

RISING MOON AT TELL EŠ-ŠERĪ'A/TEL SERA': A NEO-ASSYRIAN BRONZE CRESCENT STANDARD AND THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE MOON GOD SĪN OF ḪARRĀN IN SOUTHERN LEVANT. RITUAL PARAPHERNALIA AND MILITARY INSIGNIA?

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Abstract: Neo-Assyrian influences over southern Levant had been long debated and criticised. During the 8th and 7th centuries BC the veneration of the moon god Sīn of Ḫarrān experienced a remarkable international reputation, possibly linked to the deity's peculiar status as a protective and legitimating authority for the Neo-Assyrian westward imperialism under the Sargonid kings. As Stratum V at Tel Sera' shows a meaningful Neo-Assyrian milieu pertaining architectural and material records, this paper dedicates a closer focus to a very rare bronze crescent standard, one of the three only records thus far known for this special item, which can be considered the three-dimensional counterpart to both tasseled and pendants-equipped lunar crescent standards portrayed on western royal stelae as well as on glyptic records.

Since the crescent represents a meaningful religious emblem into the Levantine cultural framework during the Iron Age, the aim of this paper is to investigate a specific dimension of the Neo-Assyrian cultural impact over southern Levant, focusing on the symbolism and meaning conveyed by the bronze lunar crescent standard unearthed at Tel Sera', and on its possible use as a ritual paraphernalia and/or military emblem.

Key words: Neo Assyrian; Tel Sera'; Bronze crescent standards; Southern Levant; 7th century

Iron Age II Levant was subjected to both cultural influences and political transformations by the Assyrian conquest, as a series of meaningful archaeological records and literary sources are meant to show. Nonetheless, the derived perception of a monolithic Neo-Assyrian material culture opposed to a local one is rather deceptive and in contrast with the Assyrianization process, since the most significant outcome for the Assyrian Empire in southern Levant during the 8th and 7th

centuries BC consisted in the creation of multifaceted communities, characterised by a forced international cultural mixing imposed by deportations, as well as by the reconstitution of new networks and dynamics into a modified political and administrative framework (LIVERANI 1979 and 2003; STERN 2001; PARPOLA 2003; NA'AMAN 2005; BAGG 2013; THAREANI 2016). The aim of this paper is to investigate a specific dimension of the Neo-Assyrian cultural impact over southern Levant, through a focus on the symbolism conveyed by the iconography of the moon god Sīn in the bronze lunar crescent standard excavated at Tel Sera', and on its possible ritual or military implications.

Tel Sera' is situated in the western Negev desert on the north bank of the Wadi esh-Sheria and positioned on the main road from Gaza to the Beersheba Valley and the Dead Sea. The mound is shaped like an elongated horseshoe and covers about 5 acres, rising 14m above the surrounding area (Fig. 1). During six seasons of excavation directed by Prof. Eliezer Oren from 1972 to 1979, investigations in 5 main areas were brought on in a cooperation project led by the University of the Negev and the Israel Exploration Society (OREN 1982 and 1993a). Although the results achieved are considerable, they currently prevent a complete interpretation of the urban and architectural setting, since the existence of detailed but preliminary reports compensate only partially the absence of a final and comprehensive publication. Nevertheless, plausible reconstructive hypothesis saw the city of Stratum V during the 7th century BC as a stronghold set in two massive citadels, defending the southern and northern approaches to the city in Area A and D. Stratum V represents the last fortified occupational phase at Iron Age Tel Sera'. Excavations in Area A have revealed the remains of a large citadel showing later silos and refuse pits sunk into its ruins during the Persian

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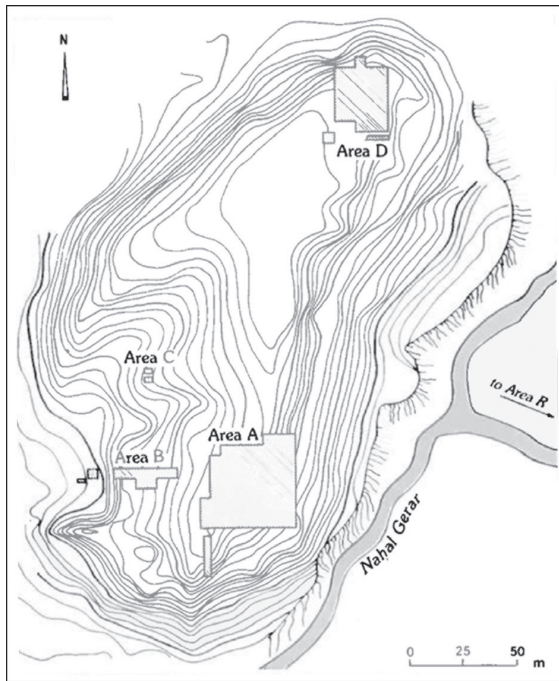


Fig. 1 General view of Tel Sera' (OREN 1993, 1329).

period, after a destruction dated to the last decades of the 7th century BC. The citadel was characterised by long, narrow storage halls and small rooms, surrounded by a defensive wall whose thickness reached up to 5 m.

In the same way, Area D yielded the impressive remains of a large and well-preserved fortified structure, with walls conserved to a height of 3 m. This rectangular building consisted of very long and narrow halls or basements, closed northward by a wall some 4 m thick. The floors inside the structure were found buried deep under heaps of burned bricks and charred beams, resulting from a great conflagration that seems to provide elements testifying the collapse of the upper stories. A massive brick platform emerged from the wall south to the halls, while on the eastern part of this area an open courtyard paved with pebbles and limestone gravel was discovered. The brick-lined floor of the northern and central halls revealed a group of metal objects, including a rare bronze crescent standard, next to which a bell was found. Nearby, on the floor of the central hall, a long iron chain ending in four pitchfork-like prong and an Assyrian-type socketed bronze spearhead were unearthed (OREN

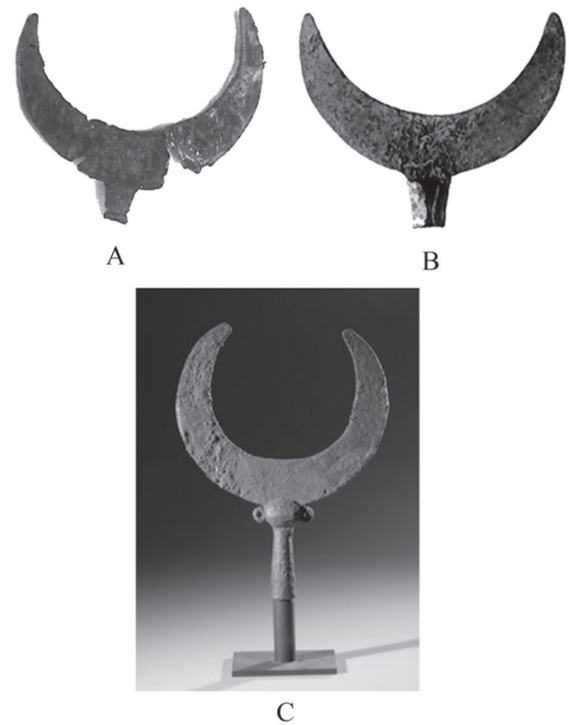


Fig. 2 Bronze crescent standards: A) Tell Halaf – w. 15.5 cm, h. unknown; B) Zincirli – w. 25 cm, h. unknown; C) Tel Sera' – w. 17 cm, h. 21 cm.

1974, 264–266). Moreover, excavations in 1978 unearthed small furnaces used for smelting iron in the spacious open courtyard to the east of the citadel (OREN 1982, 160).

Stratigraphy, architectural layout and meaningful archaeological findings such as Assyrian-style pottery, Assyrian-type bronzes and Aramaic ostraka are consistent in showing a quite plausible Neo-Assyrian milieu in the site during this phase, revealing how Tel Sera', along with other settlements in Western Negev and Philistia, was at least the place of an Assyrian garrison during the 7th century BC, and how it possibly became a strategic outpost for trading networks from the Arabian Peninsula and the Via Maris, as well as for military routes towards Egypt which passed through the territory of the philistine kingdom of Gaza during the reigns of Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal.

The crescent standard discovered at Tel Sera' is a unique piece of evidence that, although not unearthed in its original position, shows something important about the Assyrian influence and sponsorship for the cult of the moon god Sîn of Ḫarran as far away as the western provinces. Furthermore, it represents one of the three rare exam-

ples so far known in the ancient Near East. The standard (Fig. 2:C, Israel Antiquities Authority 1987–9, photo by A. Bar-Hama; OREN 1974, pl. 57) is composed of a lunar crescent on top, with a socket below allowing a shaft to be inserted and two little holes on the upper part of the socket, probably used to tie tassels or pendants (OREN 1974; KEEL–UEHLINGER 1998). The other two bronze standards we know were found in Tell Halaf (Fig. 2:A; HROUDA 1962, 49, Taf. 34:1) and Tell Zincirli (Fig. 2:B; von LUSCHAN and ANDRAE 1943, Taf. 48:z) respectively. The first was discovered in the debris of the eastern halls of Kapara's Temple-Palace, while the second came from an undetermined location on the fortified citadel of Zincirli. These latter two had no devices meant to tie on tassels or pendants, while different kinds of sockets are visible on all of them.

The cultic symbol of the moon god as a sickle-shaped crescent with cusps pointing upward and mounted upon a pole is attested in southern Mesopotamian glyptic art from the 3rd millennium BC (KEEL 1994, 165–169; HOLLOWAY 2002, 398–399), but since no depictions of this emblem have occurred in association with texts specifically mentioning the city of Ḥarrān prior to the late 9th century BC, even in northern Syrian glyptic, such lunar crescent imagery cannot be exclusively connected to the cult of Sîn of Ḥarrān before that date. Nevertheless, heuristic grounds allow to presume that the worship of a moon god appears to have been a pan-Mesopotamian phenomenon, as the emblem was used as a religious icon through millennia in the ancient Near East to represent any local or foreign moon god (WEIPPERT 1978; MATTHEWS 1990; KEEL 1994; HOLLOWAY 2002, ORNAN 2005).

In the 1st millennium BC an important change occurred in divine portrayals. The replacement of anthropomorphic deities by their divine symbols is a meaningful phenomenon² that ruled out many representations on rock reliefs and stelae, progressively including the crescent-on-a-pole as the most significant protagonist in the shift over symbolic representations in the official western Assyrian imagery. From the 8th century BC the city of Ḥarrān became an important spiritual capital in the Neo-Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians probably

adopted the moon god of Ḥarrān after having conquered the Aramean regions of northern Syria, worshipping him under the Akkadian name of Sîn. Even though not an indigenous Assyrian deity, Sîn was among the most important gods in the official state cult, since direct royal attention probably started under Shalmaneser III (HOLLOWAY 2002, 395, 401 and tab. 5:4) and went far beyond him in space and time, especially in the western provinces. During the time of Adad-Nirari III (BÖRKER-KLÄHN 1982, fig. 164.) a change can be observed from the traditional selection of divine imagery on monumental and glyptic arts. Beyond the usual symbols shown in front of the gesturing king during the reigns of Shalmaneser III (BÖRKER-KLÄHN 1982: fig. 148) and Shamshi-Adad V (HOLLOWAY 2002: fig. 9), an incorporation of foreign elements took place into the official Assyrian symbolism with the adoption of some Babylonian divine emblems as the *marru*-spade of Marduk and the stylus of Nabu. Nevertheless, a further modification from traditional depictions becomes evident on a pillar-shaped monument erected at Saba'a by the governor of Rasappa Nergal-Eresh (BÖRKER-KLÄHN 1982, fig. 163): here, on the upper left, we find a ring-shaped emblem surmounting a high pole with two tassels, nearly recalling a later symbolism proper to Sîn of Ḥarrān in these areas. Furthermore, since royal stelae can be considered the “political posters” of the Neo-Assyrian empire (READE 1979, 340), we can see how these monuments show another major change for divine portrayals on the boundary stelae found in the districts of Antakya and Pazarcik (KEEL 1994, figs. 3 and 7). These and other stelae³ discovered in southeastern Anatolia and northern Syria (KEEL 1994, 179–183), erected to commemorate military activities from the 9th century BC, bear only one large divine symbol: the crescent on a pole, a unique and meaningful iconography of Sîn alone. Further confirmations for the identity of this symbol as representing the moon god of Ḥarrān come from the Aramaic dedication to the Baal of Ḥarrān inscribed on an orthostat depicting the last ruler of ancient Sam'al: king Barrākib (von LUSCHAN *et al.* 1911, Taf. LX).

By singling out the crescent-on-a-pole and displaying it as a solitary emblem on their western

² The so-called “Astralization of Heavenly powers”. See Keel and Uehlinger 1998, 283–22.

³ A special mention is to be given for the stela discovered at Bethsaida (mid-8th century BC), displaying a peculiar iconography

which gave rise to hypothesis concerning enotheism and the eclectic nature of the twofold divine elements featured in this special depiction. See BERNETT – KEEL 1998 and ORNAN 2001.

Sites (North to South)	Typology	Dating (BCE)
Tell Keisan	1) Bell-shaped stamp seal 2) Incised potsherds 3) Stamp seal	End of 8th century 8th–7th century 8th–7th century
Tell es-Samaq/Shiqmona	4) Stamp seal 5) Stamp seal	8th–7th century End of 8th century
Megiddo	6) Stamp seal (surface finding)	8th–7th century
Tell Dothan	7) Cylinder seal	2nd half of 8th century
Samaria	8) Stamp seal	9th–8th century
Nashonim	9) Stamp seal (surface finding)	2nd half of 8th–7th century
Tell en-Nasbe _n	10) Stamp seal	2nd half of 8th–7th century
Gezer	11) Cylinder seal 12) Stamp seal 13) Stamp seal	8th–7th century Mid. 7th century Mid. 7th century
Jerusalem	14) Stamp sealing on bulla 15) Stamp sealing on bulla 16) Stamp seal 17) Stamp sealing on bulla	End of 8th–7th century End of 8th–7th century 8th–7th century 7th century
Mount Nebo	18) Cylinder seal	8th–7th century
Beth-Zur	19) Prism-shaped seal	7th century
Tell Jemmeh	20) Stamp seal 21) Cylinder seal	8th–7th century 7th century
Horvat ‘Uza	22) Stamp seal	8th–7th century
Tawilan	23) Stamp seal	End of 8th–7th century
Unknown location (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris)	24) Stamp seal	8th–7th century
Unknown location (École Biblique et Archéologique Française, Jerusalem)	25) Cylinder seal	8th–7th century
Unknown location (D. Bürgin Private Collection, London)	26) Prism-shaped seal	9th–8th century
Unknown location (M. Dayan Private Collection, Jerusalem)	27) Prism-shaped seal	8th–7th century

Tab. 1 Sealings, stamps and cylinder seals in southern Levant under the Assyrian rule.

monuments, Assyrian kings publicised their devotion and loyalty to the moon god of Ḫarrān. The veneration of Sîn became more than a prudential and political habit under the Sargonides, since archival evidences from the reign of Sargon II to the fall of Ḫarrān⁴ show how this city and its moon god gained special attention, being Sîn perceived

and sponsored as an authority owning a special approved profile for sanctioning the Assyrian expansion and dominion in the West by adding its iconic symbol to that of a popular regional cult (HOLLOWAY 2002 contra COGAN 1974 and 1993; BAGG 2013), and thus becoming a propagandistic religious emblem standing for Assyrian kingship

⁴ See State Archives of Assyria (SAA) I: 50; 188; 190–203; SAA II: 6; SAA X: 13; 174; 240; SAA XIII: 187. For further bibliography, see HOLLOWAY 2002, 406–413.

and Empire as well. It is in this context that the adoption of Neo-Assyrian divine imagery in the western part of the Empire is best understood.

In 1st millennium BC glyptic imagery, the moon god iconographies were portrayed in three manners: anthropomorphically, as a bearded male figure standing upright with a crescent; as a celestial symbol, in the upper part of a scene, identified as the emblem of Sîn on the Sippar Tablet; and as a crescent mounted on a pole representing Sîn of Ḫarrān, often employed as a cult object in local and foreign Neo-Assyrian glyptic art (ORNAN 2005, 163–167). This version represents a quite popular motif on both stamp and cylinder seals in Assyria, Late Iron Age Syria-Palestine and Transjordan glyptic art, as this pattern is attested at different sites in southern Levant during the 1st millennium BC (Tab. 1) and figurative repertoires widely diverge from previous Late Bronze Age iconographies, which were largely inspired to Egyptian patterns through Phoenician re-elaborations (SPYCKET 1973; KEEL and UEHLINGER 1998). Another element that has to be taken into account is the appearance and use of cylinder seals, perceptibly matching the Assyrian presence and power over urban centres and smaller outposts in southern Levant. The depictions of the crescents-on-a-pole on glyptic during the 8th and 7th centuries BC (Pls. 1–2) are characterised by pedestal-bases or altars, and usually show dangling pendants on both sides of the standard. The symbol is sometimes connected to the *marru*-spade of Marduk and the stylus of Nabu, as we see in the records discovered at Tell Keisan (Pl. 1:1; BRIEND and HUMBERT 1980: pl. 89: 24) and Tell Dothan (Pl. 1:7; KEEL 1994, fig. 15), holding significant parallels in Assyria (KEEL 1977, 291–293; COLLON 2001, 118–121, HERBORDT 1992). Moreover, the crescent standard also appears on different local depictions in the very peculiar shape of a thick cross-hatched pillar (Pl. 1:14; KEEL 1994, fig. 36), upon altars covered by a ritual clothing hanging over the front,⁵ and on depictions showing rituals where these pedestal-bases and altars are variously surrounded by worshippers, lyre musicians and pipers, cypress-like patterns, or stylized nail-shaped altars and Egyptian symbols such as the uraeus

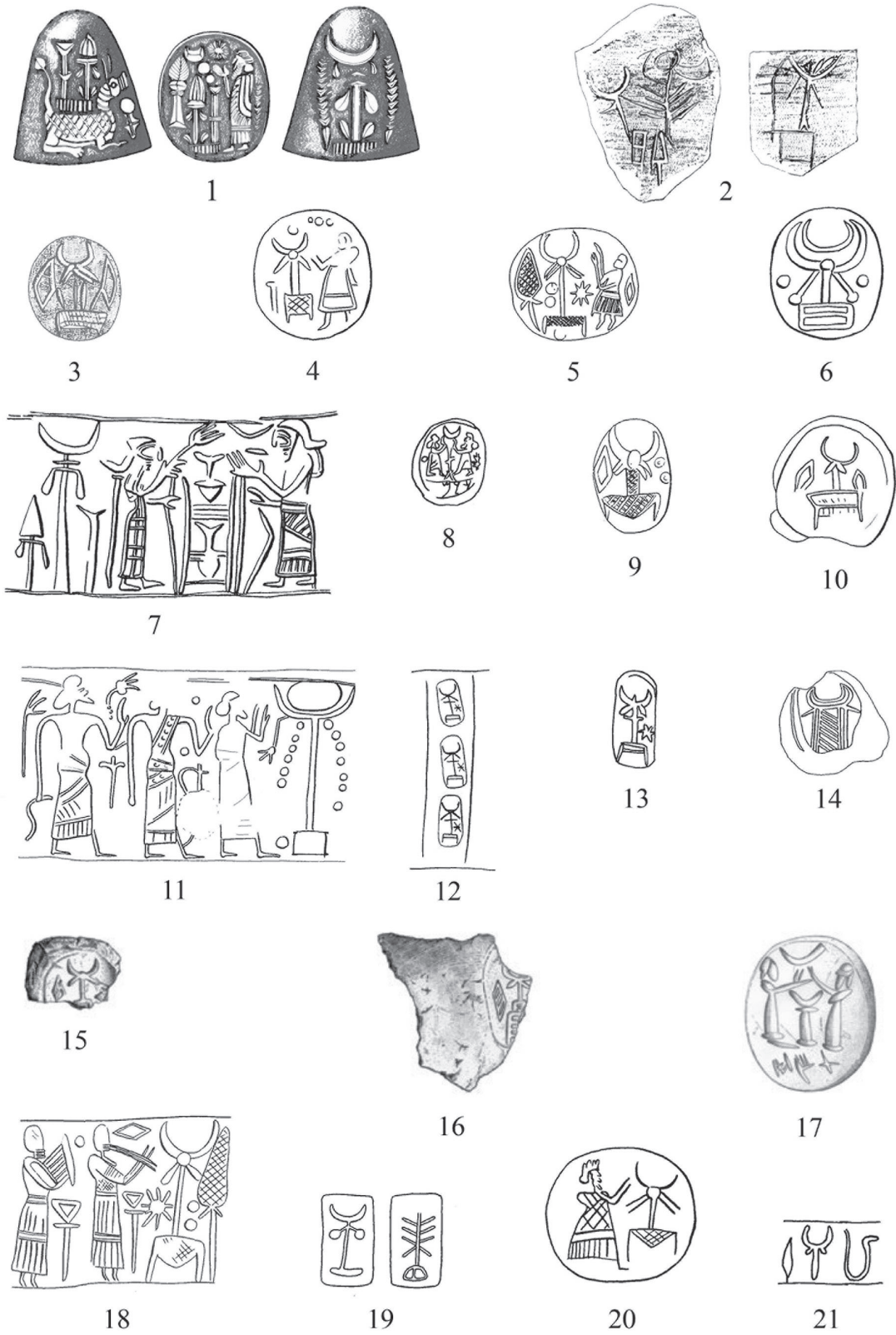
and the feather of Ma'at (Pl. 1:21). As these patterns are attested in both local and Assyrian glyptic (Parker 1955 and 1962), their association with the lunar crescent emblem could suggest a dating to the first half of the 7th century BC, the time of the military enterprises in Egypt under Esarhaddon and Ashurbanipal, even though at Nimrud such iconographies seem to have a wider dating range between the 8th and the 7th century BC.

Since the focus of this paper is mainly dedicated to the lunar symbolic value during Neo-Assyrian times, it is interesting to detect whether this iconography had a military use, or if it was used for warlike representations. The possible employment of lunar crescent standards as military insignia had been little debated (CORNELIUS 2014, 158; STAUBLI 2003, 65–90), but seems to be a speculative interpretation since such evidence is completely lacking on Neo-Assyrian reliefs, paintings or glyptic art, and references for this particular use are virtually absent in the literary record. Through the figurative analysis of military scenes such as parades, battles, camps or any other representation describing the Neo-Assyrian campaigns in the Levant from Tiglath-Pileser III to Ashurbanipal, we never see a lunar crescent standard in a military context (BLEIBTREU 1992, Taf. 50–66). Moreover, the symbol was not displayed as a standard mounted on chariots, as the only images referring to the emblem of Sîn consist in brief and symbolic decorative motifs on war chariots. Thus, although the lunar crescent standard at Tel Sera' was found on the floor of a room in a defunctionalised military context and in association with other military items, a warlike use of the emblem is to be excluded, focusing on the religious and iconic value of its symbolism.

Although the presence of Assyrian deities imagery into southern Levant glyptic repertoires was marginal and generally modest, and since an Assyrian religious coercion over western provinces and vassal states is controversial and still very debated (COGAN 1993; THEUER 2000; HOLLOWAY 2002; BAGG 2013), a remarkable phenomenon consists in the appearance of crescent moon standards into local repertoires as depicting the emblem of the moon god of Ḫarrān, the “international” god in

⁵ Commonly known as “middle bent downward altars” (KEEL and UEHLINGER 1998, 298–305). Here I would suggest an interpretation of this peculiar kind of depictions as altars covered by ritual clothing, as it can be noted on both the altar and the pole supporting the crescent emblem in

the stamp seal from Nashonim (Pl. 1:9), or from the schematic rendition of the patch-work, closely emulating the clothing worn by the worshippers on Mount Nebo's (Pl. 1:18) and Tell Jemmeh's (Pl. 1:20) glyptic records.



Pl. 1 8th–7th centuries BC southern Levant glyptic repertoires displaying crescent standards symbols (Pl. 1:1–7 see KEEL 1994, figs. 20, 29–30, 48, 42, 45, 25, 15; Pl. 1:8 see WEIPPERT 1978, fig. 10; Pl. 1:9–12 see KEEL 1994: figs. 39, 47, 31, 35; Pl. 1:13 see WEIPPERT 1978, fig. 13; Pl. 1:14 see KEEL 1994, fig. 36; Pl. 1:15–17 see WINDERBAUM 2015: figs. 7.13, 7.15, 7.2; Pl. 1: 18–20 see KEEL 1994: figs. 34, 23, 43; Pl. 1:21 see WEIPPERT 1978: fig. 20).



Pl. 2 8th–7th centuries BC southern Levant glyptic repertoires displaying crescent standards symbols (Pl. 2:22–24 see KEEL 1994, figs. 37, 46, 44; Pl. 2:25–27 see WEIPPERT 1978: figs. 24–26).

the Assyrian western sphere of influence. This is rather evident in glyptic art, though seals primarily represent an economic and political instrument used by the newcomers in the administration of southern Levant, as it is possible to deduce from the seal impressions granting the sale of an estate and its workers on a cuneiform tablet found at Gezer (Pl. 1:12; REICH and BRANDL 1985, fig. 7). Nevertheless, it is interesting to note how local glyptic patterns may reflect reproductions and re-elaborations of foreign iconographies, by crudely reproducing or transforming Neo-Assyrian repertoires by local administrations in the exercise of their power.

Moreover, local manufactures could significantly reflect a specific reception or adoption of Assyro-Aramean motifs as they came about in southern Levant, through a cultural fascination on local elites. Since we have no mention of any deliberate attempt made by the Assyrians in order to impose the lunar worship through force, it is plausible that this cult first penetrated the region through strong Syrian and Aramean cultural influ-

ences, rather than being the direct result of an Assyrian dogma. It seems quite reasonable, anyway, to argue that the establishment of a new political order in southern Levant would have arranged and implied a wider spectrum of cultic possibilities; furthermore, a southern Levantine complex religious heterogeneity during the first half of the 1st millennium BC can be considered as a matter of fact, documented in both the archaeological record and the Ancient Testament⁶ (KEEL and UEH-LINGER 1998, 367–372; THEUER 2000; LIVERANI 2003).

In conclusion, the crescent standard discovered at Tel Sera' may be ascribed to the time of the Assyrian occupation in southern Levant during the first half of the 7th century BC, as a cultic furnishing dedicated to Šin of Ḥarrān and therefore belonging to a Neo-Assyrian cultural *koiné*. Crescents-on-a-pole may have had their origin as divine attributes placed in the hands of Šin's statues (KEEL 1994, 143–147), as we can see from the unique depiction of a cult relief from Til Barsip, probably portraying the Temple of Šin at Ḥarrān

⁶ For references to Astral cults in the Bible, see: Dtn. 4:19; 17:3; 2Kings 21:3–5; 2Chr. 33; Jer.7:17–18; 8:1–2; 19:13; 44:15–25; Zef. 1: 4–5.



Fig. 3 Sin of Ḥarrān. After THUREAU-DANGIN and DUNAND 1936, pl. 14:5a–b.

(Fig. 3; KEEL 1994, 143, fig. 10). The main function of lunar crescent standards discovered in the Levant should be connected with a cultic dimension, as the depictions we currently have provide documentary evidences to the cult of the moon god *Sîn*: the emblem is displayed solely on ritual paraphernalia such as pedestals or altars that were probably positioned in dedicated chapels, open-air sanctuaries or on rooftops. Therefore, the crescent standard unearthed at Tel Sera' can be considered as a symbol of the Neo-Assyrian presence and influence over southern Levant.

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