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**ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIAN CYLINDER SEALS
IN THE MUSEUM OF HISTORICAL TREASURES OF UKRAINE**

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The Museum of Historical Treasures of Ukraine, branch of the National Museum of the History of Ukraine holds five cylinder seals allegedly made of chalcedony that were confiscated at customs between late 1990s and early 2000s. Cylinder seals are important objects of the ancient Mesopotamian culture as they were rolled over clay tablets for ratification. At the same time, depictions with motifs from religion and daily life were carved onto them. The seals in Ukraine provide an interesting overview of almost three

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thousand years of sealing practice in Ancient Mesopotamia. One of the more common themes in seals is the presentation scene, which contains a standing worshipper led by a goddess before a seated deity. Three of the seals in the Museum of Historical Treasures are variants of this scene, although two of them are executed crudely and are of dubious authenticity. They seem to imitate the Sumerian Ur III style. Examples of glyptic art from this period can be found in the collection of the Vernadsky National Library in Kyiv, which holds three Sumerian Ur III tablets with impressions of cylinder seals. The third seal with the presentation scene in the museum is dated to the Old Babylonian period and is notable for an Ugallu demon being depicted inverted. One seal in the collection depicts severed human heads among twigs in a floral motif. The final seal to be discussed dates to the Neo-Assyrian Empire of the 1st millennium BCE and is recognizable by the depiction of a Lamassu – a winged bull with human head. This study provides a catalogue of the seals present in the museum, with a short introduction to the practice of sealing and its terminology in native languages in the Ancient Near East.

Keywords: Mesopotamia, Sumerian, Babylonian, Syria, Ur III, cylinder seals, glyptic art, iconography, Lamassu, Ugallu

From before writing was invented, seals were used to store and transmit information. In ancient Mesopotamia, modern Iraq, Syrian and Turkey, they were widely used by both men and women, high and low to denote ownership, association, and liability, much like a modern signature. The cylinder seal, a particular type of spool-shaped seal which was rolled onto the surface of clay tablets, envelopes, tags and bullae, was most common in the earlier phases of Mesopotamian history, from c. 3400 BCE onward, but was superseded by stamp seals of various shapes in the 1st millennium BCE.

Images and signs were carved into the surface of the seal with fine drills, blades, gougers and abrasive slurries, so as to appear in relief when rolled out or stamped. Inscriptions were usually craved in mirror, so they would be legible in the impression, but not on the seal stone itself. They were generally not much larger than a bead and range in height from no more than ten centimeters to just around one centimeter. They were made of different types of stone, metal, shell, faience, glass and other materials, some imported over very large distances and others artificially made. The materials had important magical and symbolic significance and the color could be enhanced or changed with dyes and heat. Both stamp and cylinder seals were pierced for suspension, and sometimes traces of metal pins are still

extant in the hole. Seals represent one of the most varied sources of Mesopotamian art and culture, with developments in style and iconography across time. One of the most popular themes is the presentation scene, which contains a standing worshipper led by a goddess before a seated deity. This type was standardized in the Ur III empire and remained popular in the Old Babylonian and Assyrian periods [Collon 2005, 36b]. An example can be seen on a seal impression on a tablet held in the Institute of the Manuscripts of the V. I. Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine (**Fig. 1**).



Fig. 1. Impression of an Ur III seal in the Institute of the Manuscripts of the V. I. Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine (photo by Elyze Zomer)

In Sumerian the word for seal is KIŠIB whereas in Akkadian (Assyrian/Babylonian) *kunukku* is used, which is closely related to the verb *kanāku* ‘to seal’. Both forms use the same set of consonants *k-n-k*, which are also found in words derived from it: *kaniktu* ‘sealed document’, *kanīku* ‘(also) sealed document’, *kanku* ‘sealed (adjective)’, *kanniku* ‘sealer’, *kinku* ‘sealing’, *maknaktu* ‘seal’, *maknaktu* ‘sealed container’. We do not know where the word *kunukku* ‘seal’ comes from, but it may be associated with same word for ‘vertebra’ as one could associate the word with the bone. As the shape of the vertebra differs significantly from a cylinder seal, one may suspect that it relates to the animal bone the seals were carved from.

In Ukraine, a couple of examples of Mesopotamian glyptic art are known. Some well-preserved impressions of Ur III seals can be found on three of the five cuneiform tablets held in the Institute of the

Manuscripts of the V. I. Vernadsky National Library of Ukraine¹. The Museum of Historical Treasures of Ukraine², branch of the National Museum of the History of Ukraine, holds five seals that were confiscated at customs between the late 1990s and early 2000s. They were discovered on a cargo ship in the port of Chornomorsk. As the origin of the seals could not be established, they became state property and were eventually transferred to the museum. They are allegedly made of chalcedony. However, it was not possible for the authors to inspect the seals in persons, so that the material cannot be confirmed. The five seals represent some one thousand years of Mesopotamian seal history³. Seal 1 and seal 2 are roughly contemporaneous, one deriving from northern Mesopotamia and the other from the south. Seal 2 shows very typical imagery: a ritual scene in which a hero (possibly semi-divine) and a human, presumably meant to represent the seal owner, approach a divinity. A series of secondary motifs evoke different deities and apotropaic characters. The imagery of seal 1, a floral motif in which some of the petals seemingly are represented as bearded human heads, is unique. Seal 4 dates to the early 1st millennium BCE and shows a man attacking a so-called *lamassu*, an Assyrian guardian figure. It is unclear why a benevolent creature would be attacked in this manner. Seal 3 and 5 are probably forgeries. They could have been made using an original old seal stone, which had been worn to the point where the original imagery was no longer legible. The forger was clearly aware of Mesopotamian glyptic art and devised it to appear like an authentic seal from the Ur III period.

Catalogue

Seal 1: ДМ – 8564 (Fig. 2).

Measurements (mm): L – 25,2; D-ends – 10,9/12,2; D-middle – 13,2; Hole D – 6,4.

Material: chalcedony.

Period/Culture: 2nd millennium BCE, Syria.

¹ A study to these tablets is forthcoming [de Ridder, Zomer 2022, *Revue d'assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale* 115]. See also [Туряевъ 1900] on some of these tablets.

² From August 1, 2021 the museum was renamed to the Treasury of the National Museum of the History of Ukraine.

³ For a general overview of the discussed historical periods, see for instance [van de Mieroop 2015].

Description: A floral motif consisting of winding and branching stems and leaves or petals interspersed. Three or four of the leaves appear to take the form of severed human heads, but it is unclear if this is intentional. Direct parallels are unknown to me. There are Classical Syrian cylinder seals with decorative floral patterns [Teissier 1996, *seal nos.* 228–233]. Relying on the size of the seal, stone type and comparable floral imagery, a tentative date for the seal may be Middle to Late Bronze Age Syria.



Fig. 2. Seal 1 (DM – 8561) (© NMHU; photo by D. Klochko, drawing by E. Velychko)

Seal 2: DM – 8562 (Fig. 3).

Measurements (mm): L – 28,5; D-top 15,5; D-middle – 14,8; Hol – 5.

Material: chalcedony.

Period/Culture: Old Babylonian (c. 1900–1600 BCE).

Description: A male figure, possibly with a short, pointed beard, wearing a kilt or tunic and a crested cap stands with his legs apart and

his left arm raised. His right hand is on his chest. In front of him is male robed figure in a crested cap with one arm lifted in front of face in a so-called *shu-illa* gesture. Facing them is a standing deity wearing a long, flounced robe and a horned headdress and with the right arm raised. Adjacent to the three figures is an inverted hybrid creature consisting of human and animal parts, identified as the lion-demon, *ugallu* in Akkadian [Wiggermann 2007, 110–111]. It has a human body with a lion head and bird talons (Fig. 4). It wears a short kilt and holds a dagger in one hand, a mace in the other. The three standing figures are based on a groundline, which does not extend to the inverted Ugallu demon. Instead, the demon appears suspended in free air. Between the standing figures are: a so-called “bow-legged dwarf”, which may represent itinerant dancers and musicians [Collon 2005] and dog with a crook on its head, which was a symbol of the goddess Gula. In the field above are a mongoose and a crescent.



Fig. 3. Seal 2 (DM – 8562) (© NMHU; photo by D. Klochko & E. Velychko, drawing by E. Velychko)

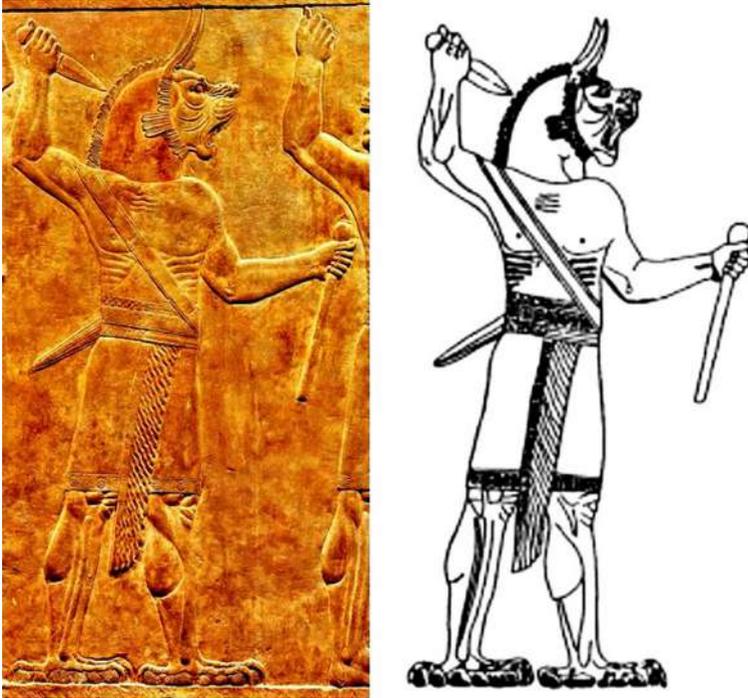


Fig. 4. The image of Ugallu-demon on the Neo-Assyrian relief from the North Palace at Nineveh (reign of Ashurbanipal), London BM 118918 (© The Trustees of the British Museum; drawing after [Green 1988, *pl. XI, a*])

Seal 3: ДМ – 8563 (Fig. 5).

Measurements (mm): L – 27,9; D – 14,5; Hole D – 5,5.

Material: chalcedony.

Period/Culture: modern.

Description: Contains a presentation scene with an inscription in pseudo-scrip on the legend. Two standing figures wearing long robes and with their right arm raised approach a seated figure in a long robe and with one hand held forward. The dress of the three figures is hatched with vertical and horizontal lines. Their faces are not discernible. There is a crescent in the upper field in front of the seated figure. There is a three-line inscription, each line separated with vertical lines. Most of the signs consist of a combination of a vertical and

two horizontal wedges. The inscription is illegible. At first glance, the seal appears to be from the Ur III period, but details suggest that the seal is a forgery. For instance, the representation of dress is not consistent with what would appear on an ancient seal. The dividing lines in the inscription are not straight. The vague/lacking facial features could be caused by significant wear or weathering on the seal, but the deep and clear lines in the dress are inconsistent with this explanation. Finally, the signs in the inscription are made to look like cuneiform but are not real signs. See above for an example of an actual Ur III seal impression with presentation scene.



Fig. 5. Seal 3 (DM – 8563) (© NMHU; photo by D. Klochko & E. Velychko, drawing by E. Velychko)

Seal 4: DM – 8561 (**Fig. 6**).

Measurements (mm): L – 31; D – 13; Hole – 3.

Material: chalcedony.

Period/Culture: Neo-Assyrian period (934–612 BCE).

Description: Kneeling man with a short, pointed beard facing left towards a winged, human-headed lion or bull. The man wears a cap

and a belted robe. He holds weapons in both hands, attacking the winged creature with a pointed weapon in his right hand. The winged creature is bearded and also wears a cap. Behind them are two bottle-brush type trees and a 6-pointed star. The winged creature is a type of Lamassu [Black, Green 2004, 51], usually benevolent guardian figures for the Assyrians, but here victim of attack. The seal is carved in the Assyrian linear style and its imagery is similar to a typical scene type in this style, which shows the kneeling man attacking an animal or Lamassu with bow and arrow, the so-called ‘archer and prey’ group.

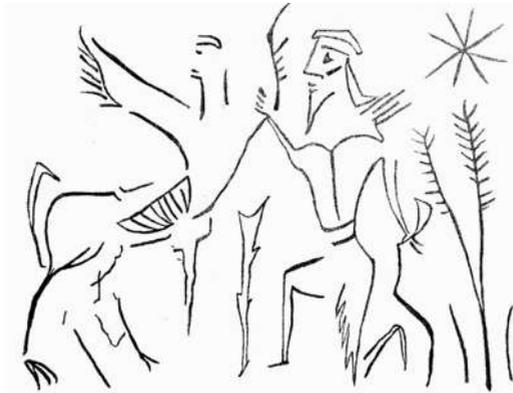


Fig. 6. Seal 4 (DM – 8564) (© NMHU; photo by D. Klochko & E. Velychko, drawing by E. Velychko)

Seal 5: ДМ – 8565 (Fig. 7).

Measurements (mm): L – 18,3 and 15,7 (sides have different lengths); D – 9;

Hole D – 3.

Period/Culture: modern.

Description: Contains vague traces of a presentation scene with an inscription in pseudo-scrip on the legend. This seal is comparable with the Ur III forgery Seal 4 (Fig. 6), however it remains unfinished. The arms and part of the dress of the worshipper figure and goddess seem to be visible.

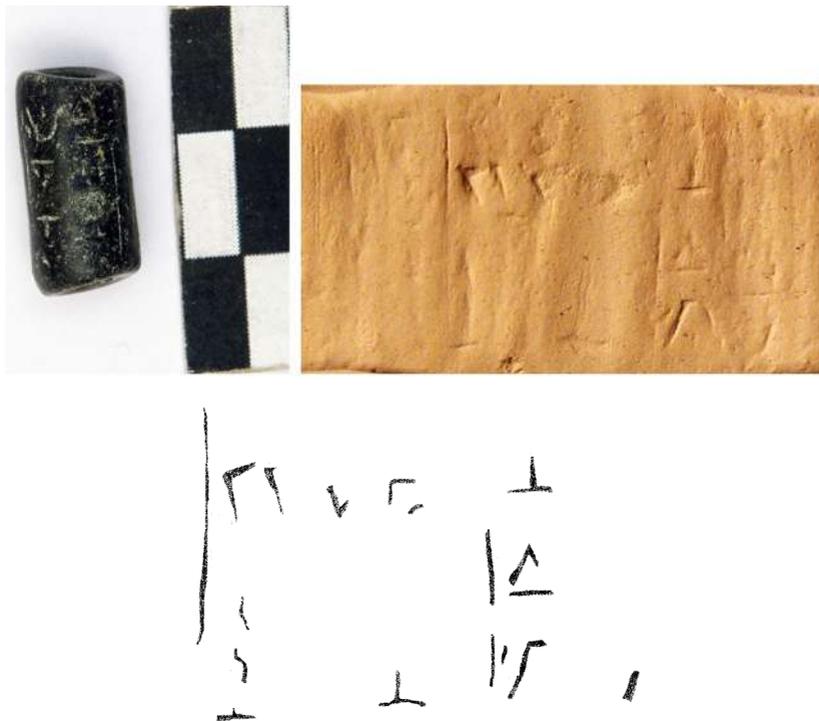


Fig. 7. Seal 5 (ДМ – 8565) (© NMHU; photo by D. Klochko & E. Velychko, drawing by E. Velychko)

Conclusions

The Museum of Historical Treasures of Ukraine contains five Mesopotamian cylinder seals in four different styles. Seal 1 is Northern

Mesopotamian and has a floral motif with severed human heads. Seal 2 is Old Babylonian and contains a variant of the presentation style. Seal 4 is Neo-Assyrian and shows a Lamassu winged bull. Seals 3 and 5 appear to be modern forgeries of Ur III era seals.

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ДАВНЬОМЕСОПОТАМСЬКІ ЦИЛІНДРИЧНІ ПЕЧАТКИ З МУЗЕЮ ІСТОРИЧНИХ КОШТОВНОСТЕЙ УКРАЇНИ

Музей історичних коштовностей України зберігає п'ять циліндричних печаток із халцедону, які були вилучені на митниці в кінці 1990-х – на початку 2000-х рр. Циліндричні печатки є важливим об'єктом давньо-месопотамської культури, оскільки їх намотували на глиняні таблички для ратифікації. Водночас на них були вирізані зображення з мотивами з релігії та повсякденного життя. Печатки з України дають цікавий огляд майже трьохтисячолітньої практики запечатування в Стародавній Месопотамії. Однією з найпоширеніших тем печаток є сцена посвячення, яка зображує людину, що стоїть на чолі з богинею перед сидячим божеством. На трьох печатках з Музею історичних коштовностей України зображено варіанти цієї сцени, хоча дві з них виконані грубо і мають сумнівну достовірність. Здається, вони імітують шумерський стиль Ура III. Приклади гліптичного мистецтва цього періоду можна знайти в колекції Інституту рукопису Національної бібліотеки імені В. І. Вернадського в Києві, де зберігаються три шумерські таблички Ура III з відбитками на циліндричних печатках. Третя печатка зі сценою посвячення з музею датується Староавілонським періодом і примітна демоном Угаллу, який зображений перевернутим. Одна печатка з колекції зображує відрубані людські голови серед гілочок у квітковому мотиві. Остання печатка, яку слід обговорити, датується часом Новоасирійської імперії 1-го тисячоліття до н. е. і атрибутується за зображенням Ламасу – крилатого бика з людською головою. У цьому дослідженні представлений каталог печаток, що зберігаються в музеї, з коротким вступом до практики опечатування та її термінології автентичними мовами на Стародавньому Близькому Сході.

Ключові слова: Месопотамія, Шумер, Вавилон, Сирія, Ур III, циліндричні печатки, мистецтво гліптики, іконопис, Ламасу, Угаллу

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