seal. Perhaps the explanation could be that since the responsible persons were known within the palace, they did not need to use official seals.

In Mari and in Leilan this motif of the victorious king opposite the suppliant goddess continued to be used under the kings succeeding Šamši-Adad and Yasmaḥ-Adad: in Mari under king Zimri-Lim until 1761 BC, and

⁴ For example F.A.M. Wiggerman, The staff of Ninšubura. Studies in Babylonian Demonology II, *JEOL* 29 (1985-86), 23-29. I doubt also his statement, p. 23: "The concept of the king as emblem is un-Mesopotamian".

⁵ For the seal of Ḥazip-Aranziḥ see A. Otto, Ein neuentdecktes Glied in der Kette altorientalischer Administration - Zur Deutung gesiegelter Langetten, *DaM* 8 (1995), 90-92.

⁶ E. Bleibtreu, *Rollsiegel aus dem Vorderen Orient. Zur Steinschneidekunst zwischen etwa 3200 und 400 vor Christus nach Beständen in Wien und Graz*, Wien 1981: n. 65.

⁷ See also A. Otto, Local, Regional, and International: Seal Impressions from the palace of Šamši-Adad in Tall Bi'a/Tuttul, in *Languages and Cultures in Contact - At the Crossroads of Civilizations in the Syro-Mesopotamian Realm*, Leuven 1999 (in press), figs. 8-14.

⁸ A. Otto, Siegelabrollungen aus Tall Bi'a, *MDOG* 124 (1992), figs. 23-24, 26-27, 30, 31-32.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 62-63, figs. 33-34.

in Šeḫna (formerly Šubat-Enlil) until the last kings Mutiya and Yakun-ašar, that is until Samsu-iluna 22, 1728 BC. Some of the seal-cutters in Mari, who had worked for Yasmaḫ-Adad, continued to carve seals under Zimri-Lim, as can be seen in the seal of Šamaš-dam-x, servant of Yasmaḫ-Adad (Fig. 5a; impression found in Tuttul), and the seal of Ana-Sin-taklaku, servant of Zimri-Lim (Fig. 5b; impression found in Mari).¹⁰ While the earlier seal from Tuttul shows the usual pair of the king and the goddess, enriched by the semi-nude goddess with an object hanging from her elbow which may be interpreted as a mirror, the later seal shows that the official motif could be varied further: the direction of the main figures has been reversed, another figure added, and the king appears in his role as worshiper.

Now that this official motif and its emblematic function has been identified, we can examine whether comparable motifs were used in other kingdoms. In Karkemiš it is easy to prove that this was the case. The seals of Aplaḫanda's daughter Matrunna and of his servant Tabbeli share a common design, with the king depicted as a worshiper and wearing a coat going down below his knee (Figs. 6a-b).¹¹ In Karkemiš the direction of the two main figures is very often the opposite to that in North Mesopotamia and Mari, with the king on the right instead of the left. To these two seals can be added several others which probably belonged to officials of the kingdom of Karkemiš. Two examples, which may have belonged to servants of Aplaḫanda's successor are a seal in Berlin¹² and a seal which was discovered recently by G. Bunnens in a grave in Til Barsip (Tall Ahmar).¹³ Perhaps the owner of this seal exercised an official function here, only about 15 kms downstream from Karkemiš.

In Yamḫad the official motif also consists of a king and a goddess (Figs. 7a-b).¹⁴ The specific iconography here is the king in a remarkable synthesis of a warrior figure with a weapon in one hand and of a worshiper who holds his other hand in front of his mouth. His costume can vary, but a coat with distinct points, perhaps indicating a fleece, is most typical for the earlier time (Fig. 7a). Opposite him can stand different goddesses, for example a suppliant goddess, or a winged one, or one wearing a coat partly revealing her nudity.

The seal style of Qatna shows for a short period a similar official motif.¹⁵ However, here it always has three persons and an elaborate secondary scene. Numerous Egyptianizing elements are added and remarkably fine decorative bands. One example was found in Tall Bi'a (Fig.

8a), to which may be added other from the art market, one from a soldier's grave in Jericho,¹⁶ and one impression from Mari which has been recently published by D. Beyer (Fig. 8b).¹⁷ Perhaps the short-term existence of this official motif in Qatna can be explained by the close contacts between the kingdoms of Mari and Qatna, which existed through common military actions and dynastic marriage during the last years of the reign of Yasmaḫ-Adad.

To sum up, we can state that each of the five powerful kingdoms in Syria and North Mesopotamia had an official iconography which follows the same basic scheme, but they differ from each other distinctly and deliberately. This is true only for a relatively short period of time, about 60 years following the capture of Mari by Šamši-Adad around 1800 BC.

We may ask why this standard-motif of a pair, consisting of king and goddess, was obligatory for officials' seals. There are several possibilities:

1. The seal served a programmatic function. This is obvious, because on the official seals almost always the king appears, either in his military or victorious aspect, or as a worshiper. About the meaning of the goddess in this context we can only speculate; perhaps she serves to demonstrate his piety or the fact that he had divine support.
2. The motif has an emblematic value serving to identify the seal with a particular administration or state, comparable to the crossed keys of the Vatican, or to the eagles which occur in several modern state emblems. It would have been easy to recognize from which kingdom a seal impression came and it would not have been necessary to read the inscription of the seal. This could have been important since it is probable that many people serving in the lower ranks of the administration were illiterate.
3. Official sealings could be distinguished immediately from private ones, even if only a tiny fragment of the sealing was preserved. I was struck by the usefulness of such characteristic, easily distinguishable motifs, when I was trying to identify the various seals used on numerous tiny fragments of sealings. If, for example, only the rear arm of a victorious king was visible, one could be certain that the seal belonged to an official. In addition the various small motifs in the field, inappropriately named filling motifs, made the identification of particular official seals easy.

After the destruction of Mari it can be observed that the seals of these different court styles disappear. Instead simpler seals with other motifs, for example naked heroes with animals, become more and more numerous (Fig. 9a).¹⁸ They differ from the former official seals not only by motif, but also by size (they are mostly smaller) and by style (they are cut in a more cursory way). Most of these seal groups had already existed at the time of Šamši-Adad or Zimri-Lim, as some early examples within the impressions from

¹⁰ A. Parrot, *Mission archéologique de Mari, II. Le Palais, Documents et monuments* (= BAH 70), Paris 1959: 169-185, pl. XLVIII.

¹¹ Seal of Matrunna: E. Williams-Forte, *Ancient Near Eastern Seals (Metropolitan Museum of Art)*, New York 1976: n. 11. Seal of Tabbeli: J. Nougayrol, *Notes épigraphiques, Syria* 39 (1962): 188-189, AO 21116.

¹² A. Moortgat, *Vorderasiatische Rollsiegel*, Berlin 1940: n. 525.

¹³ A. Otto, A Middle Bronze Age cylinder seal from the jar burial F167 at Tell Ahmar, *Abr Nahrain* 35 (1998): 120-134.

¹⁴ Court seals from Yamḫad: Collon 1981: 33-43, nn. 1-3, 6, 8, 14, 15, 17, 26, and others elsewhere.

¹⁵ The sealstyle of Qatna is, like the other groups mentioned here (Karkemiš, Yamḫad, North Mesopotamia), one of the results of my doctoral dissertation (A. Otto, *Die Entstehung und Entwicklung der klassisch-syrischen Glyptik* (= UAVA 8), Berlin 1999, in press); they cannot be discussed here in length.

¹⁶ E. Porada, in K. Kenyon - T. Holland, *Excavations at Jericho, V*, London 1983, 774-776, fig. 354, pl. 38d.

¹⁷ Beyer 1997: figs. 8-9 (TH.82.245).

¹⁸ For further seals of this group see for example G.A. Eisen, *Ancient Oriental and Other Seals with a Description of the Collection of Mrs William H. Moore* (= OIP 47), Chicago 1940, nn. 132, 166.

Tuttul (Fig. 9a) and Mari show, but now they are manufactured in greater quantities.

Another example is the group of the so-called spade-hand seals, which show simple processions of men and animals in a highly stylized manner (Fig. 9b). Original cylinders of this group have been found in Karahöyük, Hammam Turkman¹⁹ and in Ebla, whose Middle Bronze Age buildings belong to the latter part of the 18th century BC. The earliest securely dated example of this group was found in Tall Bi'a (Fig. 9b). It is less stylized than most of the later pieces; this group continues to exist in Syria until the Late Bronze Age, as S. Mazzoni has pointed out.²⁰

These simple seals may for several reasons be interpreted as private seals. Impressions of these seals, however, were seldom found in the palaces of Mari and Tuttul, although they are very common in museum collections. The suggestion that private sealings rarely enter palaces, does not explain, however, why impressions of such seals were often found in Tall Leilan in the palace of the lower town and in Karahöyük.

These two find spots date slightly later than the palaces of Mari and Tuttul, namely in the second half of the 18th century BC. Among the many sealings found in Karahöyük no official seal impressions were found.²¹ In Tall Leilan it is striking that nearly all the seals, which D. Parayre attributes to her "style purement syrien" were found in the palace in the lower town, not in the earlier building on the Acropolis.²² In contrast, most of the official seals from Leilan were found on the Acropolis, and the few examples from the lower town show a distinct stylistic decline.²³ The last ruler of Šekna, Yakun-a-šar, was a vassal of the king of Yamḥad, whose influence reached as far as the eastern part of the Ḥabur triangle. As we have seen, there are many indications that the majority of these simple seals belonged to the time after the fall of Mari.

On the other hand it can be stated that the official iconography continued to exist in the kingdom of Yamḥad, and developed into the glyptic of Alalaḥ VII. The official seals of Alalaḥ VII always show a king in a heavily bordered mantle standing opposite a goddess with a cylindrical hat.²⁴

Conclusions

In the first half of the 18th century BC, the time of the balance of power in Syria and North Mesopotamia, every one of the major Amorite Kingdoms used an official iconography. These different local court-styles disappear after the fall of Mari, with the single exception of the court-style of Yamḥad. At the same time huge quantities of simpler seals appear which must have been private seals. This distinct break in the Syrian glyptic tradition around the middle of the 18th century may therefore be attributed to the increasing predominance of the kingdom of Yamḥad within Syria and North Mesopotamia resulting from the collapse of the balance of power after the fall of Mari.

¹⁹ See D.J.W. Meijer, A Cylinder Seal and Some Ramifications, in T.P.J. van den Hout, J. de Roos (eds.), *Studio Historiae Ardens. Ancient Near Eastern Studies Presented to P.H.J. Houwink Ten Cate on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*, Istanbul/Leiden 1995, 195-209; unfortunately the seal and the seal impressions were found in refuse soil of "MB II" date.

²⁰ S. Mazzoni, Continuity and Development in the Syrian and the Cypriote Common Glyptic Styles, in M. Kelly-Buccellati et al. (eds.), *Insight through Images, Studies in Honor of E. Porada (= BiMe 21)*, Malibu 1986, 171-182.

²¹ S. Alp, *Zylinder- und Stempelsiegel aus Karahöyük bei Konya (= TTKY V 26)*, Ankara 1968. For the dating of the seals, see R.M. Boehmer, Zur Datierung des Karahöyük, in K. Emre et al. (eds.), *Anatolia and the Ancient Near East, Studies in Honor of Tahsin Özgüç*, Ankara 1989, 39-44.

²² D. Parayre, Tell Leilan 1987: Sceaux et empreintes de sceaux, *AAAS* 37-38 (1987-88), 141, n. 23; D. Parayre, Seals and seal impressions from Tell Leilan 1985, *AJA* 94 (1990): 556-557, n. 23.

²³ Parayre 1987-88, 138, nn. 10-13.

²⁴ D. Collon, *The Seal Impressions from Tell Atchana/Alalakh (= AOAT 27)*, Neukirchen-Vluyn, pl. V, nn. 3-6, 10-12, 14-21.

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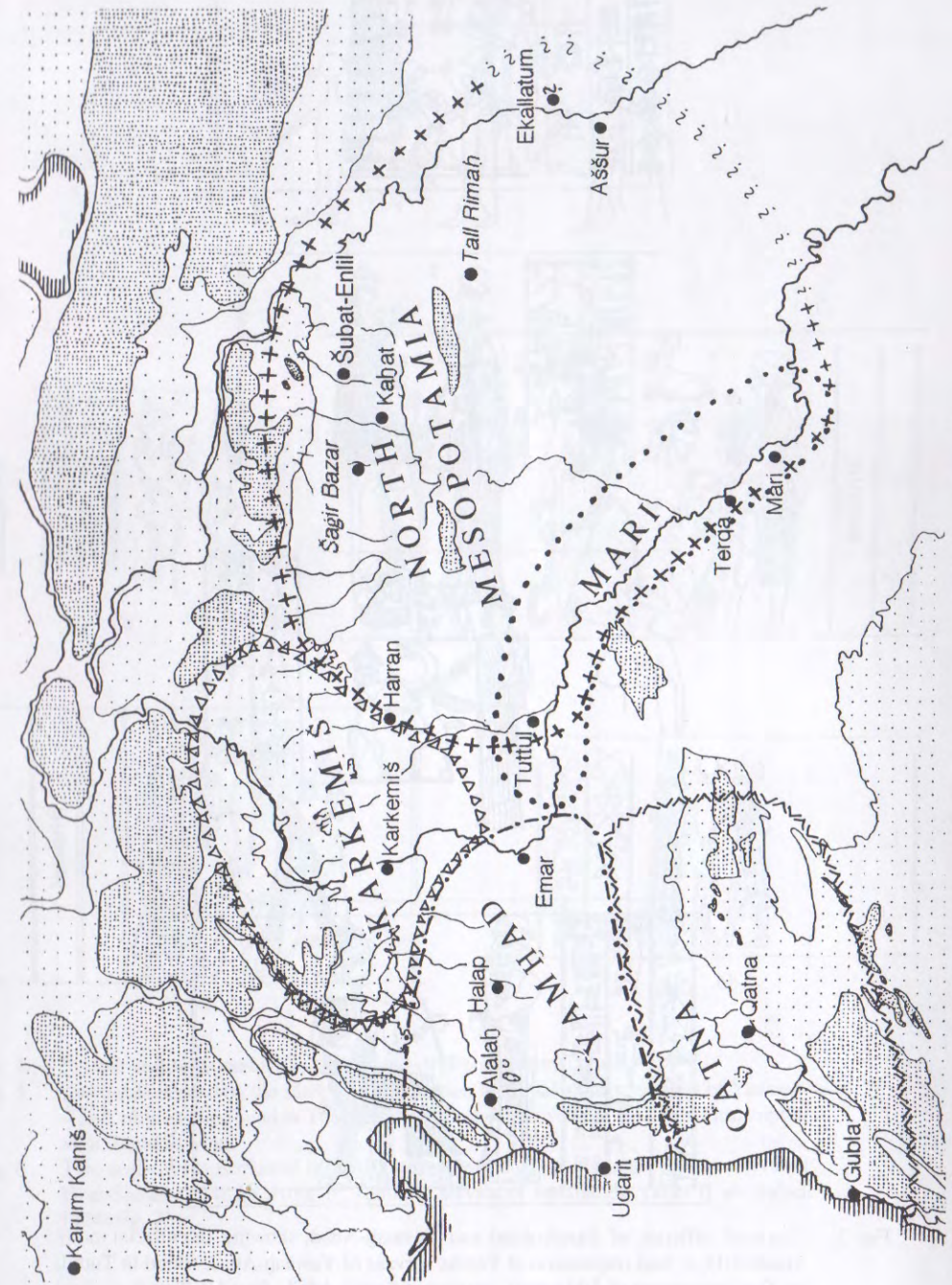


Fig. 1 Map of Syria and North Mesopotamia during the period of the "Balance of power".