

RITUAL SCENES IN URARTIAN GLYPHTIC

Alina Ayvazian, M.A., C.Phil
University of California, Berkeley

ABSTRACT

Based on their shape, Urartian seals can be divided into several categories. Those most commonly encountered include cylinder, stamp and stamp-cylinder seals. Present article discusses these categories and attempts to connect some of the more prominent shapes of Urartian seals with a designated function. Thus "faceted" seals seem to have been connected to the priestly office, as they exhibit high quality of workmanship and display designs of a religious nature. It seems, however, that scenes showing an individual in the process of a ritual action usually involved the figure of the king (who served as the high priest to the gods in a theocratic state like Urartu), and were only depicted on cylinder seals. An exception to this can be seen in a rectangular stamp seal impression from Ayanis, where the king is shown in an attitude of worship. As there are very few examples of the latter type of design, any analysis of it must for the moment remain tentative.

Over the years various scholars of Urartian art have tried to come up with different systems for categorizing Urartian glyptic material¹. Though any such categorization is not the topic of the present paper, it is nevertheless vitally important for a deeper understanding of the designs depicted on Urartian seals and the purposes behind them. After reviewing the work of many esteemed colleagues, and working with the glyptic material directly, I have tried to suggest an all-encompassing system whereby the ostensibly significant nuances of a seal's shape and design would be taken into consideration. The following preliminary categories may be taken to be relevant:

1. Simple stamp
2. Cylinder (rare)
3. Stamp-cylinder
4. Conical stamp
5. Faceted
6. Scaraboid
7. Discoid
8. Zoomorphic/shape stamp
9. Carved bead

A detailed discussion of the significance of these categories will be presented elsewhere, but for present purposes I wish to draw attention to four of these categories, namely those comprising stamp, cylinder, stamp-cylinder and faceted seals.

Perhaps, a better definition of the material I am considering is in order before we delve into the topic of the ritual scenes in Urartian glyptic. It has been argued that all of the images in Urartian art, including those on seals, were sacred². Indeed, when we look carefully at even the simplest images depicted on small stamp seals and seal impressions, we notice the repetition of not only the images themselves, but also the manner in which they were depicted. While this fact alone does not prove the

¹ For example, Azarpay 1968, Van Loon 1966, Abay 2001, Piliposian 1998.

² F. Ter-Martirosov, forthcoming article, personal communication.

sacredness of an image, the argument may perhaps be strengthened by reflections on the theocratic nature of the Urartian state. If the king is seen as “a representative of the gods, who carries out their will”³, and hence the country’s highest priest, then the royal administration offices which is where the majority of seals were used, is a reflection of the theocratic nature of the state. This state of affairs is amply reflected in the formula of the early Urartian inscriptions, which pronounce actions on behalf of the god Haldi, be it in military feats: “The god Haldi has taken the field”; “the God Haldi conquered the ... country”, or in construction activities: “with the greatness of the god Haldi Sarduri, son of Argishti, established this granary”⁴ – the same granary in which we find vessels stamped with certain of the seals under consideration.

Beyond a number of regional examples of stamp seals reflecting realistic animal images, Urartian glyptic art largely deals with fantastic images of composite animals placed among heavenly bodies:



Fig. 1. Stamp seal impression from Ayanis.



Fig. 2. Stamp seal impression from Akko, Armenia.

These images, however, though undoubtedly sacral and representative of certain Urartian beliefs, do not reflect aspects of any known ritual act. They represent a category of images that can be said to reflect the Urartians’ understanding of a “heavenly realm”: one that is separate from the “earthly realm” and rarely mixes with it.

True ritual scenes (understood as ones reflecting “ritual in action”) seem to only occur on cylinder seals, and the use of such seals may have been a royal prerogative.



Fig. 3. Cylinder seal impression from Ayanis.

The above seal impression comes from a bulla. It shows two groups of male figures engaged in ritual activities. The pair shown on each side of a sacred tree can be seen to be performing the pollination ritual, and the pair on the left is shown standing under a winged sun disc, possibly performing a libation ceremony. The inscription at the top reads “this (is) the seal of the x house”⁵. Each figure wears a long dress and a conical helmet and carries a vertical staff; they thus exemplify an image typical of the representations of Urartian kings. Since one of the figures in each pair is much shorter

³ Ibid.

⁴ UKN 163 (Melikishvili 1960: 311).

⁵ E. Abay 2001: 329.

than the other, the smaller figure may represent a junior member of the royal family, possibly Rusa's heir to the throne.

An interesting and much discussed example of a cylinder seal impression comes from Bastam:



Fig. 4. Cylinder seal impression from Bastam.

Here we see a king, identified by the shepherd's stick (or "crook"), walking behind an empty cart with a gabled top crowned by a sacred tree. A winged composite creature occupies the space behind the figure of the king. The placement of the scene in the "heavenly realm" is emphasized by the presence of two stars: one placed immediately behind the king and one to the right of the wagon. A fuller account of this scene was given by P. Calmeyer⁶. If we accept his interpretation of the "empty wagon" as a symbolic substitute for the god Haldi, we could suggest that the king himself is shown on this seal as entering the "heavenly realm" and approaching the god (versus conducting a more common ritual involving a sacred tree, one carried out, for example, in the "earthly realm"). Thus, the presence of a composite creature as well as heavenly bodies is used to emphasize the location where the scene takes place. Thematically similar cylinder seal impressions were found at Karmir Blur and Toprak Kale.

The exception to the above comprises square stamp seal impressions such as the ones found at Ayanis⁷. These impressions show a man in a long dress and a conical helmet, standing under a parasol. He is holding a vertical stick or a crook in his left hand and he lifts his right hand in greeting. An especially clear impression shows a band of cuneiform, mentioning the name of Rusa, son of Argishti, surrounding the rectangular design of the seal. Based on the presence of the inscription and the royal parasol, E. Abay places these impressions in his category "king under a parasol", thus identifying the male figure as the king. Such impressions are extremely rare, and to date no seals with such a design have come to light. It is equally difficult to judge at this point whether there existed any connection between the rectangular shape of the seal and its ritual/royal designation. The only supposition that may be possible to make here is that this particular shape, as well as the rectangular band surrounding the design of the seal, may have served to evoke an association with a ritual niche or a divine gateway at which the king could also conduct was conducting religious ceremonies or communicate with the god(s).



Fig. 5. Stamp seal impression from Ayanis.

⁶ P. Calmeyer 1974: 54-59.

⁷ Abay 2001: 327-328.

Another group of seals which it may be relevant to consider are those that I have classed as “faceted” seals. They are usually rectangular in shape and carry designs on all four (or more) lateral facets, as well as on the base. The distinctive shape of this class of seal may have come to the Armenian Highlands from Syria, where seals of a similar shape were used in the first quarter of the first millennium B.C.:

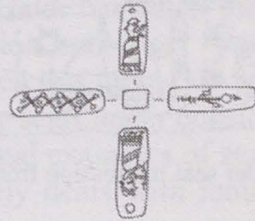


Fig. 6. Faceted seal from Kamishli (Nisibin).

Still earlier examples of seals of this shape come from the excavations at Knossos, Crete, and are dated to the second half of the second millennium⁸.

In Urartian times seals of this kind appear with some frequency in the Armenian Highlands and are known from a number of sites, including Karmir Blur, Noratus, Nor Bayazet, Erebuni and Armavir⁹:

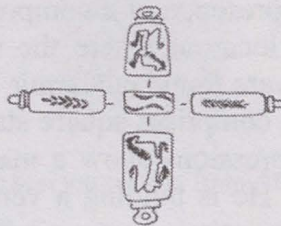


Fig. 7. Faceted seal from Noratus.

Though not always fashioned out of the most expensive materials, Urartian faceted seals exhibit exquisite workmanship and a richness of design that indicates that they must have belonged to persons of a particularly distinguished status within the kingdom. The examples known to me are all expressly religious in nature, and many of them document a certain orientation of action on all or some of the lateral facets. In other words, the designs carved on different facets are somehow connected to each other or to that on one of the facets, hence in some instances allowing for some interpretation of that action.

In this respect, the example of a faceted seal found during recent excavations at Armavir is especially interesting. This spectacular ceramic seal boasts an exquisitely worked design, and takes its rightful place among the most significant Urartian finds from that site.

⁸ Matz F 1928: table 12, Fig. 1, Brentjes 1983: 43.

⁹ Piliposian 1998: 67, Piotrovskii 1953: 56, fig. 42, Piotrovskii 1970: fig. 100-101, Hodjash, Trukhtanova et al. 1979: 106-107, fig. 119, Yengibarian 1991: 66.



Fig. 8. Faceted seal from Armavir.

The design of the seal is treated in detail in a recent article (in Armenian) by I. Karapetyan et al. (Karapetyan et al. 2002). It may be of some utility, therefore, if I briefly summarize some of the main points in the following paragraphs.

This red ceramic seal is made of a well mixed, high quality clay, and was fired at a very high temperature. It was found inside a cremation burial placed inside a red burnished vessel, together with some beads, a bronze bracelet and a pin of an unknown type. It is a faceted seal (called by the authors “pyramidal”) carved on all five sides, that is, on its four lateral surfaces as well as on the base. The design on every facet is surrounded by a linear border. The lower surface shows the joined protomes of a lion and an eagle; a star is placed above the lion’s head, and a lunar crescent is placed in the middle. One of the broad, side facets shows a standing eagle with a human head in profile suspended from its beak. A rayed heavenly body is placed above the eagle’s head. The second broad side shows a winged bull standing among heavenly bodies. Seven dots are placed over its wings and horns, and six dots are placed behind it. Each mythological animal faces the corresponding sacred tree depicted on the adjacent narrow side. One tree grows out of a beautiful base, and expands into a bouquet-like finial, while branches with unopened buds grow out of its sides. The tree depicted on the opposite narrow side is growing out of a triangular base; its branches and the top of the trunk are laden with ripe fruit.

Inter alia, the image of a tree represents the idea of fruitfulness, a source of life, and the center of the Universe. Each tree can stylistically be divided into three parts such as may reflect a three-partite Urartian Universe: sky, earth and underworld; birth, fruit-bearing, and death, etc.. The horizontal perspective preserves the three-partite division of a tree in the middle, flanked by a mythological animal on each side. Thus, the sacred tree is placed in the imaginary center, between the bull and the eagle, and is viewed as part of a fertility ritual.

The figure of a winged bull surrounded by seven dots reflects the constellation of Taurus (Pleiades). The Pleiades played a central role in the agricultural activities of not only the Urartians, but also those of the Mitanni, the Assyrians, the Babylonians, and others. Furthermore, the calendar in ancient Armenia was based on the observations of the appearance of the Pleiades. On March 22nd, on the day of the spring equinox, the Sun enters the constellation of Aries, thus signaling the start of a New Year. Around April 10-14th, the Sun enters the constellation of Taurus (the Bull), and the Pleiades become invisible. Around this time, when the first buds appear on trees (like those shown on the seal), sowing started. In order to evoke a rich harvest, sacrifices were made to the gods – an idea reflected on the right side of the seal showing an eagle carrying a human head in its beak. This depiction illustrates the existence of human sacrifices in Urartu (and the authors of the cited article also refer to parallels for this custom in other cultures).

Six months later (an event illustrated by the six dots carved behind the bull’s back), the god can be seen to have accepted the sacrifice, and to have granted the rich harvest symbolized by the tree laden with fruit. This means that August arrived along

with the constellation of a Lion. The lion on the seal under discussion is thus depicted facing the fruitful tree, signifying the time of harvest.

It is well known that in ancient times the maintenance of the calendar was the responsibility of priests. Their observations were vitally important for the economic, spiritual and political well-being of society. The owner of the seal is thus identified as a priest, and the possibility of his special status as a priest of the god Haldi is explored in some detail.

It is certainly tempting, though perhaps premature (as I would like to stress), to associate the use of the faceted seals in Urartu with a priestly office or person. If we allow our imaginations to roam free, we could perhaps imagine that the use of a faceted seal would be especially appropriate in a slow-paced Urartian ritual. Much in the same way that a modern Armenian priest touches the bodies of worshippers and various sacred objects with different parts of a cross, an Urartian priest could have taken his time gravely “sealing” an object with different facets of his seal, each of which contained an image holy for an Urartian public.

The imagery and the form of faceted seals would seem to occupy the middle ground between stamp and cylinder seals. Their iconography reflects the “heavenly realm”, such as is depicted on stamps, yet their form and the visible rudiments of “ritual action” relate them to examples of cylinder seals. However, one notable difference is that no impressions of faceted seals have so far been found in Urartu. In contrast to the usual experience, faceted seals are known from the actual examples rather than their impressions. The question that naturally arises here is then, were these seals used for sealing? And, in complete agreement with the usual praxis, the answer is, we’ll have to wait and see.

At this stage we may allow ourselves to make only certain preliminary observations: namely that (a) the use of faceted seals was connected to a high office within the Urartian hierarchy, (b) faceted seals tend to reflect religious iconography, and (c) the majority of known examples comes from a burial context.

Thus, as we can see from the Armavir example described above, high priests at times had in their possession invaluable, beautiful examples of seals depicting undeniably religious iconography, however the *actual scenes of ritual* remained an exclusive royal prerogative. Further, the scenes of ritual action performed by the king were always depicted on cylinder seals¹⁰. Such scenes are absent from stamp cylinders found to date, thus so far the association of true cylinder seals with scenes of ritual and with Urartian royalty can be seen to be not entirely without merit. A rare example illustrated above (fig. 5) possibly shows another type of “king performing a ritual action” seal. The restrictive stamp design does not give much room for showing an “action” itself. It seems more static and contemplative; and it may have been designed with a different purpose or message in mind.

There are many interesting observations to be made about the Urartian seals and seal impressions, and it is quite impossible to touch upon all aspects of this subject within the format of this article. Besides, considering the scarcity of well provenanced Urartian material in general, and Urartian glyptic material in particular, these observations must remain tentative. New material produced by recent excavations¹¹ at the fortress of Erebuni has already produced some surprises which will in time enrich

¹⁰ A similar idea of interrelation between the form of a seal and its design in relation to Sassanian seals was advanced by Ryka Gyselen: “On a pu remarquer qu’il n’existe pas de relation entre la forme d’un sceau et le motif qu’il porte, à l’exception de quelques série bien définies qui ont d’ailleurs un caractère officiel: les sceaux administratifs, ceux de la maison royal et ceux des hauts fonctionnaires appartenant à la noblesse” (R. Gyselen 1993: 123).

¹¹ The recent excavations at Erebuni are a result of a selfless effort by an Armenian archaeologist, F. Ter Martirosov.

our knowledge of the gamut of Urartian glyptic. Nevertheless, the process of analysis itself is fascinating, especially in a field as poorly explored as Urartian Studies. The present brief study may, hopefully, open new perspectives and thus move us a bit closer to understanding the complex kingdom known as Urartu.

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