

# IMPORTED AND LOCAL CYLINDER SEALS IN THE OMAN PENINSULA: FINDS FROM KALBA, TELL ABRAQ AND MLEIHA (SHARJAH EMIRATE, U.A.E.)

By

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## Abstract:

Few cylinder seals have been reported from the Oman Peninsula; nevertheless, the existence of a local cylinder seal production has been suggested. Less than 40 seals and sealings are presently published and the addition of seals to the known repertory and the analysis of their iconography can shed new light on the SE-Arabian society and its relations with neighboring regions. This contribution presents seven cylinder seals that have been excavated at Kalba K4, Tell Abraq and Mleiha in Sharjah Emirate, UAE.

**Keywords:** cylinder seal, Tell Abraq, Kalba, Mleiha, Neo-Assyrian period, snake cult, Sharjah, UAE.

The regular trade contacts of SE-Arabia with Mesopotamia and Iran are well attested, yet they did not lead to a significant adoption of Mesopotamian sealing practices. In his 2010 survey of cylinder seals and their use in the Arabian Peninsula, Potts listed 114 seals but these were overwhelmingly from the Northern parts of the gulf and the islands where the strongest Mesopotamian presence is documented; merely 14 derived from the Oman Peninsula, 11 from the UAE and 3 from the Sultanate of Oman (Potts 2010)(1). Several more have since been mentioned in literature but their

number remains low. The large seal repertoire from Saruq al-Hadid, which covers the Bronze and Iron Age periods, is symptomatic in this regard. It is a clear illustration of the strong preference for stamp seals in SE-Arabia. Only 5 cylinder seals were found, which is a fraction of the number of stamp seals at the site (David-Cuny et al. 2018). It seems that although a local production of (predominantly stamp) seals existed, seals were used mostly either as beads or amulets or as exotic status symbols, particularly in the case of imported cylinder seals, often in locally rare materials such as faience or frit (Potts 2010: 37-38). Cylinder seals remain the exception in the Oman Peninsula. Their role and use, their iconography, the possible local production; our understanding of all this remains fragmentary at best. This contribution presents 7 cylinder seals that were discovered in Sharjah Emirate. Two of these derive from Kalba mound K4, three from Tell Abraq and two from Mleiha.

## The Cylinder Seals from Kalba Mound K4.

The two seals were already discovered in the 1990s during excavations at Kalba mound K4 but have never been adequately published. K4 is one of a group of mounds near the modern city of Kalba on the narrow Eastern coast of Sharjah Emirate (GPS: 25.085539°; 56.345076°). It is a multi-period site with a documented occupation from at least the Early Bronze Age (Umm an-Nar period) to the Iron Age II. At its center is an Early Bronze Age mud-brick tower, a construction that was expanded several times in major building programs. The first excavations at the site were directed by Carl Phillips from 1993 until 2001 on behalf of University College London's Institute of Archaeology but they remain largely unpublished (Carter, 1997; Eddisford & Phillips, 2009). The research at Kalba K4 has now been resumed by Sharjah Archaeology Authority (SAA) and the Institute of Oriental and European Archaeology (OREA) of the Austrian Academy of Sciences (Schwall & Jasim, 2020; Schwall, Brandl, Börner et al., 2022).

(1) The following seals complete Potts' 2010 list: Rumeilah (2 stone seals: Lombard, 1998, pp. 156-160, fig. 1 nr 10-11); Saruq al-Hadid (3 stone & 2 frit or faience seals: Boraik Radwan Karim, David-Cuny, Mahmoud & Yousif Al-Ali, 2017; David-Cuny, Boraik, Mahmoud & Yousef, 2018); Qidfa' 1 (1 frit or faience seal: al-Tikriti, 2022, pp. 68-69, fig. 208, Pl. 113. Note that fig. 211 was listed in Potts, 2010, as nrs 94 & 112); Dibba al-Bayah (1 frit or faience seal & 2 local stone seals: Frenéz, Genchi, David-Cuny & Al-Bakri, 2021, pp. 113-115, fig. 6; Genchi, 2022, timestamp 30:17); Salut (2 stone seals: Degli-Esposti, 2014); Adam-Mudhmar (1 frit or faience and 1 stone seal: Gernez & Jean, 2017, p. 11, fig. 9-10; Gernez & Giraud, 2017, pp. 76-77, fig. 6.35).

As the cylinder seals were discovered during the 1990s excavations, we lack precise information about their discovery or stratigraphic context. Both were listed by Potts in his above-mentioned survey but he only had a sketch of their impressions and much of the iconography remained at the time unintelligible (Potts, 2010, p. 34, fig. 13 nrs 95 - 96). The recent production of new impressions of both seals, which are presently in the care of the Sharjah Archaeological Museum (inv. nr SM 1998-639) and of the Sharjah Archaeology Authority (inv. nr SM 5079 / SAA 82J), makes it now possible to discuss their iconography in more detail.

### Kalba K4 cylinder seal with feline (?) and rosette.

Sharjah Archaeology Authority Inv. Nr. SM 5079 / SAA 82J.

Stone.

H. 22.9 mm; Diam. Seal 9.2 mm.

Publication: Potts, 2010, p. 34, fig. 13 nr. 96.



Fig. 1. Cylinder seal from Kalba K4 (inv. SM 5079 / SAA 82J).

Half of the upper part of the seal is missing and the published sketch of its impression by C. Phillips and E. Thompson was upside down (Potts, 2010,

fig. 13). Its new sealing provides much more detail and an animal sitting in front of a rosette can be recognized (Figs 1 and 3). The animal's head and back is missing which complicates its identification but judging from its posture and tail, it is a predator, in all probability a (possibly winged) lion, gryphon or sphinx. Such creatures of Assyro-Babylonian inspiration occur on other SE-Arabian seals (Fig. 2), e.g. on stamp seals from Saruq al-Hadid (David-Cuny, Boraik, Mahmoud & Yousef, 2018) and on a fragmentary, sawn off cylinder seal from Adam-Mudhmar (Gernez & Jean, 2017). The rosette consists of 4 linked palmettes, interspaced with 4 buds. An identical pattern with respectively 5 and 6 palmettes and buds is present on Early Iron Age shell discs found at Saruq al-Hadid and Dibba (Fig. 2). They belong to a group of shell ornaments of Mesopotamian and Iranian inspiration (Weeks, David-Cuny, Avanzini et al., 2019, p. 215, fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Top : Iron Age Shell discs with linked “palmettes and buds” from Saruq al-Hadid and Dibba (after Weeks, David-Cuny, Avanzini et al., 2019, fig. 2); Bottom: Iron Age seals with (left to right) a lion and a winged gryphon from Saruq al-Hadid (after David-Cuny, Boraik, Mahmoud & Yousef, 2018) and a winged sphinx from Adam-Mudhmar (after Gernez & Jean, 2017, fig. 10).

The pattern of linked palmettes and buds is the core component of one type of Near Eastern “Sacred Tree” or “Tree of Life”. Botanical details identifies their origin unequivocally as the buds and blossoms of the Egyptian lotus, a plant with narcotic properties (McDonald, 2002). These components are sometimes described as palmettes, flowers, pomegranates or opium poppies (Weeks, David-Cuny, Avanzini et al., 2019, p. 216) and the identification is not always straightforward. In regions where the lotus was not native, other flora such as palms and pomegranates often inspired

“Sacred Tree” representations and there appears to be a variety of shapes and elements that was used for this enigmatic symbol. The precise meaning and identity of this key symbol in the Ancient Near East is a much-debated topic since their mid 19th century discovery on Assyrian reliefs (Giovino, 2007). Compositionally, the Assyrian tree is often centrally placed between two figures who perform a ritual with a bucket and a pine-cone type of object. Although there is no consensus on the exact meaning and function of this ritual due to the lack of contemporary written sources, it seems the tree symbolized the divine world order and in some ritual depictions it is replaced by an image of the king (Parpola, 1993: pp. 167-168). In other portrayals, it is a rosette that substitutes the Sacred Tree, an image that may be a derivative from a specific type of Sacred Tree that is topped by a circular rosette (Fig. 3; see Parpola, 1993, p. 201, top row).

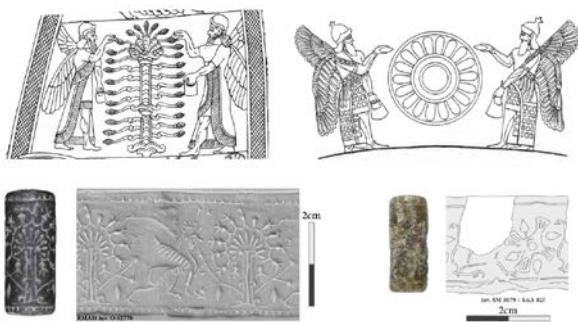


Fig. 3. Interchangeability of the Sacred Tree (left) and the rosette (right) in Neo-Assyrian cultic scenes.

Top: Textile patterns on palace reliefs from Nimrud and Khorsabad (after Giovino, 2007, figs 13 & 100).

Bottom: unprovenanced Neo-Assyrian seal with winged sphinx and Sacred Tree (Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels, inv. O.02770) and the Kalba K4 seal SM 5079 / SAA 82J with rosette.

The circular representation must be seen as an alternative depiction of the traditional Sacred Tree, maybe it is simply a top view of it (on this opinion, see Giovino, 2007, p. 116 note 307). The Kalba seal motive, a (mythical?) animal sitting in front of such a symbol, mimics a familiar Mesopotamian theme and cylinder seal concept (compare Fig. 3; RMAH O.02770: Niederreiter, 2020, p. 74-76, nr 26). Although the Assyro-Babylonian inspired iconography of the Kalba seal could suggest the seal was an import, a local Early Iron Age production is not excluded.

### Kalba K4 cylinder seal with worshipper and celestial symbols.

Sharjah Archaeological Museum, Inv. Nr SM 1998-639.

Stone.

H. 35 mm; Diam. Seal 8 mm.

Publication: Potts, 2010, p. 34, fig. 13 nr. 95; Cordoba, 2016, p. 61 nr. 53.



Fig. 4. Cylinder seal from Kalba K4 (inv. SM 1998-639).

This slender cylinder seal in a yellow-green stone shows a “stick-like” human figure with raised hands and two circles next to the head (hair or earrings?) who seems to wear a kind of loincloth. It looks as if the figure holds something (a knife?) in the right hand. Next to the human figure are 6 dots, a standard and a square stand with a pole or vessel. Underneath the left foot was another item. Only a single horizontal line remains, however. A palm leaf delineates the scene. Potts – who published a sketch of this seal – suggested to see a standard or offering table in the lower item and possibly an inversed second human figure in the large feature next to it (Potts, 2010, p. 34). The stance of the main figure with its raised hands is similar to that of men with a dagger or short sword at the waist on a decorated tubular soft stone amulet, bead or seal from Qidfa and on two stamp seals from Tell Abraq (Fig. 5), which Ziolkowsky had compared to figures on rock drawings in the region (Ziolkowsky, 2007, pp. 222-223, 231 fig. 67, pp. 238-239 note 170). The former seal had been discovered in 1986 in the upper chamber of a tomb at Qidfa (Ziolkowsky, 2007, fig. 67; Potts, 2010, p. 34 nr 52; al-Tikriti, 2022, pp. 70-71, fig. 211). The object was found with a plain tubular bead and the image is only superficially scratched, not deep enough to be efficiently used for sealings, hence the excavator’s view that it may rather be a decorated bead or amulet (al-Tikriti, 2022, pp. 70-72, fig. 211-212). Its decoration covers only half of the cylinder’s surface, a curious characteristic that it shares with an Iron Age II cylinder seal from

Rumeilah however (see Fig. 12; Lombard, 1998, pp. 156-160, fig. 1.10).



Fig. 5. Stick- like human figures with raised hands on Iron Age beads, amulets or stamp seals and on a cylinder seal.

Far left: seal or bead from Qidfa 1 (after al-Tikriti, 2022, fig. 211); center: amulet/stamp seals from Tell Abraq (after Potts, 1991, fig. 96 & 97); right: cylinder seal from Adam North (after Gernez & Giraud, 2017, fig. 6.35)

Identifying such stylized iconography is always speculative but recent finds have facilitated the interpretation of the Kalba K4 seal. The seal belongs to a series of SE-Arabian stamp and cylinder seals with drawings in a simple, somewhat naive linear style and stick-like human figures, which suggests a common background. Apart from the Qidfa seal/bead mentioned above, seals from Tell Abraq (Potts, 1991, pp. 96-97, fig. 137-138), Saruq al-Hadid (David-Cuny, Boraik, Mahmoud, & Yousef, 2018) and Adam North (Gernez & Giraud, 2017, pp. 76-77, fig. 6.34 & 6.35) can be mentioned (Fig. 5). Two more cylinder seals from Dibba remain to be fully published: DA.43512 (banqueting scene: 2 seated figures, each holding a drinking cup, face each other across a table with a spouted jar on top) and DA.42343 (deer hunting or offering scene?). The latter seal also has a “stick-like” figure with raised hands who faces symbols and deer, one of which is decapitated (Genchi, 2022, timestamp 30:17).

The cylinder seal from Adam North (Fig. 5) shares the same human figure with raised hands and is elementary to the understanding of the Kalba scene as a cultic event. The figure - given the direction of the legs/feet - faces a vertical pole with two horizontal bars on a stand. A palm leaf or tree closes the scene and acts as a vertical scene delineator. The scene offers a striking parallel for

the Kalba image which can only be understood as a similar worshipper addressing divine symbols. Positively identifying all 4 or 5 symbols on the Kalba seal is not possible but the principal symbol clearly represents a lunar disc on a stand with leaves at its base and with an horizontal bar with pending tassels (compare Fig. 6); next to it are a group of 6 dots, a stand with vessel or mace (?) and a palm leaf. Such symbols as representations of divinities are characteristic for Neo-Assyrian iconography (Fig. 6; Ornan, 2004; 2005).



Fig. 6. Impressions of Neo-Assyrian seals with divine symbols.

Left: worshipper in front of divine symbols and a table with offerings (Khorsabad; after Ornan, 2005, p. 279, fig. 196). Right: divine symbols and worshippers around a stand with two vessels (unprovenanced; after Keel-Leu & Teissier, 2004, pp. 184-185, 405 nr 192).

The Kalba worshipping scene resembles that on a seal from the Neo-Assyrian capital of Khorsabad (Fig. 6), which also includes a tree/palm leaf and a mace in the scene. A lunar disc on a stand and a tree is a characteristic combination on Neo-Assyrian seals (Ornan, 2005, pp. 165-167), as is the combination with 7 dots, representing the Sibittu. These 7 deities are identified with the brightest planets in the Pleiades star cluster. They are a very popular theme on Neo-Assyrian seals and are mostly represented as three pairs of dots followed by a seventh single dot (Konstantopoulos, 2015, pp. 292 – 302, 324 – 367). This arrangements of the dots in pairs and its association with the moon

symbol, argues for the identification of the Kalba dots with the Sibittu, despite the absence of a seventh dot. Why only six would be shown is not clear, possibly it was an oversight of the engraver. The small square with the central dot and the vertical pole topped by a globe could represent a mace (compare fig. 6 left) but it is also possible that it represents a stand with a vessel, similar to that 2 vessels on fig. 6 (right) and on a calcite cylinder seal from Tell Abraq (Potts 1991: fig. 109).

Although the worshipping scene on Inv. Nr. SM 1998-639 is related to Neo-Assyrian scenes, the rather naïve, linear style and the specific stance with raised hands of the worshipper - which is familiar from other Iron Age II seals in the region - suggests it may be of local manufacture. If correct, it would provide a rare insight into Iron Age religious beliefs and practices of a region from which we have no contemporary written records.

### The Cylinder Seals from Tell Abraq

Tell Abraq is one of the rare remaining tells on the UAE West coast and like Kalba K4 on the East coast, it had a long occupation from at least the Early Bronze Age to the Mleiha period. The strategically located site is now a few kilometers from the sea and the creek of Umm al Qaiwain, due to coastline changes. The tell straddles the Sharjah - Umm al Qaiwain border and both emirates have engaged in its excavations. The first small-scale test trench at the site was dug by an Iraqi team in 1973 (Salman 1974); large-scale excavations were started by Dan Potts in 1989 and lasted until 1998. They were an extension of the international ed-Dur project (Potts 2000). Work on the Sharjah section of the mound was restarted in 2007 under the direction of Peter Magee on behalf of Bryn Mawr College in a joint project with the then Sharjah Directorate of Antiquities, now Sharjah Archaeology Authority (Magee et al. 2017). Excavation and preservation work at the site by Sharjah Archaeology Authority is still continuing. Excavations in the Umm al Qaiwain part of the tell were reactivated in 2019 (Majchrzak & Degli Esposti 2022, p. 152).

Dan Potts listed two seals from Tell Abraq in his 2010 survey of cylinder seals in Arabia. The first is a frit or faience seal, possibly of Elamite provenance, the second is a calcite seal of Mesopotamian / Iranian inspiration which was apparently recut

(Potts, 1990, p. 91, 122-123, figs. 109-110, 150-151; 2010, p. 32, 35-36, nr 84 & 111). Both seals are badly preserved and the interpretation of their iconography is problematic. Two vessels with seal impressions were discovered during the recent excavations on the Umm al Qaiwain section of the mound. They were found in a mixed context and are tentatively dated by the excavators from the late 2nd to the early 1st millennium BCE (Majchrzak & Degli Esposti, 2022). Three more cylinder seals have been discovered on the Sharjah section of the tell since Potts' 2010 cylinder seal survey: inv. SAA 81o, a bronze seal with a humped bull; inv. SAA 80j, a black stone seal with an animal and rosette; inv. SAA 11j, a brown stone seal with a geometric pattern.

### Tell Abraq cylinder seal with zebu.

Sharjah Archaeology Authority, Inv. Nr. SAA 81o.  
Bronze / copper alloy.

H. 22.8 mm; Diam. 9.1 mm; Perforation diam. 4.6 mm.



Fig. 7. Bronze / copper alloy cylinder seal from Tell Abraq with modern impression.

The metal seal was discovered on 19 February 2022 in a mid-3rd millennium d.p.q. context. The seal shows a single striding bovid with a slightly turned head, providing a frontal view of the horns and the two nostrils but only a single eye. The artist emphasized the zebu's characteristic hump and the folds of the dewlap. A large upwards directed shape is present behind the horns and a rhombic item is mounted between the animal's horns.

There is no evidence for an Early Bronze Age presence of zebu (*Bos indicus*) in Mesopotamia and the Arabian coast of the Gulf despite their occasional representation (Grigson, 1994, pp. 45-51). Nevertheless, bulls – not necessarily always specifically zebu - are present on the late 3rd millennium “Gulf Type” stamp seals but this is linked to an Harappan influence through trade activities and settlers (Laursen, 2010; Magee, 2014, pp. 166 – 170; Olijdam & David-Cuny, 2018). On Mesopotamian cylinder seals however, zebu remain a rare exotic element. Dominique Collon lists 5 late 3rd millennium Near Eastern cylinder seals with distinct Indus influence, only two of which show a zebu (Collon 1994, 212-213, fig. 9). A cylinder seal from Susa shows a zebu with its manger, a combination familiar from Gulf type stamp seals (Aruz & Wallenfels, 2003, p. 410-411, nr 301c). On another seal from Ur, the zebu is combined with various animals (snakes and scorpion), a palm tree and a bull leaper, again an Eastern phenomenon (Fig. 8; Aruz & Wallenfels, 2003, p. 409, 410, nr 301a). In view of its strategic position between Mesopotamia and the Indian subcontinent, it is not surprising that a seal from Tell Abraq would combine the western cylinder seal tradition with an eastern iconography.

The unusual components mounted behind and in-between the horns of the Tell Abraq zebu remain to be explained. The almost rhombic component between the horns could be a peepal or fig leaf, common on horned headdresses of anthropomorphic figures on Harappan seals and also appearing on a Late- or Post-Harappan coffin decoration from Sanauli (Parpola, 2020, 180-181, fig. 14). The mounts may also be part of a yoke and/or a decoration as a reference to a specific cultic or festive aspect of the seal image.



Fig. 8: Stone cylinder seal with modern impression from Ur.

(British Museum, London, inv. 122947 © The Trustees of the British Museum)

### Tell Abraq cylinder seal with geometric pattern.

Sharjah Archaeology Authority, Inv. Nr. 11128.

Stone.

H. 33.1 mm; Diam. 10.3 mm; Perforation diam. 4.8 – 5.7 mm.

Ref.: Magee et al. 2017: 233-234, Fig. 44; Cordoba 2016: 62 nr. 54.



Fig. 9. Tell Abraq stone cylinder seal 11128 with modern impression and completed pattern.

The stone seal was discovered on 8 January 2011 in a Late Bronze Age deposit (Magee et al. 2017: 233-234, Fig. 44). It shows two superposed zigzag patterns filled with vertical strokes and separated by a deep horizontal line at the center of the seal. Two more deeply engraved horizontal lines run across the zigzags.

Seals with related designs of zigzags and/or cross-hatchings in horizontal bands, separated or covered by horizontal lines are common in the Near Eastern seal repertoire. Such simple seals with generic designs can provide few dating criteria other than their general shape and size. Comparable Late Bronze and Iron Age seals are reported from Saruq al-Hadid (David-Cuny, Boraik, Mahmoud, & Yousef, 2018) and sites in the Middle East (Roach, 2008, p. 549-550, nrs 3437-3438). The excessive wear on the edges of the seal and the perforation indicates that this object was worn on a string for a considerable time, maybe as part of a necklace. The object was probably a decorative bead rather than an real cylinder seal.

### Tell Abraq Cylinder Seal with Sacred Trees (?).

Sharjah Archaeology Authority, Inv. Nr. SAA 80J.

Black stone.

H. 38.0 mm; Diam. Seal 11.3 mm; Perforation: diam. 4.1 mm.



Fig. 10. Tell Abraq stone cylinder seal SAA 80j with hatched vertical divider and Sacred Trees (?).

The stone seal was found in an upper layer with mixed Bronze and Iron Age material. A superficially scratched vertical band with hatchings limits the scene that consists of a shrub with long leaves (palm?) and a somewhat higher-up positioned, roughly executed, “Sacred Tree”. Both plants are much deeper cut than the vertical divider and also overlap it. Possibly the seal was recut (some faint but unintelligible superficial lines are visible underneath the plants) or the seal cutter added the scene to a blank that already had the divider in place. Both plants loosely resemble representations of Sacred Trees, while the hatched band is a very common feature. A cylinder seal with a similar divider and a linearly executed mountain goat with large curved horns between crude zigzag borders was found at Saruq al-Hadid (David-Cuny, Boraiik, Mahmoud, & Yousef, 2018, slide 60, illustrated upside down).

### The Cylinders Seals at Mleiha

Two cylinder seals were discovered during the excavations by Sharjah Archaeology Authority on the Mleiha / PIR-period site of Mleiha. Although Bronze and Iron Age material is found in the wider area around the site (Jasim, Uerpmann & Uerpmann, 2016), there is no Iron Age material attested at Mleiha itself and both seals must to be classified as heirlooms objects. Possibly they were reused as beads or amulets. One of the seals is of a familiar Neo-Assyrian type and seemingly an import, the other may however, be a local Iron Age artefact.

### Mleiha Neo-Assyrian Cylinder Seal with Worshippers and Sacred Tree.

Sharjah Archaeology Authority, Inv. Nr. SAA 84J.  
Beige limestone.

remaining H. 24.4 mm; Diam. Seal 19 mm,  
Perforation diam. 2.7 mm.

The lower half of a large cylinder seal was found in the surface layers of MLH-10, a rectangular, densely build walled area between “Mleiha fort CW” and “Palace H” (MLH-08) where excavations are ongoing. These will have to determine the nature of this area.

The seal fragment depicts a table and kneeling worshippers flanking a stylized Sacred Tree, a familiar scene from the Neo-Assyrian territory. An antithetical composition of kneeling or standing winged genii, bulls, kings or courtiers centered around a Sacred Tree, often surmounted by a winged sun disc is a common theme in Neo-Assyrian art and occurs on wall reliefs, furniture fittings, garments, jewelry, seals... (Roaf, 1991, pp. 163, 165; Madhloom, 1970, pl. XLII; Mahmoud Hussein, 2016, pl. 72, 211). A cylinder seal from Nimrud for example, found in the grave of queen Hama, wife of Shalmanasar IV (782 - 773 BCE), represents the king and queen flanking the tree of life while they perform a ritual (Mahmoud Hussein, 2016, p. 28, pl. 133e; for a similar private seal: see pl. 201b). Teissier notes that the kneeling posture is mostly restricted to royals and genii in Neo-Assyrian iconography and that it is rare for common worshippers (Teissier, 1984, p. 43, pl. 179), yet it is a repetitive theme on Neo-Assyrian cut style cylinder seals. Niederreiter recently discussed such seals including two from the collection of the Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels (Fig. 11; Niederreiter, 2020, nrs 46-47, note 333). Items such as a tree, celestial symbols, animals... are used in this series as a delineator of the main scene. On the Mleiha seal this is done by the table. A large wine strainer hangs with its vertical handle from the table's edge (for identical bronze strainers see Moorey, 1980, pp. 192-193, pl. IV; Mahmoud Hussein, 2016, p. 23, 106, pl. 35d & 86c). Possibly, foodstuffs or (wine?) vessels, or eventually religious symbols were depicted on top of (or above) the table but only the edge of one item is preserved. The kneeling worshippers on the Mleiha seal were apparently holding maces or scepters – only the lower end of these is preserved – and they appear to wear a dagger or sword in their belt.

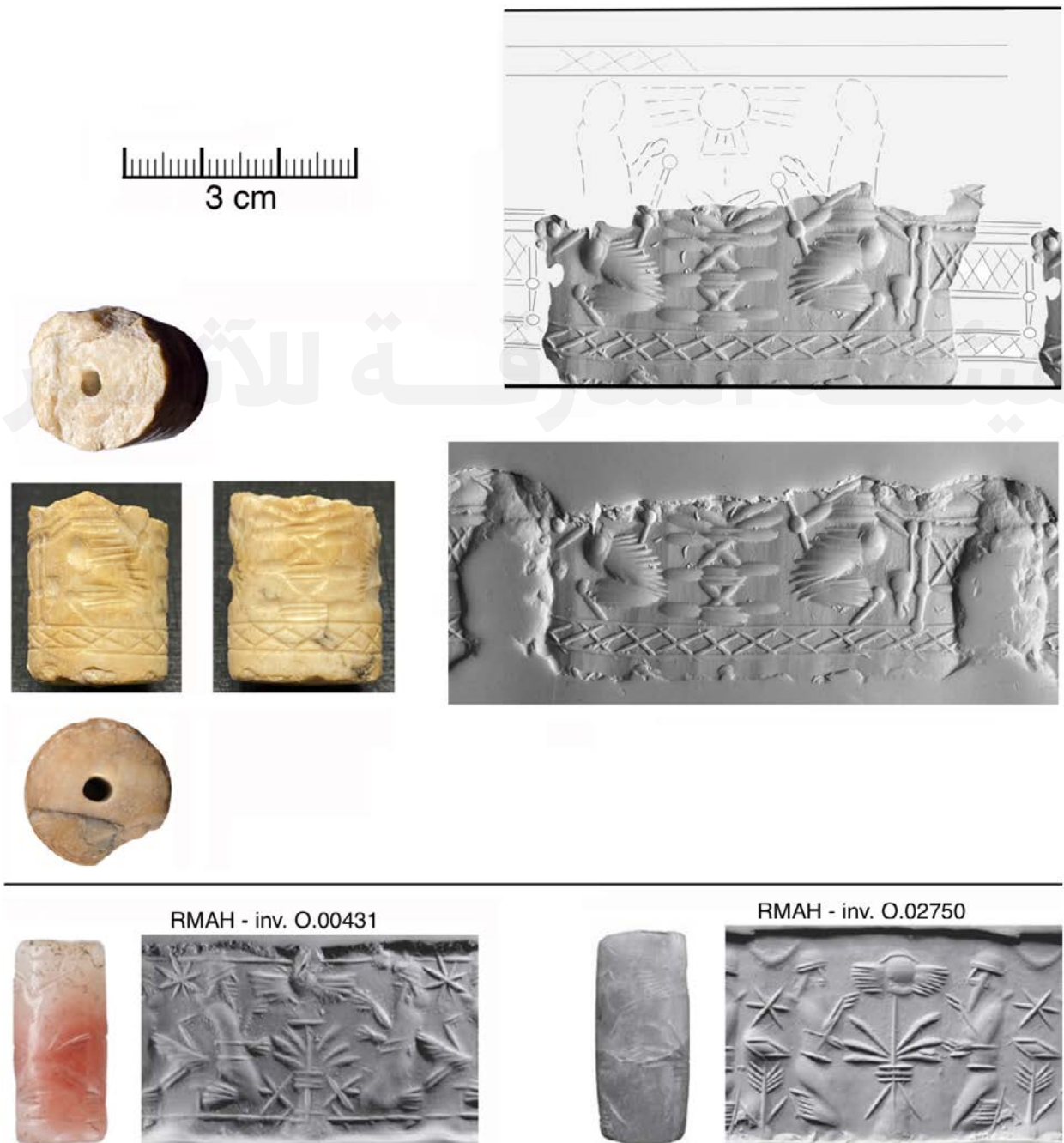


Fig. 11. Fragment of a Neo-Assyrian style seal from Mleiha with modern sealing and tentative reconstruction of its iconography. Bottom: two comparable seals in the collection of the Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels.

Its size and material, some of the iconographic details and its general style sets the Mleiha seal well apart from the group of Neo-Assyrian cut-style seals mentioned above (Fig. 11). The cross-hatched borders and the shape of the tree of life are deviating features. Furthermore, this group traditionally shows a sparse use of vertical lines, probably because they are more difficult to realize on a seal surface than horizontal or oblique lines (Niederreiter, 2020, pp. 122). The use of globe-tipped lines for the vertical table legs and the

wine funnel, the drilled cavities for the hand and the heels of the worshippers are characteristics that distinguishes the Mleiha seal from the cut-style group and relates it to 9th-8th century Neo-Assyrian drilled style seals (see Buchanan, 1966, pp. 113-116).

The Mleiha fragment is the lower part of a large and well-made Neo-Assyrian cylinder seal that can stylistically be dated to the 9th-8th century BCE. Niederreiter suggested that it is to be considered as



a provincial production (personal communication). Where exactly it was made and how and when it arrived at Mleiha remains a mystery but it was already broken when it was last used in Mleiha area 10. The fragment has been worn on a string for some time as the perforation on the broken side shows visible wear (Fig. 11). The fragmented seal image would probably have had little meaning in the Mleiha context (early 3rd cent. BCE - early 3rd cent. CE); possibly the seal fragment was worn as a decorative bead, an exotic heirloom or an amulet.

### Mleiha Cylinder Seal with a Human holding an Arabian Horned Viper.

Sharjah Archaeology Authority, Inv. Nr. SAA 83J. Black stone.

H. 26 mm; Diam. 16.6 mm; Perforation diam. 4.1 mm and 4.6 x 7 mm.

The cylinder seal was found in the surface layers of an habitation area (MLH-06, known as “farmhouse with kitchen”: Jasim, Uerpmann & Uerpmann, 2016, p. 81). The image on the seal depicts a human figure with raised arms who stands on a large snake while he grasps the animal with his left hand (Fig. 11). The short snake’s tail is indicated by the irregular curve at the top of the image; the two large curves at the lower end of the image represent a pair of horns. It identifies the species as an Arabian horned viper (*Cerastes gasperettii* / *Gasperettii’s sand viper*) (Fig. 12; Els, 2014). The image is turned 90° in comparison to the standard orientation of cylinder seal imagery. The perforation was drilled from both sides but at one side (see Fig. 12), the drill hole was out of center and a new hole had to be drilled just next to it. The oblong looking perforation is thus not the result of wear but of the two parallel boring holes.



Fig. 12. Stone seal from Mleiha 6 with modern impression (left) and Arabian Horned Vipers (right; photos Johannes Els, Environment and Protected Areas Authority, Sharjah).

The Mleiha 6 context cannot provide much information, but the production of the seal can be tentatively dated by comparison to Iron Age II finds from Rumeilah (Fig. 13). The unusual position of the imagery, turned 90° to the direction of the perforation, links it to two Rumeilah seals (Lombard, 1998, pp. 156-160, fig. 1). It is not the standard seal orientation but the image would have been correctly positioned if the item was worn horizontally on a string or as part of a necklace. The excavator suggested they were made by local craftsmen who were used to produce stamp seals or amulets and who had copied cylinder seals without realizing their true use (Lombard, 1998, p. 159).



Fig. 13. Left: two Iron Age seals from Rumeilah, UAE (after Lombard, 1998, p. 156, fig. 1). Right: Two Iron Age seals from Salut, Oman (after photos from the IMTO archive in <http://salut-virtual-museum.org>).

Although the device of the Rumeilah seals is simple and similarities should therefore not be overemphasized, there are resemblances with the Mleiha seal. The use of a large deepened area to indicate the body volume of the camel, rather than straight contour lines (Fig. 13), combined with the sparse use of curved lines (camel’s tail and lunar crescent) is notable. Curved lines are more difficult to engrave and are still rarely used on the Rumeilah seals. Curving the camel’s tail was thus probably of importance, it is a recurring element in camel representations and may be an apotropaic element, linked to fertility (Overlaet, 2021, p. 242). Curved lines can also be used to add a sense of motion as e.g. on one of the two Iron Age cylinder seals found at Salut (Fig. 13; Degli-Esposti, 2014). These are technically more advanced however, since the drilled hole technique is already part of the seal carver’s repertoire.

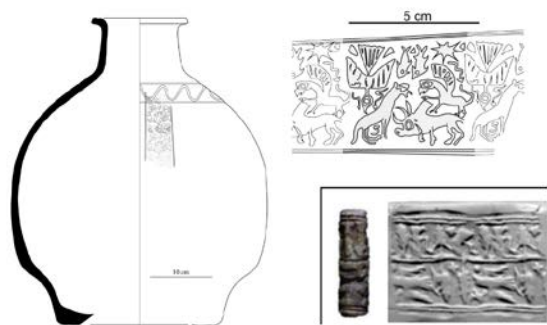


Fig. 14. Drawing of a pottery vessel with a vertical sealing on the shoulder from Tell Abraq (after Majchrzak & Degli-Esposti, 2022, figs 6 & 10) and frit/faience seal with modern sealing from an Iron Age burial at Qidfa'1 (after al-Tikriti, 2022, p. 70, fig. 208).

The orientation of the image on the Mleiha and Rumeilah seals may be – as suggested by Lombard – the result of a misunderstanding of the traditional cylinder seal use. It can however, also point to a different sealing practice. A pottery vessel from Tell Abraq bears a long vertical seal impression on the shoulder (Fig. 14). When used in this manner, it would make sense to turn the image on the seal 90°. We do not know whether the Tell Abraq vessel is simply an outlier or whether it stands for a more widespread tradition of sealing pottery vessels in this manner before firing, particularly since a second vessel that was found with it, had a horizontally rolled seal impression on the shoulder. Comparable use of horizontal and vertical cylinder seals impressions on storage vessels - occasionally even with heirloom cylinder seals - is sporadically reported from East Mediterranean and Near Eastern contexts (Georgiou, 2018; Majchrzak & Degli Esposti, 2022). The excavators suggested that the Tell Abraq vessels were imports rather than local products and pointed to seal characteristics to argue a foreign seal provenance (Majchrzak & Degli-Esposti, 2022). Although there are indeed strong links, there are no exact parallels and a Mesopotamian or Elamite production may be doubtful. Another faience seal discovered by Dan Potts in an Early Iron Age context at the same site raised similar questions. Its iconography is related to Elamite examples but its style and execution prompted the excavator to hesitate between an actual Elamite import - thinking of Liyan near modern Bushir as a possible source (Potts, 2000, p. 117) - and a possible local production (Potts, 1989, pp. 270-271). Supporting the latter idea is

a recently published frit/faience seal from Qidfa' 1 (Fig. 14), suggested by Dominique Collon to be a local product (an opinion not shared by its excavator however; al-Tikriti, 2022, p. 68). She considers it to be a “lone representative of a well-established workshop or tradition”. The seal measures 46 x 14.5 mm and is thus of similar length as the one that made the Tell Abraq impression (estimated to have been 42 x 10 mm; Majchrzak & Degli-Esposti, 2022, p. 156). Collon points out that although the seal draws on other glyptic traditions, it does not belong to any familiar well-defined group (Collon, 2022). The representation in the lower register of the “heraldic” predator bird (above a snake) with its sideways set triangular wings – a rare shape in an Iron Age context but familiar (often in combination with snakes) from the Bronze Age Halil Rud “Jiroft” contexts (Majidzadeh, 2003; on the mythological backstory see Vidale, 2015) links the seal to the Tell Abraq pottery. Whether this seal production center has to be looked for in the Oman Peninsula as implied by Collon or rather somewhere on the periphery of the Elamite dominions (along the nearby SE-Iranian coast, Hormozgan / Kerman?), remains an enigma. The “trumpet base” shape of the Tell Abraq vessels may argue for the latter (Majchrzak & Degli-Esposti, 2022, p. 165).

At present, it is impossible to ascertain the existence of a link between the one-off vertical use at Tell Abraq and the 90° rotated images on the stone seals from Mleiha and Rumeilah. It may just be a coincidence and, as suggested by Lombard, the cylinder seals may have been intended to be worn horizontally as pendants or amulets.

The similarities between the Rumeilah and Mleiha seals, as well as the imagery, suggest an Iron Age II date for the Mleiha seal, despite its discovery in a much later environment. A snake cult is widely documented in Iron Age SE-Arabia. Snake sanctuaries and metal miniature snakes (*ex-votos*) and pottery with appliqué or painted snakes are reported from across the region (Benoist, 2007 & 2010; Cian, 2015, pp. 52-87; Gernez, Benoist & Jean, 2017, pp. 97-122, fig. 7.7; Contreras Rodrigo, Vila, Albarracín, Mohammed Bukhash, Al Abbar, Boraik Radwan Karim & Mohammed Zein, 2017, pp. 61-63). The majority of the appliqué snakes can be identified by their triangular heads and the painted or impressed circles on the body as

vipers (Benoist, 2007, p. 47, 51) and although the subspecies is not always discernable, many are Arabian horned vipers. Some snakes on Saruq al Hadid pottery have 4 lines springing from the head, indicating the snake's tongue and the two horns (Fig. 15; Karacic, Boraik, Qandil & David-Cuny, 2017, fig. 3a, 4). Another interesting parallel provided by the Saruq al-Hadid finds concerns the human figure on the Mleiha seal. Its stance with raised arms resembles that of some metal anthropomorphic figurines that were found together with metal miniature snakes, items that point to cultic depositions (Fig. 15; Contreras Rodrigo, Vila, Albarraçín, Mohammed Bukhash, Al Abbar, Boraik Radwan Karim & Mohammed Zein, 2017, pp. 61-63, fig. 8; Valente, Contreras, Mahmud & Boraik Radwan Karim, 2019, fig. 3, 8 & 10).



Fig. 15. Snake-cult related finds from Saruq al-Hadid and close-up of an Arabian horned viper's head.

Left: vessel with appliqué horned vipers and drawing of one of the snakes (after Karacic, Boraik, Qandil & David-Cuny, 2017, fig. 4); the 4 lines at the head mimic its split tongue and horns (photo viper by Johannes Els, Environment and Protected Areas Authority, Sharjah.) Bottom right: metal anthropomorph figurines discovered near metal miniature snakes (after Valente, Contreras, Mahmud & Boraik Radwan Karim, 2019, fig. 7-10).

The discovery of our cylinder seal in a Mleiha period context raises the question on whether the image still had cultic significance to its owner or whether it was a decorative heirloom used as a bead or as an apotropaic amulet. There is not much evidence to argue for the continuation of a snake cult as it existed in the Iron Age into the PIR/Mleiha period. Merely 6 sherds with snake appliqué decoration are reported from ed-Dur (Rutten, 2008; Haerinck, Overlaet, De Waele & Delrue, 2021, Pl. R). All 6 are of storage jars in local Black

Ware, which indicates that some elements of the Iron Age cults may have survived in the region but definitely not on a significant scale.

Decorated metal drinking bowls, which are among the characteristic burial goods from the Mleiha period in the Oman Peninsula, display a rich assortment of animals and mythical creatures (Yule, 2001b; Overlaet, 2021) but snakes are rarely among them. Only 2 bowls display snakes (Fig. 16). A bronze bowl from Sama'il has vipers (note the shape of the heads) as divider for the twice repeated theme of a horseback lion hunt (al Baruni grave inventory Bar1. Yule, 2001a, p. 278, 281, fig. 16; 2001b, p. 496, fig. 18; 2001c, pp. 84-85, 401, Taf. 556-557a). The second one is a silver bowl reported from al-Juba. It is decorated with an unusual 4-armed cross filled with a rosette in the center and addorsed pairs of animals in the crosses' arms. In-between there are men holding a pair of Arabian horned vipers and bull-lion fights (Fig. 16; Yule & Pariselle, 2016). The pattern leaves no doubt that this bowl belongs to the Mleiha period. The central rosette is similar to those on Early Mleiha bowls and moreover, a fragment from a bowl with an identical cross pattern was found at the Mleiha 5 graveyard (Fig. 16; unpublished). It depicts a standing man next to an upside-down prisoner with hands bound behind his back.

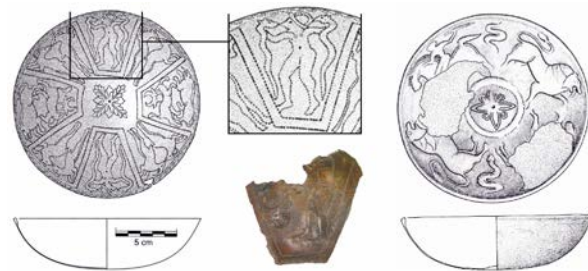


Fig. 16. Left: silver bowl reported from al-Juba, Oman (after Yule & Pariselle, 2016, p. 163, fig. 14). Center bottom: bowl fragment with cross-pattern from Mleiha 5 depicting a man and a bound prisoner (unpublished). Right: bronze bowl with snakes and lion hunts from Sama'il, Oman (after Yule, 2001b, p. 278, fig. 16).

Snakes on Mleiha period objects like the al-Jubba and Sama'il bowls could refer to specific pre-Islamic deities like e.g. Wadd (Potts, 2007, p. 65; Robin, 2012, p. 83) but they could also be "heirloom images" of the Iron Age cults. The occasional use of heirloom iconography was demonstrated by the discovery of a metal bowl at ed-Dur which copied

a characteristic Iron Age Levantine lion hunt with a chariot (Overlaet & Yule, 2018). That both bowls with snake representations, of which at least one – given the nude person holding snakes - had a specific cultic or mythological backstory, are nominally from the Samad cultural area of eastern Oman (Yule & Pariselle, 2016, fig. 1) may indicate local survivals of cultic traditions, maybe in some of the more mountainous areas of SE-Arabia. It would also explain the sporadic presence of snake imagery on ed-Dur pottery.

Although the Mleiha cylinder seal is most probably an Iron Age heirloom, the possibility of a production in the Mleiha period cannot be completely ruled out. The ed-Dur bronze bowl (Overlaet & Yule, 2018) and decorated shell discs (Weeks et al., 2019, pp. 232–233) illustrated how some Iron Age objects and iconography continued to be replicated in the Mleiha period. The al-Juba bowl suggests that the image of a standing person grasping snakes may have kept some significance and its Iron Age backstory may have survived in one form or the other. The image can also have been (re)interpreted as referring to something different, however, like the deity Wadd, commonly associated with snakes and whose idol could take the shape of a man (Faris, 1952, p. 46). In the Mleiha period, the object would most likely not have been used as a cylinder seal but would rather have been worn as a bead or an amulet.

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