

# Heirloom Cylinder Seals at Mleiha (Sharjah Emirate, U.A.E.)

by

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**Abstract:** Very few cylinder seals are reported from South-East Arabia. The paper presents two cylinder seals that were found as heirlooms at Mleiha, UAE. The first is a Neo-Assyrian seal with a ritual scene: kneeling worshippers around a tree of life. The second is a seal of local manufacture. The positioning of its image, a human figure holding an Arabian horned viper, is turned 90°, questioning whether it was ever used as a seal or rather worn as an amulet or bead. Local seal production and seal use is discussed. Seals from the Iron Age II suggest the object is of local production, as does the iconography that can be linked to Iron Age snake cults in South-East Arabia. Comparable snake representations are however, occasionally still found in the Mleiha / PIR period.

**Keywords :** cylinder seal; Neo-Assyrian; Iron Age; Mleiha; snake cult; SE-Arabia

## 1. Introduction

Despite the intense trade contacts between Iran, Mesopotamia and Arabia, cylinder seals never found wide use in Arabia. In his 2010 survey of cylinder seals and their use in the Arabian Peninsula, Potts lists 114 seals but these are overwhelmingly from the northern parts of the gulf and the islands where a strong Mesopotamian presence is documented. Merely 14 derived from South-East Arabia: 11 from the UAE and 3 from the Sultanate of Oman (Potts, 2010; nrs 94 and 112 are identical). Some 18 more have since been reported<sup>1</sup> which raises the total to 32 documented cylinder seals for a period dating from the Late Uruk (Pittman & Potts, 2009) to the Iron Age. The recent discovery of two more cylinder seals at Mleiha, a 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE – early 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE context, is therefore all the more remarkable. One of these is a familiar type of neo-Assyrian seal, seemingly an import from Mesopotamia, the other appears however, to be a local Iron Age artefact.

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<sup>1</sup> The following seals complete the list of cylinder seals in the Oman Peninsula provided by Potts (2010): *Tell Abraq* (1 stone seal, IA / Magee, Händel, Karacic et al., 2015, pp. 26-28, fig. 36; Cordoba, 2016, p. 62 nr. 54); *Rumeilah* (2 stone seals, IA, Fig. 4 / Lombard, 1998, pp. 156-160, fig. 1 nr 10-11); *Saruq al-Hadid* (3 stone & 2 frit or faience seals, LB & IA / Boraik Radwan Karim, David-Cuny, Mahmoud & Yousif Al-Ali, 2017; David-Cuny, Boraik, Mahmoud & Yousef, 2018); *Qidfa 1* (1 frit or faience seal, LB-IA, Fig. 5 / al-Tikriti, 2022, pp. 68-69, fig. 208, Pl. 113. Note that fig. 211 was already listed in Potts, 2010, as nrs 94 & 112); *Dibba al-Bayah* (1 frit or faience seal + 2 local stone seals, IA / Frenez, Genchi, David-Cuny & Al-Bakri, 2021, pp. 113-115, fig. 6; stone cylinder seals DA42343 and DA43512, Genchi, 2022, timestamp 30:17); *Salut* (2 stone seals, IA, Fig. 4 / Degli-Esposti, 2014); *Adam-Mudhmar* (1 frit or faience and 1 stone seal, EIA / Gernez & Jean, 2017, p. 11, fig. 9-10; Gernez & Giraud, 2017, pp. 76-77, fig. 6.35). Some recent finds remain unpublished: 2 seals found near al-Rustaq and 2 seals at Tell Abraq (personal communications).

## 2. Neo-Assyrian cylinder seal with ritual in front of a tree of life (inv. 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 tree of life, a familiar scene from the Neo-Assyrian realm. An antithetical composition of kneeling or standing winged genii, bulls, kings or courtiers centered around a tree of life, 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, etc. (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 Shalmaneser 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 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. 1 lower left; Niederreiter, 2020, nrs 46-47 and note 333). Items such as a tree, celestial symbols, animals, etc. are used in this series as a delineator of the main scene. On the Mleiha seal this is done by the table. A large strainer for wine hangs with its vertical handle on the edge of it (for identical bronze wine 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 placed on top of (or above) the table but only the edge of an 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.

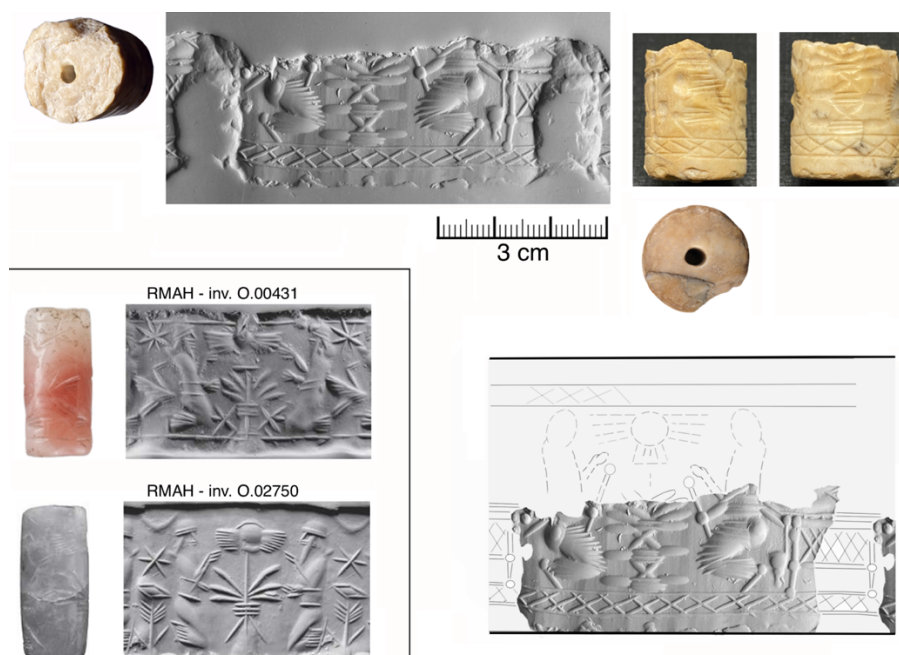


Fig. 1. Fragment of a Neo-Assyrian style seal from Mleiha with modern sealing and tentative reconstruction of its iconography. Lower left: two comparable seals in the Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels.

Its size and material, its iconographic details and its general style sets the Mleiha seal well apart from the group of Neo-Assyrian cut-style seals mentioned above (Fig. 1 bottom left). 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 sets the Mleiha seal apart from the cut-style group and relates it more to 9<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> 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 9<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Niederreiter suggested that is a rather 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. 1). The fragmented seal image would probably have had little meaning in the Mleiha context (early 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. BCE – early 3<sup>rd</sup> cent. CE / PIR.A–D); possibly the seal fragment was worn as a decorative bead, an exotic heirloom or an amulet.

### 3. Cylinder seal with a man holding an Arabian Horned Viper (inv. 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 a habitation area (MLH-06, known as “farmhouse with kitchen” / Jasim, Uerpmann & Uerpmann, 2016, p. 81). The image on the seal represents a human figure with raised arms who stands on a large snake and who grasps the animal’s body with his left hand (Fig. 2). 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 which identifies the species as an Arabian horned viper (*Cerastes gasperettii* / Gasperettii’s sand viper) (Fig. 3; Els, 2014). The image is turned 90° in comparison to the standard orientation of imagery on cylinder seals. The perforation was drilled from both sides; at one side (top right Fig. 2) the drill hole was out of center and a new hole was drilled just next to it. The oblong looking perforation is thus not the result of wear but of the two parallel boring holes.



Fig. 2. Stone seal from Mleiha area 6 with modern impression.

Fig. 3. The Arabian Horned Viper / Arabian Sand Viper (*Cerastes gasperettii*). Note the distinct tail and the large horns, characteristics that are emphasized on the Mleiha cylinder seal. (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. 4). 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). This orientation somewhat conflicts with the standard use of cylinder seals, i.e. to make a sealing that is an uninterrupted, continuing and horizontal illustration.

The image on the seal would have been correctly positioned however, 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).

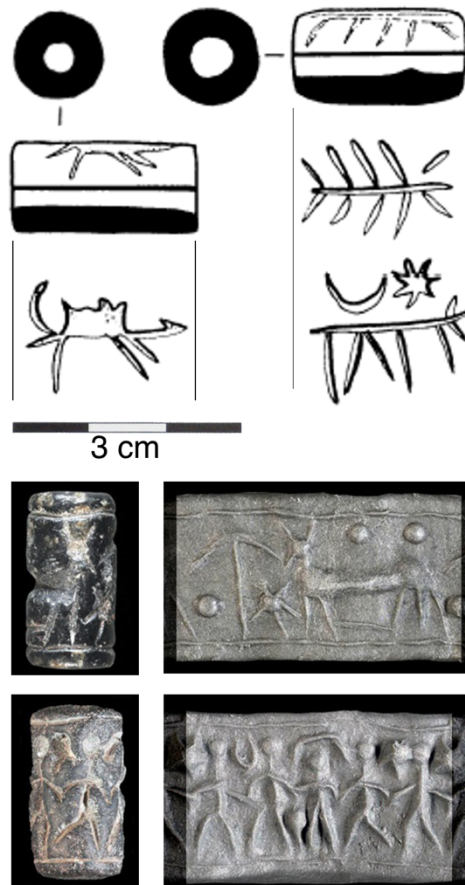


Fig. 4. Top: two Iron Age seals from Rumeilah, UAE (after Lombard, 1998, p. 156, fig. 1). Bottom: Two Iron Age seals from Salut, Oman (after photos from the IMTO archive in <http://salut-virtual-museum.org>).

Although the device of the Rumeilah seals is simple and similarities should therefore not be overemphasized, there are some resemblances with the Mleiha seal. Deepened areas to show body volumes were used by the Rumeilah seal carvers, e.g. for human torsos on two stamp seals (Lombard, 1998, fig. 1 nr 6 & 8). On the top left cylinder in Fig. 4, it is preferred above straight contour lines to indicate the body volume of the camel. In this case, its combination with curved lines (camel's tail and lunar crescent) is notable. Curved lines are more difficult to engrave and are still sparsely used on the Rumeilah seals. Curving the camel's tail was 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. 4 bottom; Degli-Esposti, 2014). These are technically more advanced however, since the drilled hole technique is already part of the seal carver's repertoire.

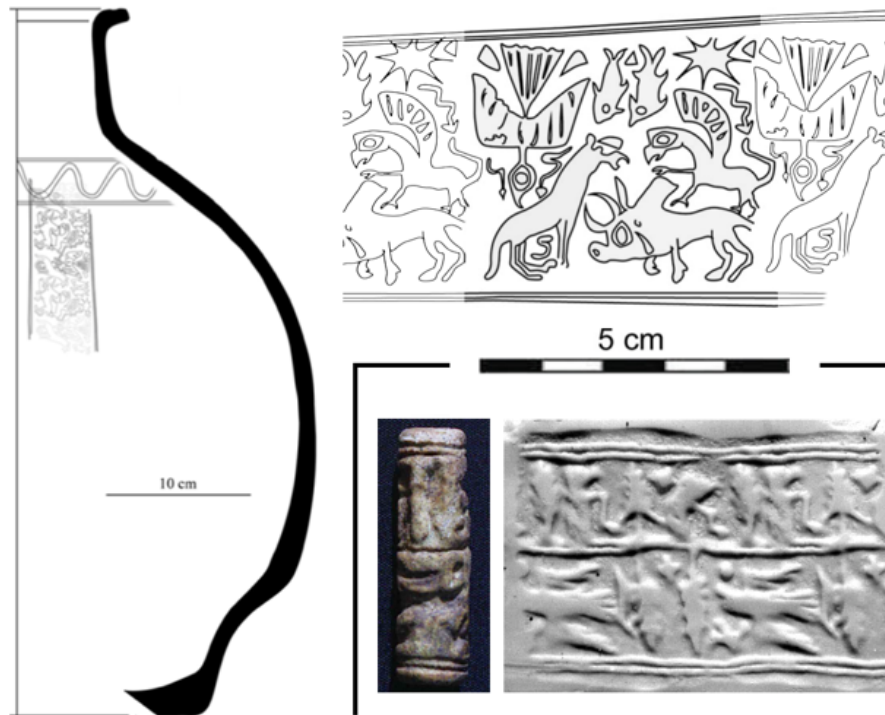


Fig. 5. Drawing of a pottery vessel with a vertical sealing on the shoulder from Tell Abraq (after Majchrzak & Degli-Esposti, 2022, figs 6 & 10) and frit/faience seal with modern sealing from an Iron Age burial at Qidfa 1 (after al-Tikriti, 2022, p. 70, fig. 208).

The orientation of the image on the Mleiha and Rumeilah seals may be – as suggested by Lombard – the result of a misunderstanding of normal cylinder seal use. It can however, also point to a different function or even different sealing practices. If used as an amulet or horizontally as a bead in a necklace, the image would be positioned correctly. A less probable explanation would be a preference for vertically positioned sealings, a possibility that needs to be mentioned, however, in view of the discovery of a long vertical seal impression on the shoulder of a storage vessel at Tell Abraq (Fig. 5). 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 and Iranian contexts (Georgiou, 2018; Alibaigi & Khosravi, 2014, p. 54-56, fig. 4-5; Majchrzak & Degli Esposti, 2022; Matthews & Fazeli Nashli, 2022, p. 431-433, fig. 12.57). 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 doubted. Another faience seal discovered by Dan Potts in an Early Iron Age context at the same site raised a similar question. 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 Bushire 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. 5), 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 Abraç 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” context (Majidzadeh, 2003; on the mythological backstory see Vidale, 2015) links the seal to the Tell Abraç pottery sealing. Whether this seal production center has to be looked for in the Oman Peninsula as implied by Collon or – which seems more probable – rather somewhere on the periphery of the Elamite dominions (along the nearby SE-Iranian coast, Hormozgan / Kerman?), remains an enigma. The production of faience and frit objects does require a specialized knowledge and the relative rarity of such items at the SE-Arabian Iron Age sites does not favor the idea of a local production center. The “trumpet base” shape of the Tell Abraç vessels may argue for a SE-Iranian provenance (Majchrzak & Degli-Esposti, 2022, p. 165); our understanding of this region’s Iron Age period and its seal use however, is still fragmentary at best (Maresca, 2018; Matthews & Fazeli Nashli, 2022, p. 509, fig. 12.5).

At present, it is impossible to ascertain the existence of a link between the one-off vertical use at Tell Abraç and the 90° rotated images on the stone seals from Mleiha and Rumeilah. It may simply 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. Snakes had already a prominent role in Bronze Age Arabian and Near Eastern beliefs, cult practices and myths (Potts, 2007, p. 64-69), but snake worship (ophiolatry) seems to have climaxed in SE-Arabia during the Iron Age. Snake sanctuaries with metal miniature snakes (ex-votos?) and pottery with appliqués 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, Vila, Albarracín, et al., 2017, pp. 61-63). A unique pottery incense burner from Bithnah is a striking parallel for the Mleiha seal: a human figure with raised arms lifts a small bowl while a snake crawls on the outside (Fig. 6; Benoist, Bernard, Hamel, et al., 2004, p. 30-31, fig. 10; Benoist, 2007, p. 46-47, fig. 14; Benoist, Pillault, & Skorupka, 2012, p. 244, fig. 12). The majority of the appliqué snakes on the Iron Age pottery can be identified by their triangular head and the painted or impressed circles on their body as vipers (Benoist, 2007, p. 47, 51) and although the subspecies is not always discernable, many appear to be 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. 6; 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 and the above-mentioned incense burner. Their 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. 6; Contreras, Vila, Albarracín, et al., 2017, pp. 61-63, fig. 8; Valente, Contreras, Mahmud & Boraik Radwan Karim, 2019, fig. 3, 8 & 10).

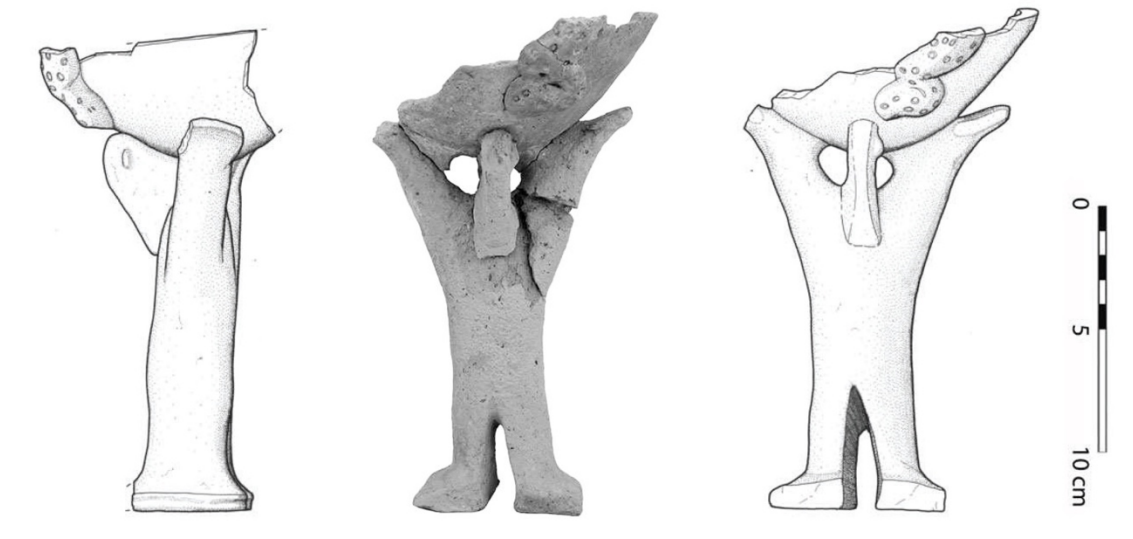
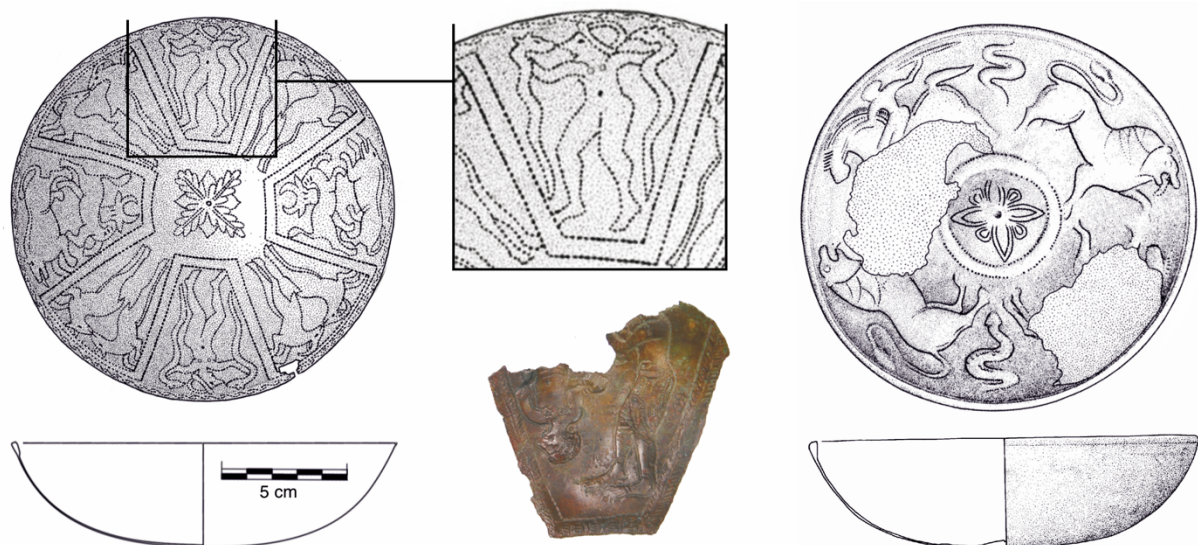


Fig. 6. Snake-cult related finds from Bithnah and Saruq al-Hadid and close-up of an Arabian horned viper's head. Top: Incense burner in the shape of a human supporting a bowl with snake in relief (after Benoist, 2007, fig. 14; Benoist, Pillault, & Skorupka, 2012, fig. 12). Bottom left: vessel with appliqué horned vipers and drawing (not to scale) of an appliqué snake (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: selection of 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; Haerincx, 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. 7). 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 adorsed pairs of animals in the crosses' arms. In-between there are men holding a pair of Arabian horned vipers and bull-lion fights (Fig. 7; 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. 7; unpublished). It depicts a standing man next to an upside-down prisoner with hands bound behind his back. It depicts a standing man next to an upside-down prisoner with hands bound behind his back.



**Fig. 7. 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 background, 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 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 must have kept some significance and its Iron Age backstory may have survived in one form or the other. The image may in its Mleiha environment also have been (re)interpreted as referring to something different, however, like the deity Wadd, 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 may rather have been worn as a bead or an amulet.

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