

A CUNEIFORM SEALING FROM TELL EL-DAB^cA AND ITS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

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Sealing TeD 9421 (Fig. 1a, b)

Measurements: height=2,3, width=1,5, depth=0,8 cm

Description (ML)

The seal impression discussed here, TeD 9421, originates from the main tell in Tell el-Dab^ca, from Area A/II, square h/9. It was excavated in autumn 2009 (see LEHMANN 2011).

Several Late Period tower houses are situated in this area. The foundations of these houses reached deep below the associated walking surface, and therefore the area in between the houses was filled with a thick deposit of soil mixed with a large quantity of potsherds and many stone fragments to create an even walking surface on top of the fill. The latter contained many small finds from different periods starting with the Middle Kingdom and extending to the Late Period. One of the finds was the cuneiform seal impression that forms the subject of this article.

The front of the seal impression shows three rows of cuneiform signs separated by horizontal lines, while on the rear two impressions of a twisted string, about 0.5–0.6cm broad can be seen. The clay lump is slightly convex in form, so that it might have sealed a vessel or a bag. The material is of a very fine clay, with almost no sand and few mica. The colour is grey.

The inscription (FvK)

The only part of the design of the cylinder seal used for sealing the clay lump TeD 9421 is its framed three-line cuneiform legend. Each framed line is about 3 mm high; the length of a line of text when complete cannot be established. Conventionally the legend box occupies the whole height of a cylinder seal, which normally measures between 2 and 3 cm. The legend box occupied significantly less than half of the seal stone's circumference, and the remaining space was taken up by an image. Part of it should have been visible below the third line of the legend, but the surface of the clay lump in this area



1A cuneiform sealing TeD
Inv. Nr. 9421, front



1B cuneiform sealing TeD
Inv. Nr. 9421, back

has deteriorated too much for any details to be recognizable.

The cuneiform signs are well executed and the text reads as follows:

ARAD-^d[..]

DUMU ì-*l*[ì-..]

[AR]AD [..]

“Warad-[..], son of Ilī-[..], servant of [..]”

The legend defines the seal owner by his name, parentage, and as a “servant” of a particular deity or king. Legends containing this information over three lines of text are typical for Mesopotamian cylinder seals of the first half of the second millennium BC (C.B.F. WALKER *apud* COLLON 1986, 16), and seals inscribed with a legend of this format are the most prevalent type of seals used for sealing clay tablets in Babylonia during the seventeenth and sixteenth centuries BC.¹ Neither personal name can be fully restored, but both contain elements that are extremely common in the Babylonian onomasticon of that time. The same legend format can also be found outside Mesopotamia, for example in the glyptic material from Alalakh VII (e.g. COLLON 1975, nos. 92, 119 and 140), but given that the name elements featuring in this sealing are far less common in western Syria or the Levant, the balance of evidence suggests that the cylinder seal was of Mesopotamian origin.

As can be seen on the accompanying photographs, the space following ARAD in the third line was not inscribed as far as now preserved. The next sign, now missing, was therefore positioned roughly in the middle of the line. This layout implies that no more than two or maximum three cuneiform signs were engraved after ARAD, making it very likely that the missing part of the line contained a short divine name (compare e.g. COLLON 1986, nos. 183 and 222). Should the line have held a royal name, which inevitably would have required more cuneiform signs, one could reasonably expect that at least its first sign was engraved in the preserved part of the line.

Discussion (FvK)

The fact that the person who sealed the clay lump TeD 9421 started to roll his seal stone with the legend facing down suggests that the inscription was particularly significant to him, probably because it contained his name, or perhaps that of a (dead or living) relative; a strong preference for the legend over any other part of the design can also be observed for seal impressions on tablets. It seems less likely, therefore, that the seal was handled by somebody whose appreciation of the individual parts of its design was not informed by Mesopotamian cultural values. If we may thus disregard the possibility that the seal had been re-used somewhere else, we are left with a scenario of a con-

tainer sealed by means of what appears to be a Babylonian cylinder seal, brought to Egypt and first opened in Tell el-Dab^a, where its sealing was discarded. What background might be envisaged for such a transaction?

Transporting goods over huge distances was time-consuming, expensive and potentially dangerous in the world of the ancient Near East, but also promised rich rewards. Traders maximized their profit margins by directly accessing distant markets, and rulers raised their prestige at home and abroad by exchanging embassies and gifts with faraway courts. Having a choice between the commercial (“trade”) and the ceremonial (“gift exchange”) paradigm to interpret this find, we shall now look more closely at its physical shape and inscription to advance a more specific interpretation.

While sealings on clay were used to secure a wide variety of containers in the ancient Near East (for an overview see OTTO 2010), the description of the object calls to mind one type in particular: the ubiquitous leather bag (STOL 1980–83, 537–8). Leather bags and sacks of various sizes were very common packaging for merchandise shipped over long distances, including bulky goods like wool and especially textiles (VEENHOF 1972, 37–41) but also smaller items (e.g. FRANKENA 1966, no. 84 for a bag of precious stones). Bags were tied up with a cord around the neck and secured with a sealing in order to safeguard their contents and identify their owner. Two methods for sealing bags are known. The first was particularly common for small-size bags, such as those containing silver (VARGYAS 2005): a lump of clay was folded around the loose string ends, modelled into a particular shape (the so-called *bul-la*), and then sealed (OTTO 2010, § 2.2; for an illustration see ARNAUD, CALVET and HUOT 1979, 13). The other method was suitable for larger bags and sacks: a lump of clay was attached directly on top of the string wrapped around the neck of the bag, flattened, and sealed (OTTO 2010, § 2.1.2; for an illustration see REICHEL 2001, 108). The object to which TeD 9421 was once affixed still awaits conclusive identification, but its shape, string impression and uneven rear surface are quite suggestive of the latter type of bag sealing. Bags were frequently used for packing merchandise but also, we may assume, for transporting valuables destined for ceremonial exchange with foreign courts. The in-

¹ Dates following the chronology proposed by GASCHE, ARMSTRONG, COLE, GURSADYAN 1998.

scription, to which we shall now turn, strongly suggests a shipment of goods brought to Egypt primarily for their commercial value.

The third line of the seal legend is particularly important for the interpretation of the find. There are basically two options for the servant statement appearing in the final line: the seal owner can express his veneration of a specific deity, or his allegiance to the ruling king. The first type was more widespread and defines the seal owner as belonging to a particular kinship group, with all members professing devotion to the same deity on their seals (CHARPIN 1990). The second type was reserved for “servants” of the king, a rank that may have been understood somewhat differently in different realms: it always comprises the king’s magnates, palace staff and military officers, but also may include, for example in the kingdom of Babylon, people with responsibilities in the temple or municipal administration. Using a seal that mentions one’s family deity clearly did not conform to the impression of absolute loyalty that was expected from everybody associated with the court, which is why very few sealings of that type occur in the palace at Mari (CHARPIN 1992, 63).

The third line of sealing TeD 9421 in all probability defines the seal’s owner as a “servant” of a deity. At first glance, this seems incompatible with the paradigm of ceremonial gift exchange between courts, because diplomatic gifts were presumably sealed with the king’s seal,² while the senior members of the diplomatic corps, the itinerant messengers and resident ambassadors, surely acknowledged allegiance to their master on their seals. The alternative, then, is the paradigm of long-distance trade, leaving us with a Mesopotamian trader delivering his wares to Tell el-Dab^a, an important commercial centre, but one no less than 1000 km away from the Euphrates.

Evidence for direct contact dating well before diplomatic relations were established between Kassite Babylonia and Egypt in the fifteenth century BC (BRINKMAN 1972, 274–6) comes as a surprise, especially in view of the fact that Egypt does not feature at all in the Mesopotamian sources of the first half of the second millennium BC. This silence cannot be attributed solely to geographical distance,

because Mesopotamian traders are known for bringing their business directly to faraway trade partners, most famously the Old Assyrian merchants who led their donkeys all the way to Kanesh on the Anatolian plateau, another 1000 km trip taking some six weeks each way. That Egypt nevertheless appears out of reach for Mesopotamian traders becomes comprehensible if we compare the road to Egypt with the one leading to Kanesh: while the Old Assyrian merchants negotiated passage with more than a few city states when traversing a politically fragmented landscape, and furthermore could choose from more than one route to reach their destination, there were far fewer options for travel between Egypt and Mesopotamia, and these routes were tightly controlled by territorial powers in the Syrian area that strove to monopolize the flow of goods going in either direction.

It is important to point out that the situation in reality was more dynamic than this description suggests, for Mesopotamian access to the Mediterranean world was forever contingent on its diplomatic relations with the kingdoms of Syria and the balance of power in that area. In this regard the fundamental alterations to the political map at the time of Yarim-Lim of Yamhad and Hammurabi of Babylon (middle of the seventeenth century BC) brought about important changes (KOPPEN 2007a). Yamhad, now the unrivalled power in Syria, became a driving force in an exchange network that covered the whole of the eastern Mediterranean, and established close and lasting relations with Babylon. Seeing that Babylonian traders frequently travelled through Syria at that time (KOPPEN 2007b, 212), we can expect that some also reached the Mediterranean ports, even if this point is not yet documented in the sources. The mid-seventeenth century BC thus appears to be a time when shipping merchandise all the way to Tell el-Dab^a opened up lucrative opportunities for Babylonian businessmen; it is unknown how long conditions favourable to this type of venture persisted. Whether sealing TeD 9421 may now also be dated to this time period is a question that should be reserved for a comprehensive analysis of all clay sealings from Tell el-Dab^a.

² Considering the discovery of clay lumps with royal sealings at Acemhöyük (VEENHOF 1993, 645) and Mari (CHARPIN 2001, 27), and textual evidence (CHARPIN 1992, 72). By the

time of the Amarna letters it was still considered disrespectful when royal gifts were sealed by anybody else but the king (MORAN 1992, no. 7, lines 63–72).

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