

The Middle Bronze Age seal impressions (Adelheid Otto)¹

The Middle Bronze Age seal impressions that were found at Tell Ahmar during the renewed excavations are important for several reasons. Firstly almost all of them come from a well-defined archaeological context: that of buildings – referred to as the Administrative Complex – of the Middle Bronze Age II, part of which probably served as storerooms. This means that the way the seals were used provides information on the sealing practices in use in the administration of these buildings. Secondly, the iconographic and stylistic characteristics of these impressions place them in a period for which very few dated seals are available, making them a valuable point of reference in the history of Old Syrian glyptic. Thirdly, the iconography of the seals is particularly interesting because the figures and deities depicted on them reflect the north Syrian pantheon at a time when it is poorly attested. And last but not least, they indicate a “Tell Ahmar Seal Style” with very distinctive motifs, composition and style, which fills a regional void, since Middle Bronze Age seals of this region have been lacking secure benchmarks.

Sealings as evidence of administrative practices

A total of 34 fragments of clay objects bearing one or several seal impressions each have been found in the ruins of the Administrative Complex of Area M. These fragments take various forms. Some are lumps of clay with a seal impression on one side, slightly convex, and on the other, slightly concave, marks of cords, wood, wickerwork, sticks or cloth. We have tried to reconstruct from these marks the object which was closed or sealed and obtained some information on the operations that took place in the rooms. For instance, several of these artefacts were door sealings (*Fig. a*) impressed with the same seal decorated with the unusual figure of two bearded giants. Their supernatural nature and size were emphasized by engraving them horizontally around the cylinder (*Fig. e*). This seal must have belonged to one of the persons in charge of the storerooms.

More than a third of the sealings are in the form of clay strips, also called *languette*. These fine, elongated strips of pure clay – on which the seal was rolled – were originally embedded in a large lump of crude clay with heavy temper which covered the mouth of a jar (*Figs c* and *77*). This was the most common method for sealing jars in the Middle and Late Bronze Age.² However, in many cases the fine clay strip has chipped off from the crude clay lump and is found separately in excavation. The curved shape of several clay strips helps to reconstruct the type of jar which had been sealed (*Fig. 97*).

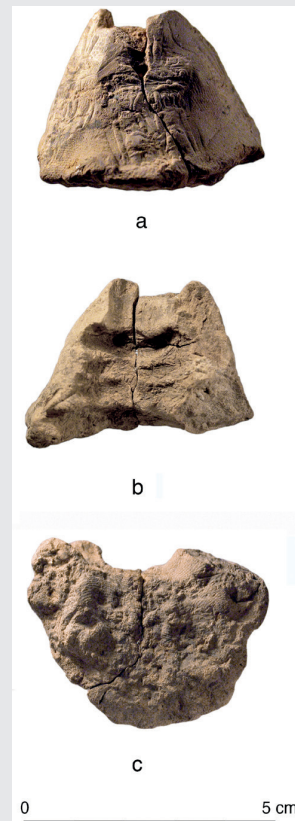


Fig. a. Door sealing (M11 O.11.31). A cord fixed to a door's leaf was wrapped around a stick stuck in the wall next to the door and a lump of clay was applied on the base of the stick; a) obverse: the lump took the shape of a truncated cone; b) reverse: imprint of the cord around the stick; c) base: marks left by the irregular surface of the mud plaster covering the wall.



Fig. b. Modern “bolt” in a house of Tell Ahmar. A device similar to the ancient locking system is still in use in some houses of the village.

Other sealings served as closures of bags and baskets (Fig. d). In general, they could either have been made on site or have arrived with the sealed objects and therefore have come from outside. However, the number of occurrences and the similarity of the clay are good indicators of the local or foreign origin of these sealings. In Tell Ahmar it can be observed that several of the people working in the buildings of Area M appear to have sealed objects of different kinds. For example, the owner of a very peculiar seal showing four female figures (Fig. g) was responsible for sealing baskets (M10 O.4) (Fig. d) as well as jars (M11 O.31) (Fig. 97).

The iconography of the seals

The impressions of fourteen different cylinder seals could be identified. Five of them show surprisingly similar scenes with more-or-less the same protagonists, which are exemplified here with Seal 1 (Fig. f). First comes the Storm-God in the posture of the "smiting god", *i.e.* a god brandishing a weapon with his right arm as if he was about to smite a foe. He is dressed in a short tunic and wears a pointed tiara decorated with horns, from which a long lock of hair runs down his back. He holds a weapon in each hand. Next comes a winged and armed figure, wearing a cylindrical headdress with two horns. The identification of this deity – due to the hairdress clearly characterised as female – is challenging for lack of contemporary Syrian religious texts; the most convincing interpretation is that of the goddess Anat, Ba'al's companion.³ Opposite the Storm-God is standing another deity with long hair, wearing a horned helmet topped by a crescent. So far, it is impossible to recognize the sex of this figure, since the long hair can be worn by male and female deities. But it is tempting to interpret this deity either as the Moon-God himself or as Ningal, his female companion, who played an important role in the Mesopotamian pantheon from the third to the first millennium BC.⁴ The close association of the Storm-God and the Moon-God (of Harran) in this area in the first millennium BC has often been emphasized.⁵ This seal is a further hint that this close connection goes back to at least the second millennium.

An incense burner placed between these two deities illustrates the veneration of both and their status on a par. Other elements in the field are the Egyptian *ankh* sign, a scorpion and a star – so-called filling motifs which are found on every example of this seal group from Tell Ahmar. The iconography, style and composition of these five seals are so homogeneous that they must have been produced by the same workshop. Dozens of seals from the art market are so similar that they can be tentatively attributed to the same workshop.⁶ It is therefore reasonable

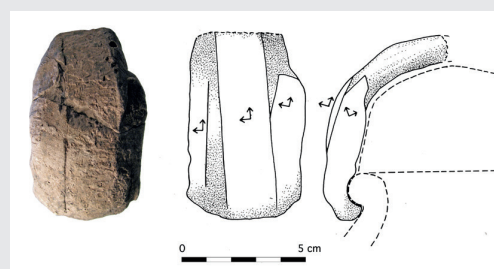


Fig. c. Languette used to seal a jar (M11 O.47) (drawing: Adelheid Otto). Fine clay strips are shown in white, with arrows indicating the orientation of the seal impressions. Dotted areas indicate the crude clay lump in which the strips were embedded.

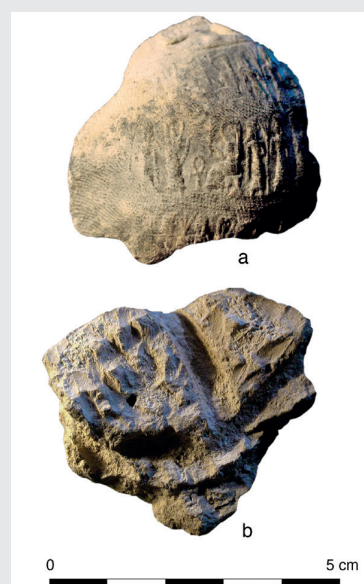


Fig. d. Bag or basket sealing (M10 O.10.4); a) obverse: the seal has been rolled at least three times on the fresh clay; b) reverse: marks left by the canvas of a bag and by the cord that was used to fasten the bag.

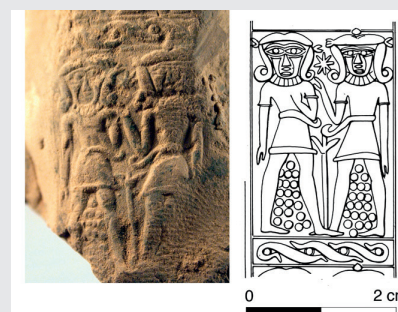


Fig. e. Impression of a seal engraved with the figure of two giants (M11 O.11.31) (drawing: Adelheid Otto).

to assume that the workshop was active at Tell Ahmar itself or in its vicinity.

A completely different scene was depicted on a small seal which was only 1.5 cm high (Fig. g). Two pairs of two figures each are depicted. The main scene shows a female person in adoration standing in front of an enthroned woman who is holding a branch in her right hand. Both women are covering their heads with peculiar veils. A crescent moon and the *ankh* sign are depicted between them. The secondary scene shows two figures in long garments with long hair opposite a pole with a three-pronged top. Especially remarkable are the two women of the main scene, since they are dressed in a typical Syrian fashion. Due to the fact that Syrian deities do not necessarily wear a horned crown, it is difficult to know if two mortal women or two goddesses are depicted in an adoration scene. What is certain, however, is that this type of female person is frequent only on Syrian seals, which can be attributed to the Middle Bronze Age II period on stylistic grounds, but most of which are without provenience unfortunately, except for one example from Ugarit.⁷ Although this seal seems very different from the seals of the “Storm-God Group” from Tell Ahmar at first sight, a seal from the art market bridges the gap between these seals: it depicts both – the Storm-God opposite the winged armed goddess, and the ‘veiled woman’.⁸ Therefore it may be assumed that both seals (Figs f and g) originated in Tell Ahmar. We can even go a step further and attribute the majority of the impressed seals to a distinctive “Tell Ahmar Seal Style”.

Completely different in motif and style and probably not of local origin are the impressions of three “Common Style” seals showing stylized figures with raised spade-shaped hands. The type of sealing and the kind of clay indicate that these pieces had entered the buildings with imported goods. Seals of this kind are known in northern Syria and Anatolia in the Assyrian merchant colonies from around 1800 to the seventeenth century.⁹ A rather coarse seal made of clay, decorated only with incised lines, may come from the same region (Fig. 96).¹⁰

Dating of the seals

The seals are undoubtedly Old Syrian. However, their precise place in the Old Syrian glyptic is not easy to determine, as there are few Syrian seals that are accurately dated to the period after 1760 (in middle chronology). The best point of reference is still Alalakh VII, from which two comparable seals originate.¹¹ Furthermore, the evolution of the style as well as the motifs of the Tell Ahmar seals, especially the thickened fringe of the garments, show that these seals are later than 1760, but must pre-date the last phase of Alalakh VII.¹² They must therefore date to the

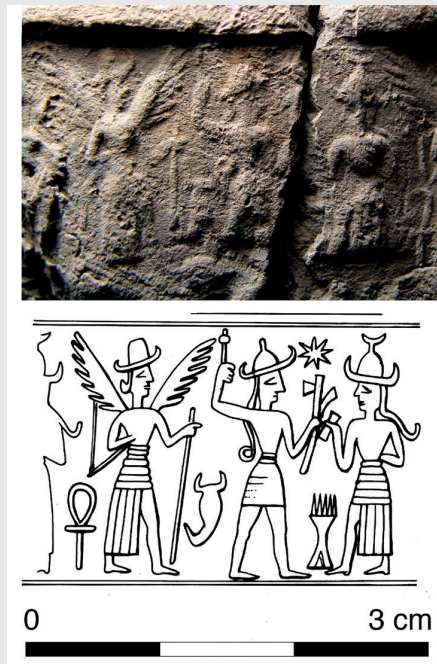


Fig. f. Impression of a seal engraved with a religious scene involving the Storm-God (M11 O.11.56) (drawing: Adelheid Otto).

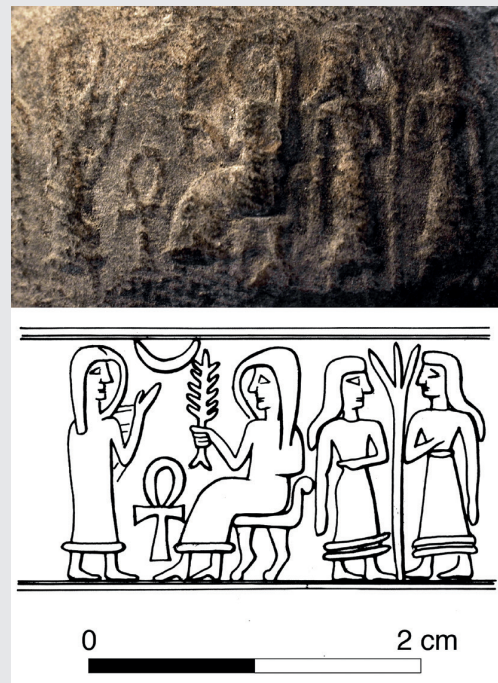


Fig. g. Impression of a seal engraved with female figures (M10 O.10.4) (drawing: Adelheid Otto).

period from around 1760 to 1700, a period that is difficult to pinpoint due to the lack of dated examples. The Middle Bronze II context of the Tell Ahmar sealings thus offer a most precious new point of reference for numerous seals which have so far not been attributed to any region or period.

In short, the seal impressions show that Tell Ahmar was a place where goods could be stored and processed in permanent storehouses. In addition, they also bear witness to contacts with Anatolia. It should be remembered that many impressions of Karahöyük, Acemhöyük and *Kārum* Kanish Ib also come from the Carchemish region. As one of the main Old Assyrian trade routes crossed the Euphrates in this region, these seal impressions are a testimony to the importance of the role played by Tell Ahmar as a stage on the trade route linking Assyria with Anatolia and Syria in the second half of the eighteenth century.

Notes

- 1 Although I was never present at Tell Ahmar during the excavations, I was able to study the sealings in the National Museum of Aleppo in 2008. The final publication of the sealings is in preparation by the author.
- 2 A. OTTO, *Tall Bi'a/Tuttul IV, Siegel und Siegelabrollungen*, WDOG 104, Saarbrücken 2004, pp. 53–56, 111–113, pls 58–63, 111–114, 118–119. Around 363 jar sealings with embedded sealed strips (or *languettes*) were found in the palace of king Yasmah-Adad at Tuttul, 350 of which had been sealed by a servant of his father, Shamshi-Adad.
- 3 W. ORTHMANN, *Untersuchungen zur späthethitischen Kunst*, Saarbrücker Beiträge zur Altertumskunde 8, Bonn 1971, p. 273; D. COLLON, A cylinder seal with a camel in the Walters Art Gallery. *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery 36, Essays in Honor of Dorothy Kent Hill*, 1977, p. 2.
- 4 A. ZGOLL, Ningal A. I. In Mesopotamien, *RLA* 9 (2001), pp. 352–356.
- 5 G. BUNNENS, *A New Luwian Stele and the Cult of the Storm-God at Til Barsib–Masuwari*. TELL AHMAR II, Leuven-Paris-Dudley (MA) 2006, pp. 70–73 with relevant literature.
- 6 See for example a nearly identical seal: B. TEISSIER, *Ancient Near Eastern Seals from the Marcopoli Collection*, Berkeley-London 1984, No 475.
- 7 The seal R.S. 7.181 (according to the excavator, found not far from the stele of the *Baal au Foudre*) depicts a similar woman in adoration and a similar storm god. See C.F.-A. SCHAEFFER-FORRER, *Corpus des cylindres-sceaux de Ras Shamra – Ugarit et d'Enkomi Alasia*, Paris 1983, pp. 25–26.
- 8 B. TEISSIER, *op. cit.* (n. 6), No 483.
- 9 S. MAZZONI, Continuity and development in the Syrian and Cypriote Common Glyptic styles, *Insight through Images: Studies in honor of Edith Porada*, ed. M. KELLY-BUCELLATI, Bibliotheca Mesopotamica 21, Malibu 1986, pp. 171–182; S. ALP, *Zylinder- und Stempelsiegel aus Karahöyük bei Konya*, Ankara 1968, pls 12–14.
- 10 S. ALP, *op. cit.* (n. 9), pls 15.34.
- 11 D. COLLON, *The Seal Impressions from Tell Atchana/Alalakh*, *Alter Orient und Altes Testament* 27, Kevelaer-Neukirchen-Vluyn 1975, Nos 20, 21.
- 12 For the development of Syrian glyptic in the eighteenth century and the change around 1760 see A. OTTO, *Die Entstehung und Entwicklung der Klassisch-Syrischen Glyptik. Untersuchungen zur Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie* 8, Berlin–New York 2000, pp. 279–281.