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‘Bottle-brush’ Tree and Its Role in Creating Standard Compositions on Neo-Assyrian Seals in the Linear-style

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Abstract: Neo-Assyrian glyptics produced several standard compositions which were repeatedly reproduced over the three centuries of the Neo-Assyrian empire’s existence, as attested by the numerous seals engraved with almost identical scenes of rituals or hunts. The canon of these compositions could be upheld by applying a rigid scheme in the scenes’ planning and maintaining the same technique of their execution. The seal-cutters often used simple incisions as outlines for the planned scene, which they subsequently masked as floral elements resembling a bottle-brush. These elements of the compositions provide a key to exploring the seal-engraving techniques of the first millennium BC.

Keywords: Neo-Assyrian period, Mesopotamia, seals, seal-cutter, ‘bottle-brush’ tree, standard composition

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In the assemblage of the British Museum Department of Western Asiatic Antiquities collection there is a rather ordinary cylinder seal catalogued as BM WA 13640,[1] made of serpentine[2] and dating from the Neo-Assyrian period (the second half of the eighth century BC).[3] Although the scene depicted on that seal is not outstanding in any way, its technique of execution provides the departure point for this short discussion of the role of a floral element – the so-called ‘bottle-brush’ tree[4] – in the creation of the standard composition.

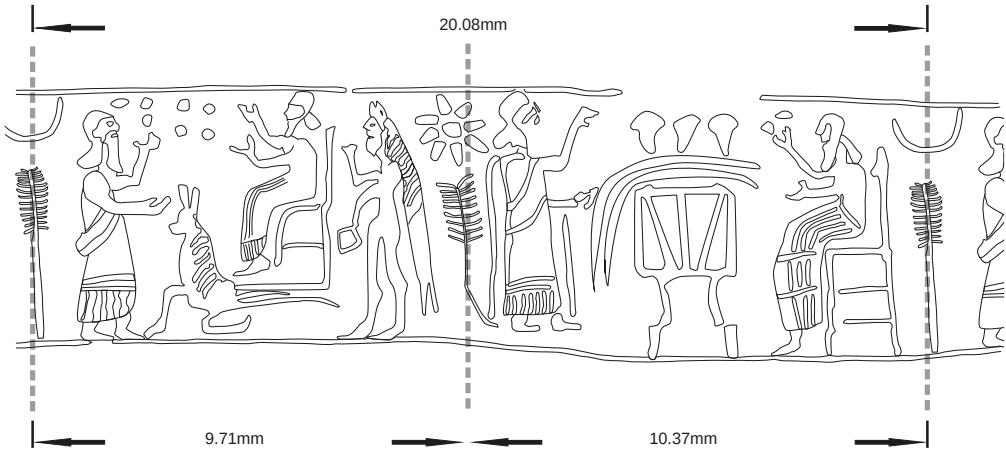
The seal is engraved with two scenes (**Fig. 1**): the first one depicts the worship of a deity, the other – a banquet scene, each taking up a similar surface. Both scenes are divided by two

[1] Collon 2001: 70, Fig. 125.

[2] The seal is slightly barrel-shaped, with an oblique top, which – considering the difference in the diameters of its top and bottom (18mm and 20mm), led Dominique Collon to regard it as the bottom part of a larger seal (Collon 2001: 71).

[3] Collon 2001: 64.

[4] A term coined by D. Collon while presenting a collection of first millennium BC seals (Collon 2001). It stands for a floral element with a long stem and an oblong crown.



1. Sketch of impression BM WA 134640 seal (Drawing: M. Iskra; based on: Collon 2001: Fig. 125).

plants shaped as the 'bottle-brush' tree (**Fig. 2a**), which might be treated as an additional decorative element. However, this would be a superficial observation, since the role of such elements is much more significant for the composition as a whole. To appreciate this, envisage yourself as an ancient 'Assyrian' seal-cutter. These craftsmen worked in small, hard stones, up to 4cm high and did not have at their disposal the specialist tools available today. The basic materials used in the production of Assyrian linear-style seals were relatively soft stones, such as serpentine, limestone or chlorite.[5] Results of technological analyses on the first millennium BC specimens, point to four engraving techniques: microchipping, filing, drilling and wheel-cutting.[6] With regard to soft materials, linear-style seals were usually deeply engraved by use of hand-held tools, such as burins.[7] Some small details, elliptical in shape and grooved longitudinally were engraved by use of lapidary engraving wheel.[8] With the tools at the engraver's disposal, he needed to be very precise in the planning of the scene about to be executed. Up till now, no sketches or ready models have been identified which could have served as aids in this process.[9] However, according to the present author's hypothesis, traces of guidelines which provided reference points for the various elements depicted in a given scene can be found on the seal itself. This observation is well exemplified by seal BM WA 13640, where these elements are clearly visible.[10]

On this seal, due to the symmetrical position of the two 'bottle-brush' trees, spaces between them are of equal width and the scenes they contain form a harmonious composition.

[5] Buchanan 1966: 106.

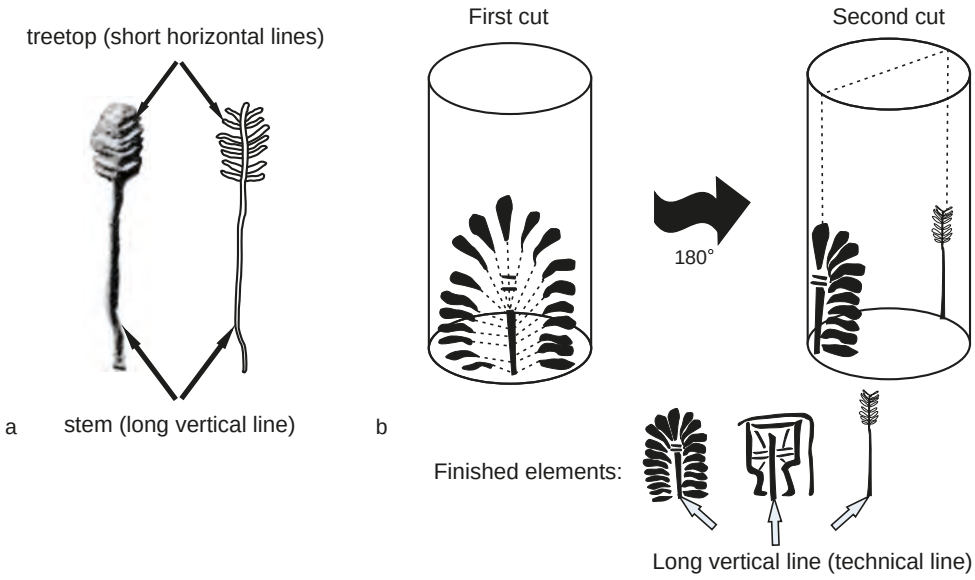
[6] On engraving techniques, see: Sax, Meeks 1994; 1995; Sax, Meeks, McNabb 1998.

[7] Sax 2001: 21.

[8] Sax, Meeks, Collon 2000.

[9] Moorey 1994: 104.

[10] According to P.R.S. Moorey's hypothesis, seals, particularly in variegated stones, were covered with a layer of clay or plaster to take initial guidelines (Moorey 1994: 104).



2a. The 'bottle-brush' tree; b. illustration of engraving process (Drawing: M. Iskra).

Execution of the 'bottle-brush' tree element is technically easy, as it consists of a long vertical incision for the 'stem' and a few short horizontal notches imitating branches. Without the latter, the 'stem' is simply a long vertical line which would have been very useful to the engraver at the beginning of his work. It must be kept in mind that while working such a small object of cylindrical shape it is difficult to measure the precise proportions of the particular elements of its ornament. First, the engraver needed to mark some reference points for the intended composition, most probably by engraving thin, vertical lines. If the scene comprised many elements, as in the case of seal BM WA 134640, at least two such reference points would be needed. After making the first incision, the seal was turned by 180° and the second line was placed so as to obtain two equal fields for each of the planned scenes (**Fig. 2b**). If the preparations for the carving of the seal did indeed proceed this way, the 'bottle-brush' tree can be regarded as a technical element, which was turned into an ornament at a further stage of the work. Use of such elements is not rare and can be found in the standard compositions of Neo-Assyrian linear-style seals.

The 'bottle-brush' tree is most frequently encountered in popular compositions depicting palace scenes, known in the subject literature by the names of the 'Pot-stand group', the 'Table group' and the 'Sacred tree with a winged disc and worshippers', popularized in the works of Dominique Collon and Edith Porada.[11] Despite visible differences, all these

[11] Porada 1948: 76–77; Collon 2001: 64–65.

scenes have a similar composition (**Fig. 3a-b**). It usually comprises three main elements: the middle one (usually a stylized palmette, a table or a stand with a vessel) and two side ones, placed antithetically (usually in the form of human figures). The 'bottle-brush' tree element in such scenes is usually located at a margin, behind the human figure's back.[12] Its main, technical role was to keep the two side elements from overlapping, but it could also be of use in determining their respective widths. For this, however, a second technical guideline was needed. In this context, the form of the middle element of these compositions needs to be considered. From a technical point of view, the 'sacred tree' is a collection of notches to both sides of a straight vertical line, while a T-shaped table, which often features in the 'Table group' scenes, also incorporates a long, straight line visible between the table's legs.[13]

These long, straight lines are important as they seem to be the long sought-after second technical guideline needed to establish the widths of the three main elements of the composition. Having made the two technical incisions, the seal-cutter could start work on the actual engraving of the central element of the scene, disguising it in the form of a table or the 'sacred tree', and then proceed to the engraving of the two side elements. In some cases, however, the middle feature was not particularly elaborated on and this element was left in the form of a 'bottle-brush' tree.[14] In the author's opinion, the correct execution of the two technical guidelines was the decisive factor in proper placement of the various elements of the scene, which was essential in the creation of repeatable compositions.

In the case of other popular compositions made in the linear-style, a somewhat different use of the 'bottle-brush' tree can be observed. Hunting scenes (**Fig. 3c**) provide a good example of compositions where the 'bottle-brush' tree determined the form of the scene's remaining components. Such compositions usually consist of two main elements (a human figure and an animal or fantastic creature) set antithetically. The 'bottle-brush' tree is located between these two main features, yet it is much smaller than in scenes depicting rituals. An important trait of these scenes is the lack of proportion between the main components – for instance, an archers arm seem much too long or an animal takes up 2/3 of the scene.[15] This may have occurred if the composition was planned with reference to just one set point provided by a single technical incision, later turned into a small plant or a 'bottle-brush' tree located in the middle of the scene. With just one axis set at his disposal, the engraver could hardly estimate the required width of the elements he was adding to the scene. Therefore, he needed to start by engraving elements (such as a bow or an animal head) that were nearest to the set axis and above the technical

[12] Compare: Moortgat 1940: Figs 660, 663–667, 637–647, 679; Porada 1948: Figs 642, 644, 665–666, 670, 673; Teissier 1984: Figs 192–193, 196, 205–207, 210; Collon 2001: Figs 104, 107, 108, 110, 112, 116, 117, 130, 131.

[13] Moortgat 1940: Figs 663, 673; Porada 1948: Figs 644, 673; Buchanan 1966: Figs 593, 606.

[14] Collon 2001: Figs 111–112; Teissier 1984: Figs 202, 205.

[15] Porada 1948: Fig. 622; Collon 2001: Fig. 30.

a

b

c

3. Examples of scenes with the 'bottle-brush' tree: a. 'The Sacred tree with a winged sun disc and worshipers'; b. 'The Table group'; c. 'Hunting scene'; not to scale (Drawing: M. Iskra; a-b. based on: Porada 1948: Figs 644, 673; c. based on: Moortgat 1940: Fig. 642).

incision.[16] Moving on to the remaining elements of the composition further afield, the engraver had to improvise relying on his experience, as he did not know the exact position of the other border between the elements. It was this lack of precision that resulted in the distortion of proportions between these elements and those situated near to the axis of the composition.[17]

Admittedly, the seal-cutters made frequent mistakes, as can be seen in the floral elements, such as the 'bottle-brush' tree. The author is of the opinion that crooked forms of the 'bottle-brush' tree can be traced back to the execution of two technical incisions instead of just one; the first was incorrect so the second one was a necessary amendment.[18] Probably, most of the seals we know were not made by 'master engravers' but rather by ordinary artisans using popular compositions and well-known engraving techniques. In Edith Porada's opinion, seals were often made by priestly scribes who drew figures like ideograms and combined them in the scenes.[19] Therefore, the abundance of seals with similar scenes did not result from a particular demand but it was rather conditioned by the simplicity of their execution. More complex scenes with continuous arrangement (such as the chariot hunt scene or Ninurta's mythological combats) are relatively rare and floral elements in the form of the 'bottle-brush' tree feature there only occasionally. These were the seals that could have been made by highly-skilled engravers.

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[16] Osten 1934: Fig. 414.

[17] This is particularly well visible in examples illustrated by Moortgat 1940: Fig. 642; Parker 1955: Fig. 4; Teissier 1984: Figs 146, 147.

[18] Porada 1948: Figs 613–614; Buchanan 1966: Figs 574, 577; Collon 2001: Fig. 36.

[19] Porada 1977: 11.

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