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*'Suckling Antelopes' from Tell Arbid  
A Rare Iconographic Motif  
from the Third Millennium BC*

The collection of almost five hundred third millennium BC cylinder seal impressions on clay sealings from Tell Arbid features a number of different styles and a wide array of iconographic motifs characteristic for the period.<sup>1</sup> The cylinders were rolled over lumps of soft clay (found during excavations in various states of preservation), which were used for sealing various kinds of containers, such as ceramic vessels, baskets and textile or leather bags, and for securing locked doors (or hatches). Finding more than one impression of the same seal in the course of excavations is rare, so it was one of such cases that drew my attention. The impression in question was the more remarkable for the peculiar motif that interested me at once upon its discovery. This impression was identified on over a dozen poorly preserved clay lumps from more than one sealing. They were found in 2005 during excavations in Sector W at the southern slope of Tell Arbid (**Fig. 1a-b**). Two largest, and least damaged, fragments retained almost the whole scene, allowing for its identification as the impression of one and the same cylinder seal. The remaining fragments, in my opinion once forming a single, now badly crushed, sealing, contributed some details towards the reconstruction of the whole image.

The first of the sealings (Inv. No. ARB'05-W-52/57-1) is shaped like a flattened, sub-rectangular lump (**Fig. 2**); the preserved part is approximately 7cm long, 5.7cm wide and 1.9cm thick. The second of the sealings (Inv. No. ARB'05-W-52/57-10) is of a similar shape, but thicker (its dimensions being: 7.8cm by 5.5cm by 3.1cm) (**Fig. 3a-b**). The cylinder seal with which the scene was impressed must have been about 5cm high. Its diameter is not known, as the surviving image is but a part of the whole scene, so the impression's length cannot be measured in order to reconstruct the cylinder's diameter. All that can be said is that it measured no less than 1.5cm. The scene was carved in low relief, its execution indicating that the cylinder must have been made of a rather hard stone. A horizontal line bordered the design from the top and it seems quite likely that a similar one was lining its bottom. The scene features two animals of the *capridae* family, most probably antelopes, suckling their young. The two pairs of animals are separated by a schematically rendered floral motif, probably representing a tree. A human figure, presumably seated on the ground, is pictured in front of one of the antelopes (**Fig. 3b**). The figure must have been holding something in one hand, but unfortunately, this part of the scene has not survived on any of the sealings, so the character of the objects remains unknown, precluding a confident interpretation of this figure's role in the whole image.

Was it meant to represent a hunter stalking the animals with a bow? The figure's pose seems to speak against such an interpretation. I picture it rather holding a stick or scepter of some kind, a symbol of 'the Lord of the Animals', a divine protector of herds and wild game against predators.<sup>2</sup> Apart from the characters mentioned above, the scene features also

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<sup>1</sup> P. BIELIŃSKI, Report on the Syrian-Polish explorations in 2005. The tenth season, *PAM* XVII (Reports 2005), 2007, pp. 454–456.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*, Some cylinder seal impression on pottery from Tell Arbid, [*in:*] O. Drewnowska (Ed.), *Here & There. Across the Ancient Near East. Studies in Honour of Krystyna Łyczkowska*, Warszawa 2009 [= Some cylinder seal impression], p. 9, Fig. 2, ARB'05 SD 35/65-10; H. FRANKFORT, Stratified cylinder seals from the Diyala Region, *OIP* LXXII, Chicago 1955, Pl. 24 (No. 246), Pl. 38 (No. 397).



0 5 cm



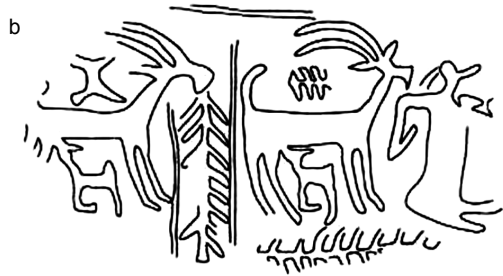
1. Two different fragments of impressions of the same cylinder seal on clay sealings from Tell Arbid (Phot. A. Reiche).



2. Cylinder seal impression on a clay sealing  
ARB'05-W-52/57-7 (Phot. A. Reiche).



3. Another sealing impressed with the same seal  
ARB'05-W-52/57-10 (Phot. A. Reiche, Drawing and  
digitizing M. Lopko and M. Momot).



a few elements that can have both symbolic and decorative character: a quadrilobe shape over the animals' backs and a schematic floral motif, positioned vertically, often taken to be the representation of a tree.<sup>3</sup> An identical, but horizontal, motif stretched beneath the hooves of one of the 'antelopes' and the seated human figure, providing a frame for the scene.

Although Mesopotamian and Elamite glyptics of the fourth and third millennia BC produced fairly numerous representations of grazing animals accompanied by hunters or shepherds,<sup>4</sup> the image from Tell Arbid is a unique example. Firstly, it features suckling animals – a very rare theme in this period. Secondly, the portrayed animals are clearly wild rather than domesticated.

From all of north-eastern Syria, or – even more broadly – from all of northern Mesopotamia, only one other example of such a scene is known so far. It came from a clay

<sup>3</sup> H. PITTMANN, *The Glazed Steatite Glyptic Style. The Structure and Function of an Image System in the Administration of Protoliterate Mesopotamia*, *Berliner Beiträge zum Vorderen Orient* 16, Berlin 1994 [= *Glazed Steatite Glyptic Style*], Figs 15, 16, 19.

<sup>4</sup> D.M. MATTHEWS, *The Early Glyptic of Tell Brak. Cylinder Seals of Third Millennium Syria*, *OBO Series Archaeologica* 15, Fribourg 1997 [= *Early Glyptic*], Pl. XXXVI.473, 476, 477, Pl. XXXVIII.504 ('protector of animals?'), Pl. XLI.558 (shepherd or hunter); B. BUCHANAN, *Catalogue of Ancient Near Eastern Seals in the Ashmolean Museum I, Cylinder Seals*, Oxford 1966 [= *Catalogue*], pp. 137–140, Pl. 49.757, 759 (possibly depictions of hunters and of the 'protector of animals').

*bullae* with a cylinder seal impression discovered by Sir Max Mallowan at Tell Brak, just 25km south of Tell Arbid.<sup>5</sup> That scene features a pair of horned animals, one of which can be identified as a deer, the other as a representative of the *capridae* family. The highly stylized glyptic art of the period rules out a more precise identification of the depicted animals' species, but I am inclined to classify the second animal as an antelope rather than a chamois. The antelope is suckling a young calf, obviously of the same species, while the deer, standing behind the nursing pair, turns its head back, towards a standing human figure. The man is wearing a knee-long robe and raises up both arms. Beneath the deer's trunk a scorpion is depicted. The scene, enclosed from the top and the bottom between double horizontal bands of hatched lines, includes also irregular, oval 'bubbles' suspended over the animals and a bulging star, or perhaps rather a sun, with clearly marked rays. A vertical element, placed in front of the antelope, as if to provide a frame for the scene, is shaped like a tall pole, with slanting lines protruding upwards from its top to just one side. I would interpret this motif as a representation of a coniferous tree. Another, similar, but smaller, motif (probably depicting a shrub) was carved between the animals.<sup>6</sup>

Returning to the interpretation of the scene from the Tell Arbid sealings, it must be stressed that the seated figure is the key to its understanding. For reasons outlined above (problems with identification caused by the fragmentary state of preservation), its interpretation as a hunter seems improbable, not the least because there are no analogical depictions of archers from that period. The object the figure is holding (judging by the preserved fragment) may have also been e.g. a harp – a common element in the iconographic repertoire of seals from the Jazirah region in that period.<sup>7</sup> However, there is no sufficient grounds for such an interpretation. I will therefore revert to the conception of 'the Lord of the Animals', which – although, in my opinion, most probable – needs further commentary. 'The Lord of the Animals' is usually depicted in Mesopotamian glyptic art of the first half of the third millennium BC with his attributes, such as a bundle of branches or a shepherd's crook (perhaps being the mysterious object held by the figure on our sealing) but in those scenes the Lord is standing, not seated. In the glyptic iconography of third millennium BC Mesopotamia, seated figures usually feature in banquet scenes; moreover, the banqueters are sitting on chairs or stools rather than directly on the ground.<sup>8</sup> Of course, in the discussed case, a banquet scene is out of the question. Still, in this context, the depiction from the Tell Arbid sealing is an interesting exception. The originality of this scene lies in the sum of two elements: the very rare motif of suckling antelopes and that of 'the Lord of the Animals', protector of herds and wild game. The whole scene is peaceful and full of harmony, idyllic even, which is a veritable exception in the glyptic art of third millennium BC Jazirah.

<sup>5</sup> M.E.L. MALLOWAN, Excavations at Tell Brak and Chagar Bazar, *Iraq* IX, 1947, p. 146, No 9, Pl. XXIII.9.

<sup>6</sup> BUCHANAN, Catalogue, Pl. 49.758d; MATTHEWS, Early Glyptic, Pl. XXXVI.476.

<sup>7</sup> Motif of the harp is also fairly common on Early Dynastic III period seal impressions on vessels and (less frequently) on sealings from Tell Arbid (of which a catalogue is in preparation by the present author). MATTHEWS, Early Glyptic, Pl. XXXVIII.514.

<sup>8</sup> BIELIŃSKI, Some cylinder seal impression, p. 9, Fig. 2, and p. 7, Fig. 1 (ARB'04 SD 35/64-11A).

As mentioned above, the seal impressions were found on clay sealings, of which more than 500 fragments have been found so far at Tell Arbid, this abundance being nothing exceptional in third millennium BC layers at northern Mesopotamian sites. As the sealings had to be broken in order to reach the contents of the rooms or containers they protected, the impressions on the sealings have been preserved but fragmentarily, and we know them mostly from pieces discarded as rubbish. Moreover, the sealings were made of fragile, unbaked clay. That is why the best-preserved fragments come from rubbish dumps containing ashes. Such contexts produced most of the Tell Arbid sealings, which, having been hardened in hot ash, bear depictions that are now reasonably clear.<sup>9</sup> The sealings under discussion were also discovered during exploration of ashy accumulation layers adjacent to a rectangular room without doorways (locus 8-52/56), which abutted the eastern wall of the *cella* belonging to the so-called Southern Temple, in Tell Arbid's Sector W.

The room, with its massive walls (up to 1.5m thick) preserved to the height of over 2m, but originally doubtlessly even higher, has been interpreted as a temple granary. The eastern wall of the 'granary' was damaged by a large, early second millennium BC pit (dated to the Khabur ware period). This storeroom must have had a special function, being the only architectural feature so closely connected and structurally similar to the Southern Temple's *cella*.<sup>10</sup> This is the basis of the assertion that it was a temple granary, and – as such – it is natural it should be much larger and more massive than contemporaneous granaries discovered in domestic districts of the Ninevite 5 period town in Tell Arbid's Sectors D and SD. However, in similarity to the other granaries, this one could also be accessed only from the top, probably through an entrance secured by a wooden hatch, that could only be reached by means of a ladder.

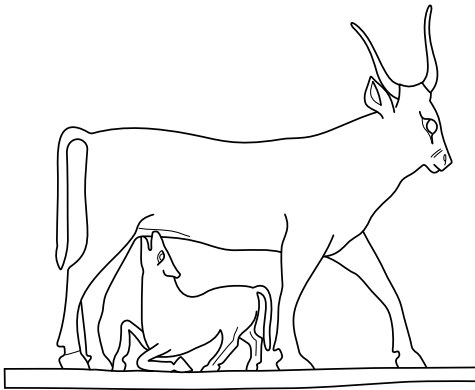
The person entering the granary would need to lift the hatch and – in doing so – break, or tear off, the sealing securing the hatch to the wall. This assumption can be confirmed by examining the sealings' section and by studying the negatives of different materials on the sealings' reverse. It seems possible to distinguish the impressions of a brick and of a wooden hatch on the discussed sealings. Based on the architectural context and on the evidence provided by potsherds from the sanctuary and from the layers in which the sealing was found, it can be dated to the period of the Ninevite 5 culture, and more precisely, to a transitional period between the incised pottery phase and the excised pottery phase, although it should probably be associated with the latter (terminal Ninevite 5 period, 2700–2550 BC). Also in terms of style (the low relief and delicate modeling of figures) the cylinder seal that made the impressions can be associated with glyptics from the Jazirah region that coincided with the so-called Piedmont style (characteristic for its non-figural motifs) but incorporated a number of local influences, exemplified by the glyptic art known from Tell Brak.<sup>11</sup>

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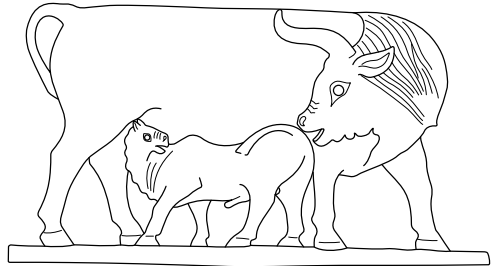
<sup>9</sup> P. BIELIŃSKI, Preliminary report on the results of the twelfth season of Syrian-Polish excavations, *PAM XIX* (Reports 2007), 2010, pp. 551–554.

<sup>10</sup> P. BIELIŃSKI, Tell Arbid 2008–2009. Preliminary report on the results of thirteenth and fourteenth seasons of Polish-Syrian excavations, *PAM XXI* (Research 2009), 2012, pp. 523–528, Fig. 15.

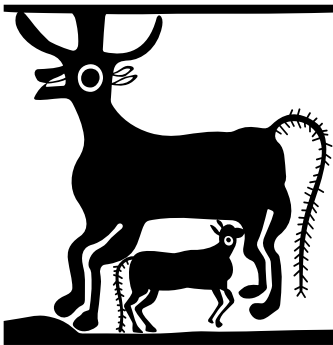
<sup>11</sup> MATTHEWS, Early Glyptic, pp. 136, 144, 190; PITTMAN, Glazed Steatite Glyptic Style, pp. 243–264.



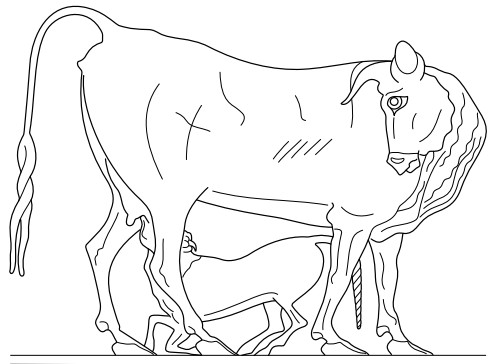
a



b

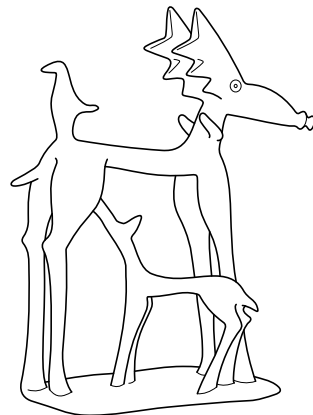


c



d

5. Analogies for the depiction from Tell Arbid – scenes with horned animals suckling their young. Examples from Near Eastern art of later periods: a. after J. & D. OATES, *Nimrud. An Assyrian Imperial City Revealed*, London 2001, p. 170, Fig. 106; b. after H. FRANKFORT, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*, New Haven 1996, p. 317: 376. Example from Aegean art: c. after N. PLATON, *Crete, Archaeologia Mundi*, Geneve 1966, III. 68. Examples from Classical art: d. after J. CHARBONNEAUX, R. MARTIN, F. VILLARD, *Grèce Archaique (620–480 avant J.-C.)*, Paris 1968, p. 309, III. 353; e. after: R. CARPENTER, *Greek Art. A study of the formal evolution of style*, Philadelphia 1962, p. 60, Fig. 12.



e

I can only suppose the depiction of animals suckling their young in peace and safety, engraved on a cylinder seal used by a person authorized overseeing the temple's granary was not accidental. One may even say that such 'guardian', like the shepherd on the seal was symbolically responsible for the welfare of the community. This motif, but without the person of the shepherd, has numerous parallels in later art throughout the Near East (**Fig. 5a-b**), the Aegean (**Fig. 5c**) and Egypt; and over the centuries, and later will find its way to classical art (**Fig. 5d-e**).

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