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## SEALING POTS IN UPPER MESOPOTAMIA IN THE LATE THIRD MILLENNIUM

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Although the practice of sealing is well attested in Mesopotamia due to the numerous finds of cylinder-seals, clay sealings and bullae, when considering sealing impressions on pots the scope of this study dwindles remarkably. Within the last two decades Near Eastern archaeology has paid much more interest to this kind of impressions, specifically in the area of the Khabur basin, where archaeological sites such as Tell Beydar, Tell Arbid and Tell Brak have provided us with good samples of how this administrative device was used. The analysis of typology and the context of the pottery and its respective sealing will help us better understand the administrative schemes in Upper Mesopotamia during the Late Third Millennium, and whether Southern Mesopotamia influence is visible in local styles and shapes.*

### **RESUMEN**

*A pesar de que la utilización de sellos está bien documentada en Mesopotamia gracias al hallazgo de un elevado número de cilindro-sellos, cretullae y bullae, si centramos el espectro a las improntas de cilindro-sellos en cerámica éstos merman notablemente. A lo largo de las últimas dos décadas la arqueología próximo-oriental ha intensificado su interés en este tipo de improntas, muy especialmente en la cuenca del Khabur, donde yacimientos como Tell Beydar, Tell Arbid y Tell Brak han proporcionado valiosas muestras de la manera en que dichos instrumentos administrativos eran utilizados.*

*El análisis de la tipología y contexto arqueológico de la cerámica y su correspondiente sello puede ayudarnos a comprender de una manera más amplia las estructuras administrativas en la Alta Mesopotamia a fines del Tercer Milenio a.C. y a valorar si la influencia del Sur de Mesopotamia era reconocible en las formas y estilos.*

### **KEYWORDS**

*Cylinder-seal, pottery, sealing, Khabur.*

### **PALABRAS CLAVE**

*Cilindro-sello, cerámica, sello, Khabur.*

## **CYLINDER SEALED POTTERY IN THE NEAR EAST**

Although cylinder sealed pots and jars are well attested all over the ancient Near East, it is during the Third Millennium when we find the first examples of this practice. It completed the wide scope of the use of seals and sealings so far attested thanks to the finds of cylinder-seals, *cretullae* and *bullae*, all of them connected but at the same time with a very specific functionality, depending on context, use and style.

For some decades the study of cylinder-sealed jars or pots was mainly focused on the area of the Hamrin valley and also on the Western area of the Near East, i.e. Palestine and the Mediterranean coast. It is therefore no surprise that the ongoing research on the cylinder-sealed examples from the Khabur region have enriched our knowledge about the use, function and typology as well as the practice of sealing pots.

Among the Khabur region some referential archaeological sites, such as Tell Brak, Tell Beydar and Tell Arbid have provided us with a remarkable number of examples of pottery sealings. Some other sites, though, such as Tell Mozan, Tell Leilan, Tell Barri, Tell Kashkashok and Tell Bi'a, must be referred when talking to the find of cylinder-sealed pottery, but in this case I will focus on the first mentioned archaeological sites.

The phenomenology of this practice seems clear. The cylinder-seal is rolled over the pottery mainly on the body, but it is also attested on lids, as we observe in examples coming from the Hamrin.

Until now, researchers classified the different arrays of cylinder-sealed pottery according to two main parameters: first, the typology of the pottery, bearing in mind the shape, the temper, the grid and, obviously, the context; and second: the stylistic features of the impressed seal. However, these two criteria as to date the cylinder-sealed pottery seem problematic as very often the stylistic dating of the seal does not match at all with the date the context of pottery found. This fact is even more complex when the context of the cylinder-seal pots or jars is the surface, as it happened in samples from Brak and Arbid<sup>1</sup>.

Nonetheless, scholars seem to agree that this practice might be better explained by a somehow yet uncertain administrative purpose than by merely artistic and decorative reasons. The explanation for this use will be accepted generally for the mentioned three archaeological sites, but we may find some new viewpoints.

### GENERAL FEATURES OF SEALED POTTERY IN THE KHABUR REGION

Three major sites has been the focus of this comparative study. The election is far from random as all of them can be considered centres of great importance in the administration of the lands of the North of Mesopotamia. Sometimes, the concurrence of the same phenomena in sites which share analogical features may point out the possible standardization of a practice. In my opinion, this is exactly what does happen with the practice of rolling cylinder-seals on pottery, although the specific functionality and styles may differ from one place to another as it clearly does occur between the North and South of Mesopotamia.

In the case of Tell Beydar, the presence of the seal-impressed pottery has been attested in different archaeological areas and contexts, most of them being dated to the EJ IIIb period. In this site the same seal seems to have been rolled over a considerable number of pots. All these sealed pottery were medium-sized jars. The cylinder-seal was rolled vertically and its decoration is entirely local, not only because of the clear Syrian style but also due to the subject depicted on it, such as attested in Tell Chuera and Tell Brak<sup>2</sup>.

We will notice that most of the seals rolled on pottery in this area bear the same iconographical subject. In all of them we notice either the presence of a master of beasts surrounded by animals and plants or simply animals. This might be the landmark of local identity, but later, in a context we might locate closer to the Akkadian period, we also find designs of a clear Southern Mesopotamian origin, with scenes such as banquets, contest scenes and wagons, that have to be connected with a different aim.

In the case of a seal from Tell Beydar this is associated with a potter's mark<sup>3</sup>, a fact that we find also in Brak and Hamoukar and that makes this kind of practice unique and may offer some hints on the nature of the use of these sealings, maybe used as labels.

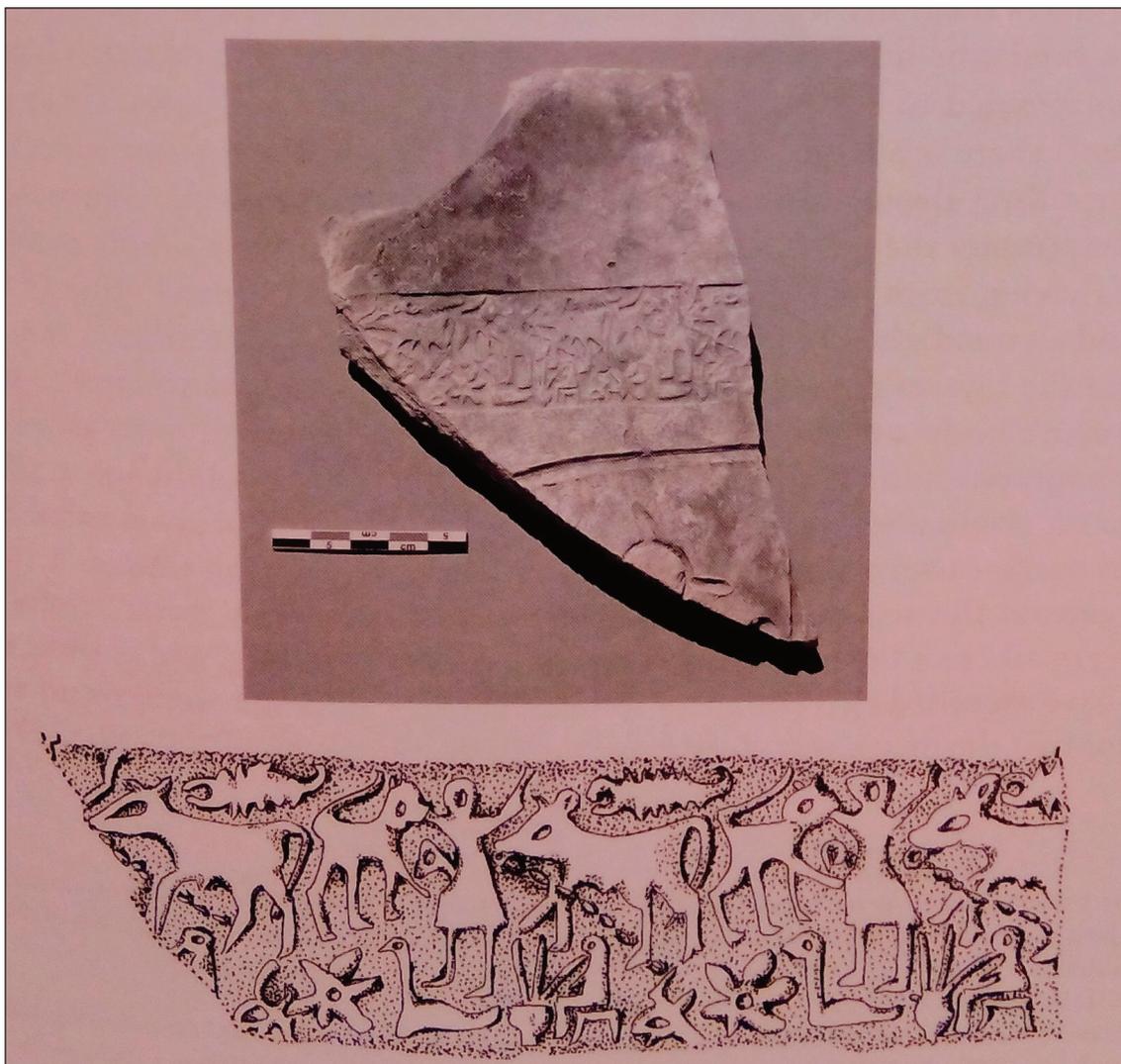
In Tell Arbid the phenomenology of the cylinder-sealed jars and pots is somehow different, somehow similar. It is not the same because here, the unearthed examples bear other motifs and there is no repeated seal whatsoever, but anyhow they have in common the stylistic typology of the scenes there depicted, with a clear local style, with scenes such as contest scenes, master of beasts and banquet scenes.

This local Syrian style is not only present during the EJ IIIb in the Khabur region, as it has been proven with the find of some similar unpublished sealings coming from Tell Brak and also from further sites such as Tell Hamoukar and dated to the Akkadian period.

<sup>1</sup> Bielinski, P. 2009 "Some Cylinder Seal Impressions on Pottery from Tell Arbid" in O. Drewnowska (ed.), *Here and There. Across the Ancient Near East. Studies in Honour of Krystyna Łyczkowska*, Warsaw. p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Rova, E. 2006 "Seal Impressions on Pottery in the Khabour Region in the 3rd Millennium B.C.: Some New Evidence from Tell Beydar", *BaM* 37. p. 302.

<sup>3</sup> *Op.cit.* p.303.



*Fig.1. Drawing and photo of a Tell Beydar impression. 13155-M-1 in Rova, E.2006 “Seal Impressions on Pottery in the Khabour Region in the 3rd Millennium B.C.: Some New Evidence from Tell Beydar”, BaM 37: p. 301.*

These kind of sealings are also present in Tell Chuera and Tell Bi’a. However, the banquet scene shows a clear influence from the South, if not in its execution at least in its conception.

Thus, the cylinder-sealed pots from Arbid show most of the features already seen for those sealed jars from Beydar. They are also rolled on the upper part of the jar and present the same “decorative” scenes and motifs.

However, there are two important differences that will be also valid when establishing an analogy with sites such as Brak. These are no others than the presence of potter’s mark along with the rolling and the fact that not a single seal is repeated.

Considering these concurrences and divergences some generalities have been accepted by several scholars concerning the function and aim of this kind of impressions. Although these conclusions may be completed by information proceeding from Tell Brak, it seems primarily clear that the typology of the pottery bearing cylinder-sealed impressions is recurrent, which is, medium-sized jars used to transport goods. The

representative variety seems limited at least in the stylistic aspect, but not so much in the subjects, as we have seen with the depictions of wagons in Tell Beydar, which is also attested in Tell Brak.

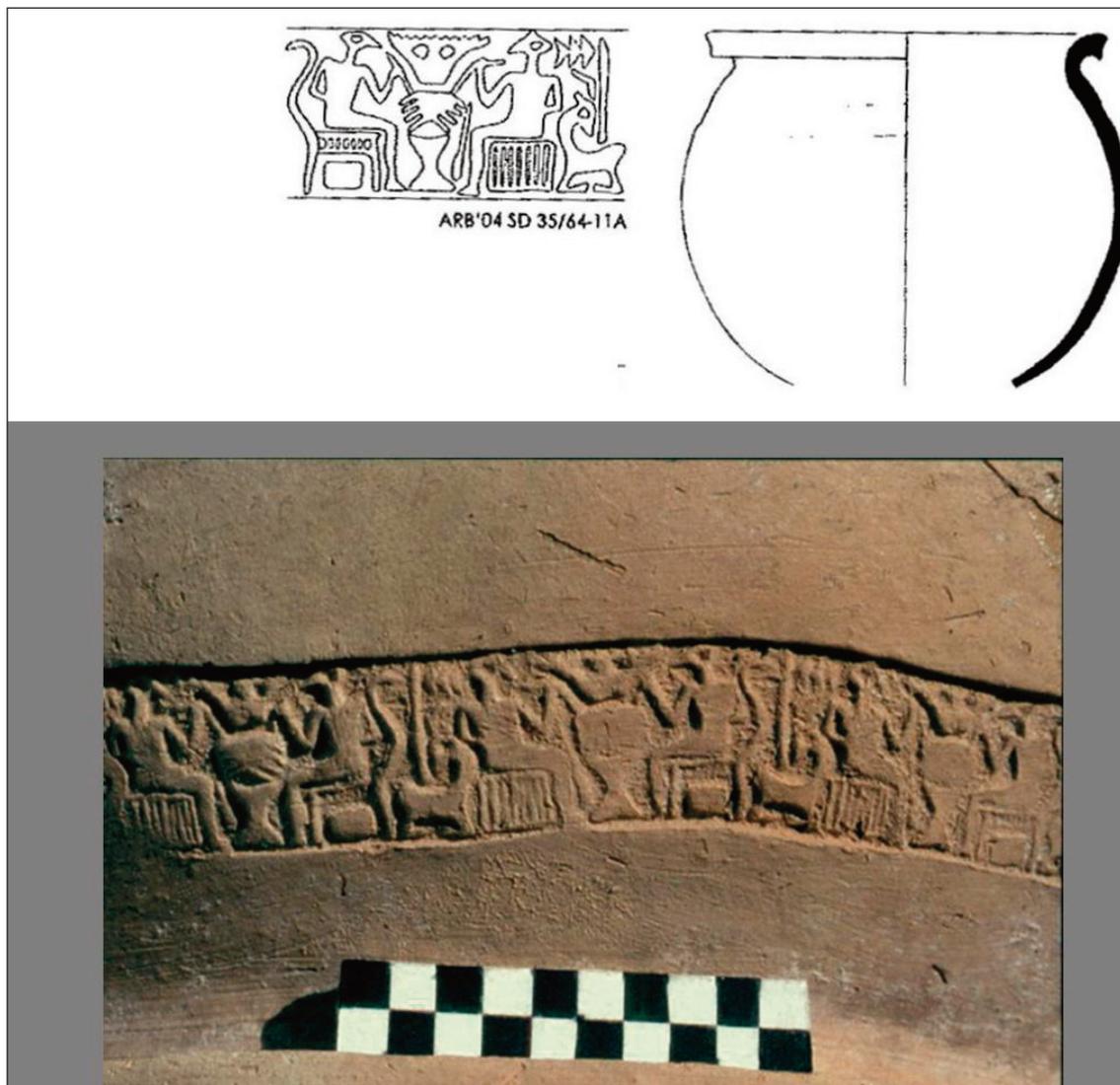


Fig. 2. Drawing and photo of a Tell Arbid impression. ARB'04 SD 35/64-11A in Bielinski, P.2009 "Some Cylinder Seal Impressions on Pottery from Tell Arbid" in O. Drewnowska (ed.), *Here and There. Across the Ancient Near East. Studies in Honour of Krystyna Łyczkowska*, Warsaw: p. 3.

The ancient Nagar is the last stop in our journey through cylinder-sealed pottery. Although the vast majority of seals on pottery must be dated back to the pre-Akkadian period ED III, due to their find in this archaeological context, as seen for the other two archaeological sites: Tell Arbid and Tell Beydar, it must be considered the persistence of this practice during the Akkadian period, maybe with a shift in function and significance.

In fact, the dating of early dynastic and what is to be called Akkadian is set by a thin border, specifically when talking about glyptic, where the time of manufacture does not match always the date of use, and this is also valid when talking about the pottery transition between the ED IIIB and the Early Akkadian Period.

In fact, many ED III style sealings from Brak have been dated to the mentioned Akkadian Period. We could quote here Joan Oates who said: "Seals themselves are poor

guides to chronology, since they are easily removed from their original contexts”, and this undoubtedly suitable for sealings and pottery.

Bearing this fact in mind we find in Brak up to sixteen seal impressions on pottery. The style is exactly the same as the one attested in Arbid and Beydar<sup>4</sup>. Most of the sealings were also found rolled on very fragmentary sherds. The scenes are also recurrent, master of beasts, contest scenes and animals. Except two of them, which we can find on the lid of the pottery, they were also rolled on the body of the jar.



Fig. 3. Seal Impression with EB Syrian from Tell Brak (TC Oval Courtyard 17) in Emberling, G., McDonald, H. 2003 “Excavations at Tell Brak 2001-2002: Preliminary Report” *Iraq* Vol. 63, p. 47.

## CONCLUSIONS

All these components may indicate the same use of these cylinder-sealed pots in the Khabur region. However, not everything that looks the same does have necessarily the same function. This is the case of Tell Beydar, which is the only site where the same seal is used in different pots and where the sealing is accompanied by potter’s marks. The wares used in these archaeological sites are undoubtedly local and so are most of the decorative motifs and must be dated to the second half of the Third Millennium.

The use of these jars and sealings are yet not entirely clear. The most accepted theory on the use suggests the use of cylinder-sealed pottery as a way to identify a certain type of goods, but some others think that they may mark the provenance of the content. On this matter, Bielinski has argued an in-between idea based on the distributions of goods in these seal-impressed jars not from far away, but from the nearby centres<sup>5</sup>. The hint for this plausible idea can be found in the use of a very similar motif in one of the Tell Beydar sealed jars and that present on a *bull* from Tell Brak.

<sup>4</sup> EMBERLING, G., MCDONALD, H. 2003 “Excavations at Tell Brak 2001-2002: Preliminary Report” *Iraq* Vol. 63, p. 47.

<sup>5</sup> Bielinski, P. 2009. p.7.

We can conclude that the use of seals in the Near East must be undoubtedly related to administrative practices or household economies, but there will still be remaining questions, such as if there is any difference in the seal-impressions motifs and the use of the pots, and if it would be possible to assume that the sealed pots from the Second Millennium B.C. follow the same pattern as those treated here.

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