

- Fig. 1: Plan of the Middle Assyrian fortified settlement at Sabi Abyad.

blocked during a later phase of occupation). The occurrence of thick layers of ashes, charred beams, burnt grain, etc., indicated that the fortress had repeatedly been destroyed by fire. The utilitarian structures surrounding the fortress (see below) provided similar evidence for periods of violent destruction.

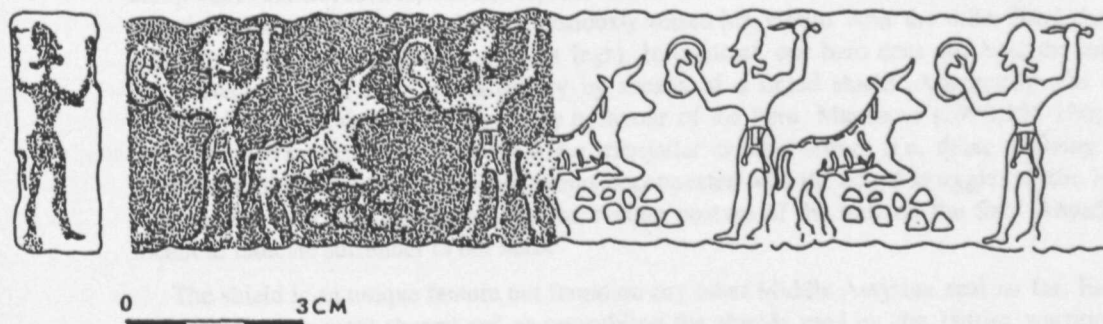
A second building of monumental outline, probably representing the palace or residence of the main Assyrian official at Sabi Abyad, stood immediately west of the fortress. So far, only the layout of this second building has been traced by means of intensive scraping and cleaning of the tell surface; excavation took place on a very restricted scale only in the southwestern part of the structure, exposing a bathroom with a floor of baked bricks. The northern part of the building is still buried below later construction remains. The palace was raised of mud-brick walls ca. 0.80 to 1.45 m wide and thickly plastered. It seems to have been more or less identical in size to the fortress but has a much more regular layout. Basically, the palace is tripartite in plan, showing a large and elongated central room flanked by parallel rows of smaller rooms along each of the long sides.

The monumental buildings were encircled by a narrow alley, providing the main passage through the settlement and separating the monumental features from other, utilitarian buildings and installations such as ovens, bins and silos (fig. 1). The utilitarian buildings were closely imbricated, sharing their exterior walls; they all seem to have been conceived and constructed more or less at a single point in time. The structures, commonly built around small gravel-paved courtyards, contained numerous rooms, some of which gave evidence of toilet and bathing facilities or housed fire installations of various kinds. The floors of the buildings were littered with ceramics and small finds. Vast quantities of burnt wheat were found as well, which appeared to have been stored mostly in large jars and pots. The general impression is that the buildings mainly served domestic purposes but the occurrence of cuneiform tablets indicates that administrative activities, linked to the central administration, were performed in these structures as well. Most structures were reduced to ashes due by a violent fire.

The architectural features on the top of Sabi Abyad seem to have been surrounded by a 1.5 to 2 m wide wall. The overall Assyrian fortified settlement was more or less square in layout and seems to have been mainly confined to an area of about 70x60 metres. However, some domestic structures were also unearthed on the slope of the mound, outside the defense wall.

In the early 12th century B.C., the Assyrian settlement fell into decay. The monumental buildings were abandoned and left to their fate. However, their remains have remained in their ramshackle state for decades, since parts of these features were incorporated in simple domestic structures or used for the construction of ovens and hearths.

The Seals



- Fig. 2: Stone cylinder seal SAB88-Z3.

SAB88-Z3 (fig. 2). This seal is 4.2 cm long, 1.4 cm in diameter and made of serpentine. It shows a rather simply executed, two-figure contest scene: a hero confronts a bull kneeling on a mountain. The man wears a short skirt or kilt with a broad belt, from which two short tassels hang down. The head, with long curling hair, seems to wear a helmet. The man holds a scimitar in his raised left hand and an (eight-shaped?) shield in his right hand. The bull is well-shaped with pronounced muscles on the flanks and in

his neck. The animal kneels on a mountain, which is shown as an accumulation of irregular blocks of stone.

Initially, this seal was considered to represent a local product mingling various themes from both the Assyrian and Hittite worlds (Akkermans and Rossmesl 1990:29-30) but this view is questionable at present. The rather naturalistic representation and the posture, clothing and hairdo of the hero have clear parallels in Middle Assyrian glyptics: these traits first appeared at the end of the 14th century B.C. but attained their main importance in the Adad-nirari I to Tukulti-Ninurta I eras (Matthews 1990:95; see also e.g. Moortgat 1942, Abb. 5, 7-9). The two tassels pending from the man's skirt or belt are much shorter than the ones shown on the Assur seals but this may reflect local styles (for example, the hunters or heroes on some Middle Assyrian seals from Tell Fakhariyah wear short skirts without any tassels at all; Kantor 1958:71 and figs. III, V). The scimitar is reminiscent of the famous *harpe* sword of Adad-nirari I (now in the Metropolitan Museum; Muscarella 1988:340-342; see also Porada and Hallo 1994:259-60, who suggest that this kind of sword is not Assyrian but Kassite in origin), and repeatedly appears on seals of the 13th century B.C., from the time of Adad-nirari I to Tukulti-Ninurta I (Moortgat 1942:56-57; Porada, ed., 1948:69 and Pl. LXXXIV, no. 599; Matthews 1990:92ff). However, it is not an exclusively Middle Assyrian trait but it is also found on, e.g., 14th to 13th century seals from Alalakh in western Syria (Collon 1982:115-116).

The find circumstances do not allow a precise chronological assignment of the Sabi Abyad seal (see below), but on stylistic arguments it seems clear that it must post-date Adad-nirari's time and fit either in the Shalmaneser or Tukulti-Ninurta period. A major indication in this respect is the absence of a tree in the scene; Matthews (1990:98) points out that trees are virtually always found on Adad-nirari seals but are rarely used in contest scenes from Shalmaneser onwards. Moreover, the position of the bull, with its more or less horizontal body, is characteristic for the Shalmaneser period, in contrast with the rampant animals in Adad-nirari's time and the generally 'falling down' animals of the Tukulti-Ninurta era (*ibid.*:106). Bulls are repeatedly found on Middle Assyrian seals but rarely occur in contest scenes (lions, ibexes or fantastic animals appear most often). A seal from the Newell collection, dated to Shalmaneser, is somewhat comparable to our seal, although in the case of the Newell seal the bull is standing instead of kneeling and the hero wields an axe instead of a sword (Von der Osten 1934, Abb. 654). The representation of the mountain as an accumulation of irregular blocks of stone rather than the more common rendering in scales compares with a Tukulti-Ninurta seal from Assur (Moortgat 1942:54-55). However, Middle Assyrian seals with mountains usually show a tree instead of an animal. It is not excluded that our seal was partly recut in antiquity: usually, the various figures on seals are each free-standing, whereas on our seal the tail of the bull virtually touches the left leg of the warrior.

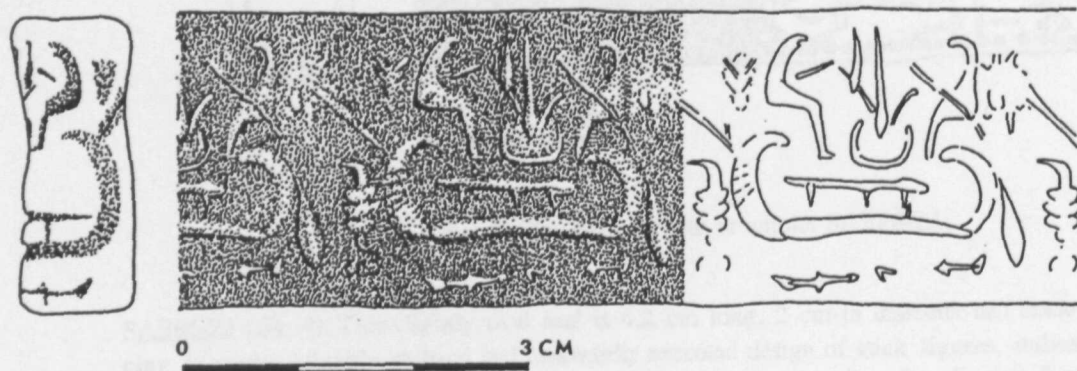
The Sabi Abyad seal deviates in one major aspect from the other known Middle Assyrian seals with comparable contest scenes, viz. the representation of the hero versus his prey. Usually, the hero has his sword or axe in his raised hand and victoriously seizes his victim with the other hand (holding either the animal's head or, most often, one of its legs). In contrast, our hero does not hold the animal in combat but protects himself from his adversary by means of a raised shield. Apparently, the outcome of the struggle is equivocal and not necessarily in favour of the hero. Matthews (1990:105-106) points out that the latter also seems to hold true for some 'triangular' combat scenes (i.e. those showing two contestants plus an additional figure which often seems unconnected with the actual struggle) of the late 13th century B.C. However, it is not excluded that the resting posture of the bull on the Sabi Abyad seal is actually meant to indicate surrender to our hero.

The shield is an unique feature not found on any other Middle Assyrian seal so far. Earlier, this shield was described as eight-shaped and as resembling the shields used by the Hittite warriors shown on the Egyptian Qadesh reliefs (Akkermans and Rossmesl 1990:29), but it is doubtful whether this truly is the case (the Qadesh shields are much larger and have a much more pronounced 'double axe'-like appearance, with a narrow waist). Remarkably, on the impression the figure holds the shield in his right hand, whereas it was usual to carry a shield on the left arm. This is in fact the position on the seal itself, so that we may be dealing with a mistake on the part of the seal cutter.

The seal was found in a mass burial containing five male individuals between 23 and 40 years old (cf. Akkermans and Rossmesl 1990:23-24 and fig. 13b). It lay on the waist, near the pelvis, of one of the dead men and may originally have been attached to a belt. The dead men all seem to have been simultaneously thrown, some on top of another, in an already existing refuse pit (containing animal

bones and fragments of Middle Assyrian pottery, among other items) without any ritual act or appropriate burial treatment. Most likely, the dead were victims of warfare or execution. Unfortunately, neither the digging of the pit nor its subsequent use as a burial place can be associated with a specific building level at the site, but its date somewhere in the 13th century B.C. is beyond any doubt.

Earlier publication: Akkermans and Rossmeisl 1990:29-30 and fig. 17.

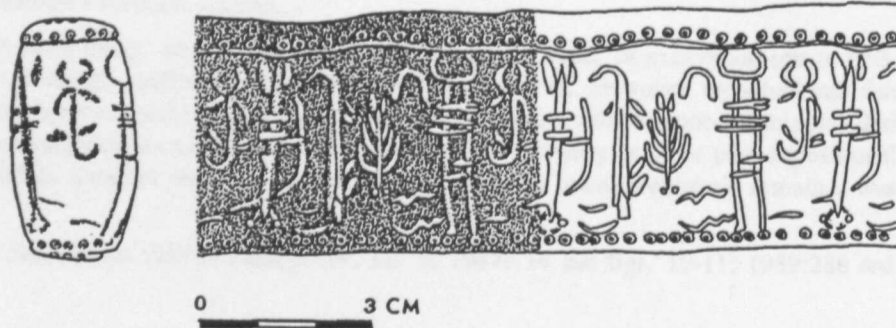


- Fig. 3: Stone cylinder seal Z93-1.

Z93-1 (fig. 3). The seal, 2.7 cm long and 1 cm in diameter, is made of soft, blackish chlorite and heavily worn. It shows a well-known type of banquet scene in a simple, stylised manner: two persons, both very simply rendered with hardly any attention to detail, are sitting in a boat and drinking beer through tubes from a large jar. The boat has a flat bottom and both the high prow and stern curve sharply inwards. Inside is a raised planked floor, on which both persons are sitting (the actual seats are not shown, probably due to lack of space). The person on the right holds a elongated helm or peddle. Behind the helm a scorpion is depicted, whereas two or three fish are shown below the boat. Another feature, perhaps a bird or a vessel, is found behind the back of the person in front. The prow of the boat is attached to an oblique line, which is unfortunately damaged at its upper end.

Seals with banquets taking place in a boat are particularly found in northern Mesopotamia and Syria (but also appear further south, e.g. at Ur and Susa; Selz 1983:28) in the Early Dynastic II-III period, about 2750-2350 B.C. Our seal probably combines two separate themes: on the one hand it depicts the journey over the canal to the scene of the banquet and on the other hand it shows the banquet itself (Selz 1983:469; see also Collon 1992:24). The oblique line attached to the prow of the boat compares to an Early Dynastic seal with a boat, now in the Allard Pierson Museum, Amsterdam: here the line stands for a rope connecting the boat with a large bird (Meijer 1977/78:14 and fig. 12). Meijer (*ibid.*) suggests that the line is in fact a lasso, with which the punter has caught a waterfowl, or that the animal is a decoy tied to the boat. Perhaps the same holds for the Sabi Abyad seal.

Our seal was found in a debris layer in a domestic area containing an oven and some bins (cf. Akkermans et al. 1993:23). Stratigraphically, these features belong to the final stage of Middle Assyrian occupation at Sabi Abyad but it is clear that this seal is far from Middle Assyrian and originally dates from the middle of the 3rd millennium B.C. Since Early Bronze Age occupation levels are not present at Sabi Abyad, it seems that the seal must have been brought to the site from somewhere else (accidental find by a Sabi Abyad inhabitant on a nearby mound?).



- Fig. 4: Clay cylinder seal or amulet SAB86-Z1.

SAB86-Z1 (fig. 4). This slightly oval seal is 4.2 cm long, 2 cm in diameter and made of lightly baked clay. It shows a highly stylised and awkwardly executed design of stick figures, indicating two human persons and a quadruped, alternating with a small tree and a scorpion. One human figure stands upside down and holds a bow in his hand, aimed at the horned quadruped with raised tail, set at 90° to the rest of the scene. The other person (?) may be wearing a horned crown, and is surrounded by short wavy lines and a crescent. The scene is framed by lines of circular dots and one additional horizontal line.

In terms of style and material, the seal closely compares to two other seals found at Sabi Abyad, viz. Z93-3 and Z93-6 (see below). Clay cylinder seals have been found at various sites in the Near East, from the Levantine coast (and, further west, at Enkomi in Cyprus) to southern Mesopotamia and southwestern Iran. Most clay seals date from the Early Dynastic to Old Babylonian periods; relatively few were manufactured in later periods, probably partly due to the appearance of a new cheap material (frit) extensively used for the production of seals (Al-Gailani Werr 1988:1-2, 5; Matthews 1991:27). Beate Salje, in her study of the Late Bronze Age seals of the Levant and Syria, points out that hardly 1% (29 out of 2631 seals) of these is made of baked clay, the others of frit and various kinds of stone (cf. Salje 1990:102, 137; in this light the number of clay seals at Sabi Abyad is relatively high).

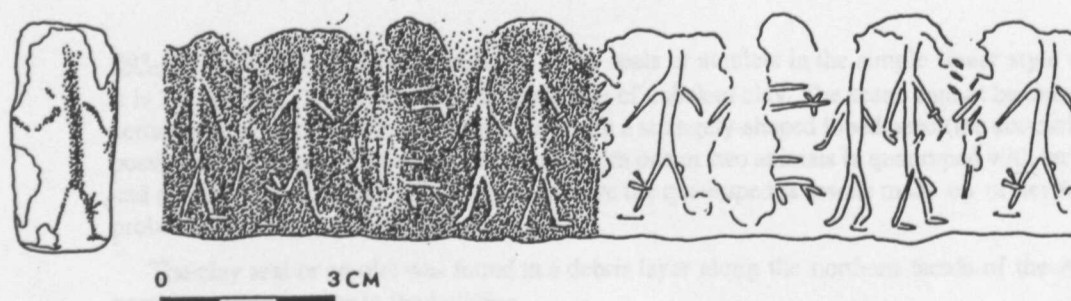
The seal is wholly different from the Middle Assyrian glyptics as it is known and must have been a local product. In style, the Sabi Abyad seal probably fits Salje's Syrian "Flüchtig Linearer Stil", in particular her group 5 (Salje 1990:120). Seals of this type, including some made of clay, are mainly found in Syria (predominantly Ugarit) but also appear incidentally at sites in Palestine, the Lebanon, Cyprus, Anatolia and northern Mesopotamia of the 16th to 12th century B.C. (compare e.g. the seals with "Strichmännchen" at Boğazköy, Lidar Höyük and Alaca Höyük; Boehmer and Güterbock 1987:108-109 and fig. 81, Tafel XXXIX, no. 314). The main themes are dances, processions and, particularly, hunts with bow-and-arrow (corresponding to our seal), all rudimentary depicted in a simple, linear manner.

Collon (1982:111), while discussing a seal in linear style from Alalakh, has already pointed to the striking similarity between the linear Late Bronze Age seals from Syria and the Levant and some Early Dynastic seals in linear style found at sites in Mesopotamia. Al-Gailani Werr (1988, 1992, ed.) presents a series of seals, all in linear style and all made of clay, from Early Dynastic and Old Babylonian sites like Khafajeh, Susa, Suleimeh and Halawa, which closely compare to the three clay seals found at Sabi Abyad. Probably these resemblances have very little direct relevance, apart perhaps from terms of use. In the case of the Mesopotamian clay seals, basically two groups can be distinguished. The first group consists of seals carrying the 'traditional' themes (banquet, presentation, etc.) commonly found on the regular seals made of stone or other durable materials (see e.g. Al-Gailani Werr 1988, Figs. 5-11). These clay seals are fairly well-produced and may have been made by professional seal cutters on behalf of members of a certain profession or rank primarily for the purpose of sealing (ibid.:5). The second group comprises the often extremely simple seals in linear style, which display little or no technical elaboration and which generally carry idiosyncratic rather than canonical themes (ibid., figs. 1-4, 12-17). These seals can hardly have been the result of professional manufacture, and more likely fit within an incidental, domestic mode of production. In this respect, the second group of seals may have been protective devices, i.e. amulets,

rather than administrative items, cheaply produced whenever the need arose. In the form of amulets, these items were not meant for public display but functioned in a more intimate sphere, implying that the mere *intention* rather than elaborate execution counted.

Our seal or, perhaps more likely, amulet was found near the section baulk of excavation square P13, above the surface of a seemingly undisturbed Early Halaf occupation level. However, an actual late 6th millennium date for this object can safely be excluded on stylistic arguments; the presence of this late 2nd millennium feature in a Halaf stratum must have been due to animal burrowing or other post-depositional activities. Actually, Middle Assyrian domestic architecture, covering the lower prehistoric remains, was unearthed nearby.

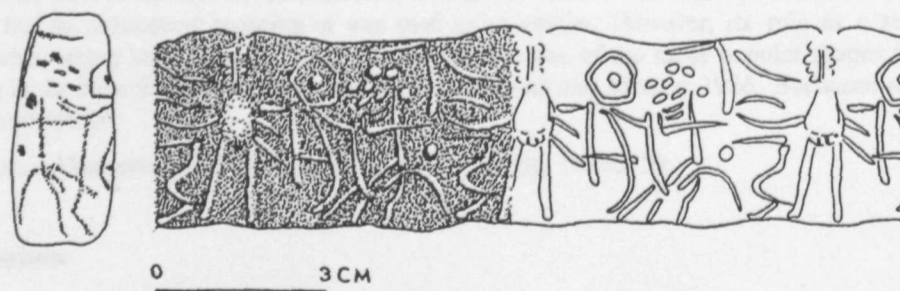
Earlier publication: Akkermans 1987a:33 and pl. IV, no. 3; 1987b:14 and figs. 10-11; 1989:288 and fig. VIII.4, no. 21.



- Fig. 5: Clay cylinder seal or amulet Z93-3.

Z93-3 (fig. 5). This seal or amulet is 4.1 cm long and 1.9 cm in diameter. It is made of clay and has a heavily weathered, black-burnt surface, probably due to secondary firing. The very simply executed design shows three human stick figures, alternating with a small tree and a quadruped (?), set at 90° to the rest of the scene (cf. SAB86 Z-1). The stick figures hold hands in what seems to be a dance. Head or body details are not indicated. At least one of the figures shows short protuberances on the legs at knee height (perhaps indicative of the griffin-demon?). In style, this seal or amulet closely compares to SAB86 Z-1 (see above).

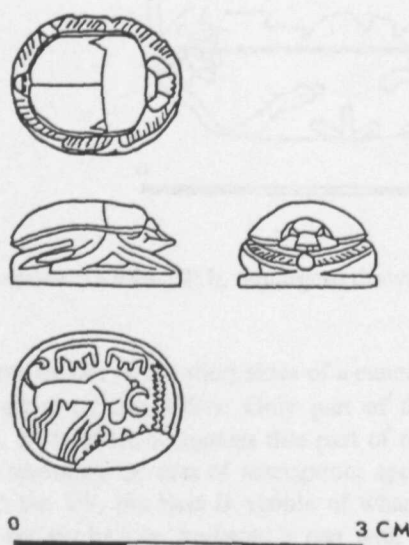
The object was found in the lower fill of a pit or silo, slightly above floor level. The pit, tapering towards the base, was ca. 1.25 m in diameter and 0.9 m deep. Its wall was carefully lined with mud bricks placed on their sides on each other. Each of the bricks showed an impression of either a human hand or two fingers, deeply pressed into the clay. Interestingly, a large jar, closed by a small bowl laid on the rim, stood in this pit. This jar definitely required some kind of stand to hold itself upright (due to its very restricted base diameter) but no traces of any such feature were found, suggesting that the jar was deliberately buried (the pit must have been filled in immediately after the deposition of the vessel). The seal was embedded in a thin layer of grey ashes, charcoal particles and burnt mud-brick fragments, covering part of the floor of the pit; apparently, a fire had been made on this floor, which most likely caused the black-burnt appearance of our seal. It is tempting to associate this fire with the burying of the jar; if so, the seal may have been deliberately burnt and buried in connection with this vessel, perhaps for ritual reasons or as an amulet (however, certain features of this deposit argue against its interpretation as a cremation grave).



- Fig. 6: Clay cylinder seal or amulet Z93-6.

Z93-6 (fig. 6). This is another example of the seals or amulets in the simple linear style discussed above. It is 3.9 cm long, 1.9 cm in diameter and made of unbaked clay. The scene cannot be determined with any certainty; perhaps it shows a human figure with a strangely-shaped lobed head (the six-curled *Lahmu*?) and possibly holding bow-and-arrow, associated with one or two animals (a quadruped with large, rounded head and a bird?) or some kind of installation. Above the quadruped, a rosette made up of seven dots is shown, probably indicating the Pleiades.

The clay seal or amulet was found in a debris layer along the northern facade of the Assyrian fortress, near the main entrance to the building.



- Fig. 7: Limestone scarab SAB88-Z2.

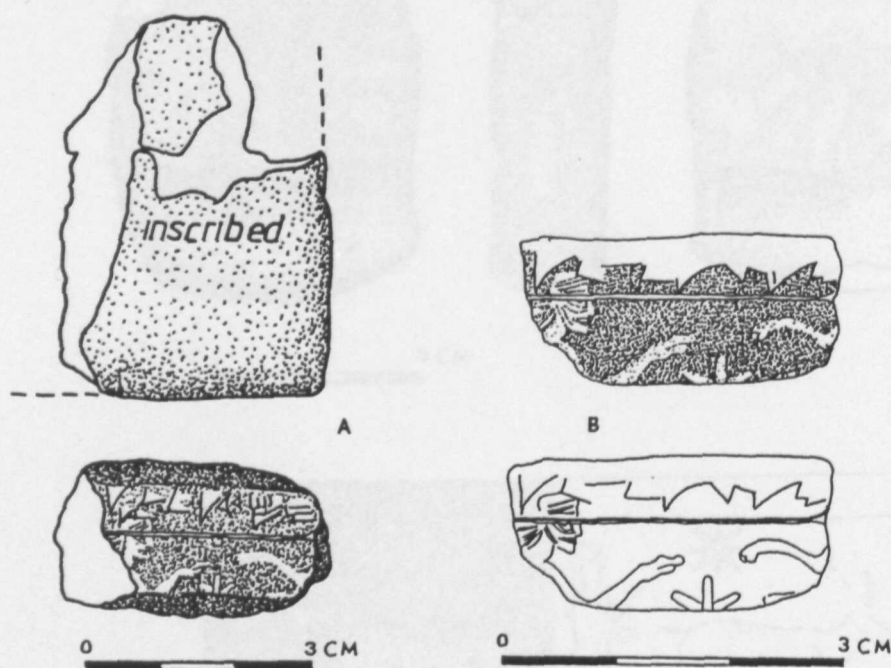
SAB88-Z2 (fig. 7). Finally, attention must be paid to a small scarab, measuring 1.7x1.5x0.7 cm and made of soft white limestone. The representation on the base shows a bull with raised tail and crescent-shaped horns, standing in front of what seems to be a tree (palm?). Egyptian hieroglyphs (two *nub* signs, i.e. 'gold') are placed above the bull, whereas other hieroglyphs may originally have been present below the animal as well (cf. Matouk 1976:340, no. 405, for a similar bull design but with other hieroglyphs).

Originally, the scarab formed part of a necklace made of beads of dentalia, carnelian and serpentine, found in the pit fill of a cremation burial containing the partly burnt remains of a female adult aged between 23 and 40. So far, the few cremations found at Sabi Abyad all belong to the final levels of

occupation at the site, associated with the decline of the local Assyrian administration in the first half of the 12th century B.C. In view of the find circumstances, it is doubtful whether this scarab ever served as a seal; more likely it had an ornamental meaning or was used as an amulet. However, its role as a seal cannot be excluded when taking into account that the scarab became one of the most popular shapes for seals of the Iron Age in the Near East (see e.g. Moorey 1980; Boardman and Moorey 1986; Buchanan and Moorey 1988; Herbordt 1992).

Earlier publication: Akkermans and Rossmeis 1990:24, 29 and fig. 16, no. 59.

The Seal Impressions



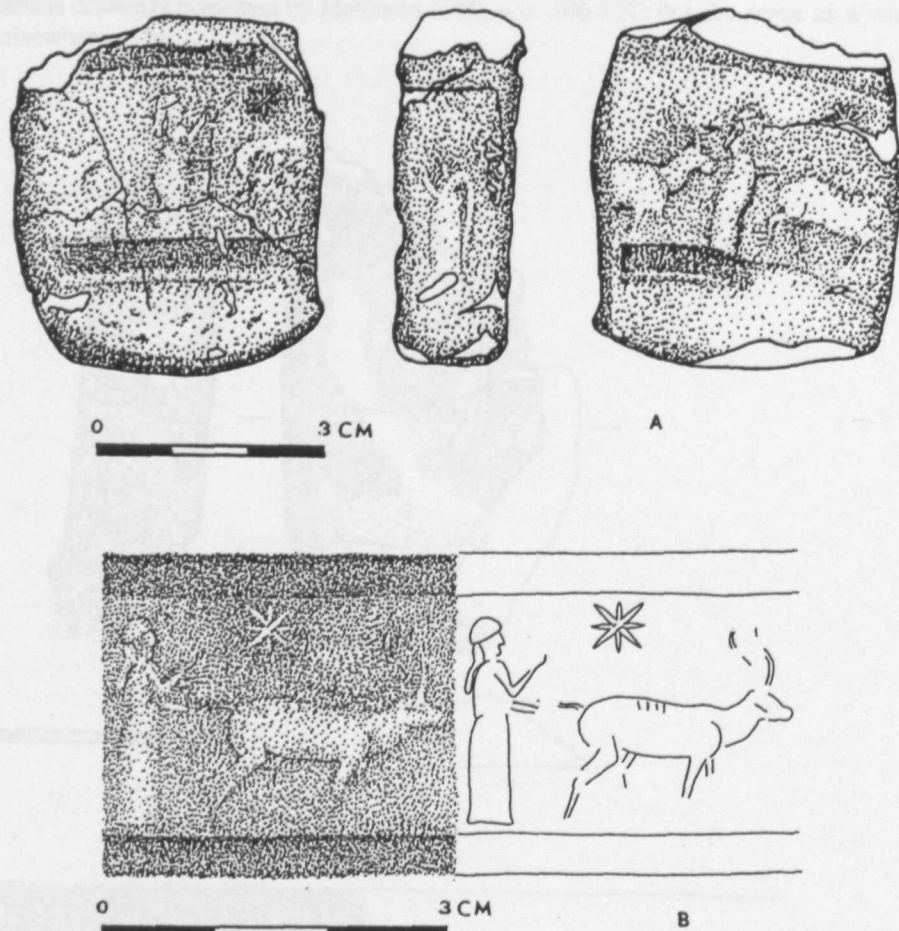
- Fig. 8: a. Cuneiform tablet with seal impression SAB88-T1; b. (enlarged) drawing of seal impression.

SAB88-T1 (fig. 8). This impression was found on one of the short sides of a cuneiform tablet containing a list of personal names in Middle Assyrian script (cf. Jas 1990). Only part of the seal was rolled, the impression having a height of only 1.8 cm. In addition, it appears that part of the scene is damaged by script signs as well as by a horizontal line bounding the area of inscription; apparently, the impression was made before the tablet was inscribed. On the left, the head is visible of what may be a male person standing upright (or a sphinx?), with long curling hair or, perhaps, a cap with two folds. One of the forearms is visible and raised in front of the person, with the fist closed but the forefinger pointing forwards. To the right of the person part of the forelegs of what may be a rampant lion or other animal or *Mischwesen* is recognisable. Between the person and the animal the upper part of what may be a plant is seen.

The various components fit well within the Middle Assyrian glyptic repertoire. Plants very commonly appear on Middle Assyrian seals from the 14th century onwards. The male's raised forearm is basically an Old Babylonian greeting posture which passed through Mitannian to Middle Assyrian designs, particularly in ritual scenes (cf. Matthews 1990:23). The rampant animal in a naturalistic manner occurs on Middle Assyrian seals usually in contest scenes. In other kinds of scenes the animal is often depicted as a winged demon or *Mischwesen* (cf. Beran 1957:214-15 and Abb. 114; and the various illustrations in Matthews 1990).

The cuneiform tablet with seal impression was found, among many vessels and other artefacts, on the floor of the domestic building uncovered on the southeastern slope of Sabi Abyad (cf. Akkermans and Rossmesl 1990). A date in the second half of the 13th century B.C., i.e. the Shalmaneser I to Tukulti-Ninurta I period, is certain on the basis of the present archaeological and textual evidence.

Earlier publication: Akkermans and Rossmesl 1990:30 and fig. 16, no. 60.

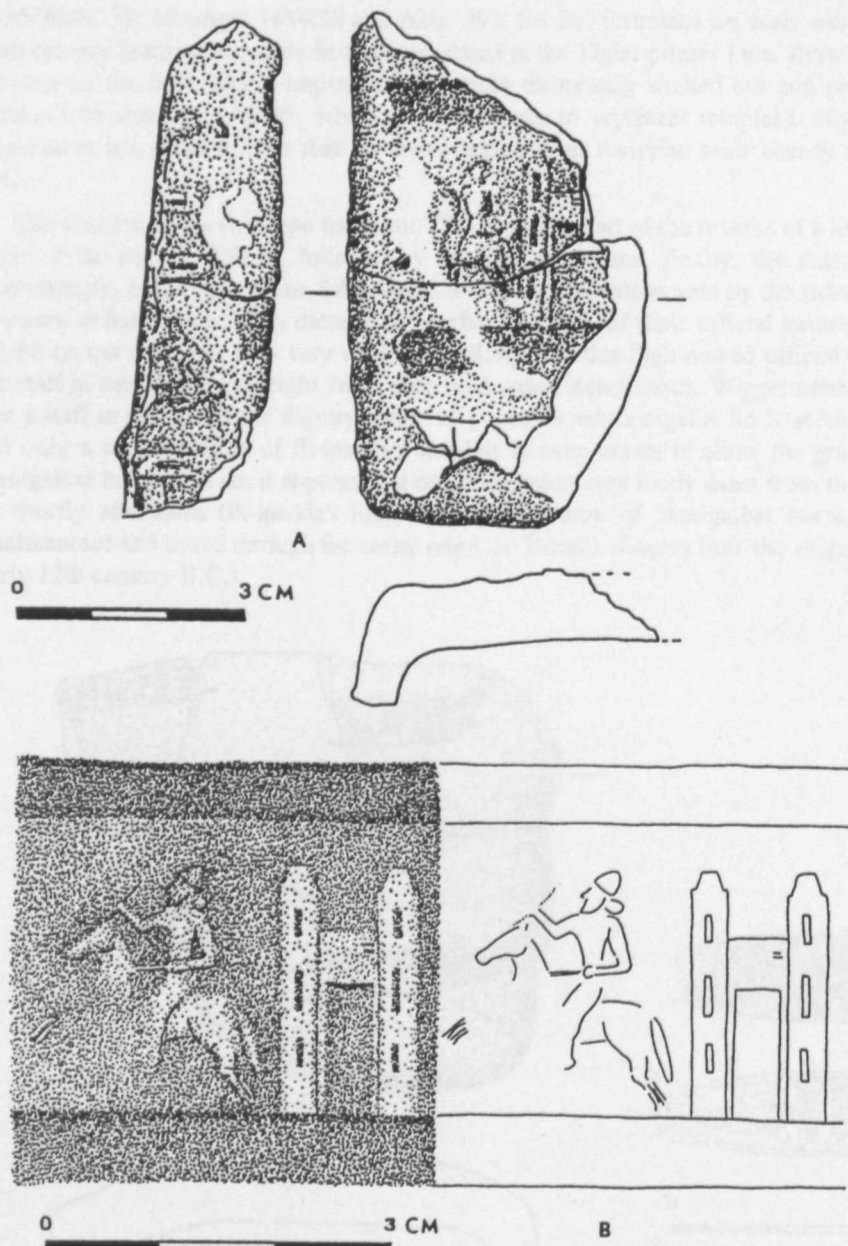


- Fig. 9: a. 'Docket' with seal impression T93-Z4; b. (enlarged) drawing of seal impression.

T93-24 (fig. 9). This impression was recognised on a small clay object resembling a cuneiform tablet in shape but without any inscription (cf. Weidner 1935/36 for a more or less comparable uninscribed but sealed tablet); perhaps the item served as a docket or tag. The object was flat and more or less square in shape and measured 4.7x4.2x1.9 cm, with the edges partly damaged. Actually, the 'docket' carried not one but a series of faint impressions of one and the same cylinder seal on all of its sides, except the upper and lower edges. The seal impressions had a height of 2.1 cm each.

The simple two-figure scene shows a human figure standing behind a caprid or bull, with an eight-pointed star above the animal. The person is dressed in a long robe and wearing a cap, his long hair curling out below the headdress and falling over the shoulders. The right forearm is raised in front of the chest, whereas the left forearm is stretched in front of the waist and, perhaps, holding the animal by its tail. The animal is well-proportioned and has tall, curving horns pointing backwards.

The 'docket' was found among numerous vessels and some cuneiform tablets and envelopes on the floor of a mud-brick building situated in front of the main entrance to the fortress. On the basis of the associated archaeological and textual evidence, the 'docket' belongs to the later 13th century B.C.; the impression seems wholly to confirm this chronological attribution. The absence of a tree in the scene clearly distinguishes this seal from comparable items of Adad-nirari of the earlier 13th century, whereas the occurrence of a single animal in horizontal posture seems to be a characteristic of the Shalmaneser period (Matthews 1990:94ff). At first sight, this scene seems to have a rural and profane character but the posture of the human figure points in another direction, i.e. the ritual sphere. The three separate components (human figure, animal and plant) each have clear counterparts in Middle Assyrian glyptics (compare e.g. the various drawings presented by Matthews 1990, nos. 306-535) but the scene as a whole has not been found elsewhere so far.

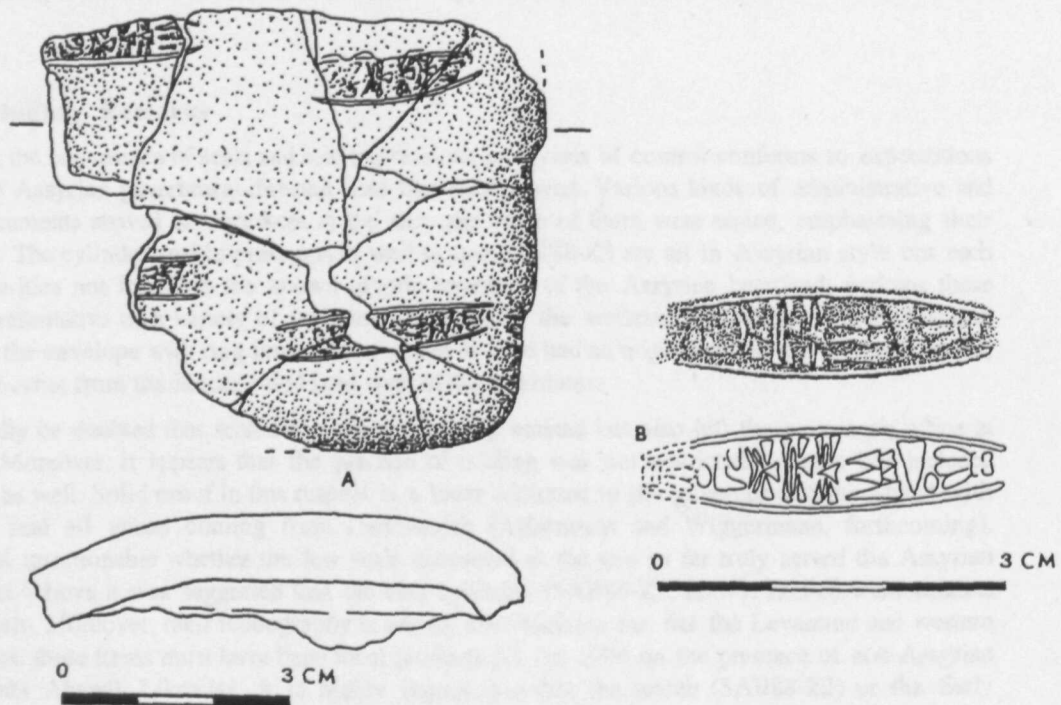


- Fig. 10: a. Envelope fragment with seal impression T93-36; b. (enlarged) drawing of seal impression.

T93-36 (fig. 10). This extraordinary impression, having a height of 3.8 cm, occurred more than once on a clay envelope fragment, found on the same floor as the 'docket' presented above. The very faint impression shows a bearded man riding a horse at a gallop. Behind the horseman a tall fortress is shown. The man seems to be wearing a long dress and a rounded cap, with the hair curling upon the shoulders. He holds the rein in his left hand and what seems to be a staff in his raised right hand. The fortress has a large rectangular gate and two tall towers with domed roofs flattened at the top. Each tower has three narrow windows or arrow slits situated above each other. The scene is enclosed by two broad bands.

Both horsemen and fortresses or other military installations occur very rarely on Middle Assyrian seals. Some seals from Assur, ascribed to Tukulti-Ninurta, show contest scenes involving horses (Moortgat 1942:78-79 and Abb. 57-58) and another Assur seal, belonging to the Shalmaneser period, shows a man attending a horse (ibid.:80-81 and Abb. 65). A seal from Assur, belonging to Ninurta-tukul-Assur and dated in the mid-12th century depicts a horse-and-chariot scene associated with the hunt (Opitz 1935/36:48-52; Moortgat 1944:38 and Abb. 39). So far, fortresses on seals were considered to be a late 12th century feature: two seals from Assur, dated in the Tiglat-pileser I era, show buildings comparable to the one on the Sabi Abyad impression but more elaborately worked out and provided with battlements (ibid.:43-44 and Abb. 45-46, who considers them to represent temples). However, the Sabi Abyad impression has made it clear that fortresses appeared on Assyrian seals already in the later 13th century B.C.

The interior of the envelope fragment T93-36 shows part of the reverse of a letter, i.e. the introductory signs of the two final lines, followed by an open space and, finally, the date: month Sippu, day 21. Interestingly, in the case of the Sabi Abyad texts, only the letters sent by the *sukallu rabu* Ili-ipadda to his governor at Sabi Abyad carry dates so far, perhaps because of their official nature. Consequently, the seal shown on our envelope may very well have belonged to this high-ranked official himself. In this respect, the staff in the horseman's right hand may hold some significance. Wiggermann (1985/86) made it clear that a staff as an emblem of dignity is part of a *sukallu rabu*'s regalia. So it seems that our impression is not only a representation of Ili-ipadda's seal but is even meant to show the grand vizier and viceroy of Hanigalbat himself. If so, it appears that our impression very likely dates from the Tukulti-Ninurta period or shortly afterwards (Ili-ipadda's long career as viceroy of Hanigalbat started in the final years of Shalmaneser and lasted through the entire reign of Tukulti-Ninurta into the reign of Assur-nirari I in the early 12th century B.C.).



- Fig 11: a. Envelope fragment with ring impression T93-Z3; b. (enlarged) drawing of ring impression.

T93-23 (fig. 11). Interestingly, this envelope fragment, with one of its sides almost completely preserved, shows a series of longdrawn, elliptical impressions of a signet ring with an indecipherable inscription in both cuneiform and, possibly, Hittite hieroglyphs, enclosed by tripartite palmets at the ends. From right to left (in reverse) the first two signs could be read as "I₁" in cuneiform but the remainder does not make any sense. Each impression is ca. 3 cm long and max. 0.7 cm wide.

Like the 'docket' and the envelope with (assumedly) Ili-ipadda's seal, this envelope, too, was found on the floor of the building situated in front of the entrance to the fortress. Consequently, its date in the second half of the 13th century B.C. is beyond doubt.

Finger rings with engraved, elliptical bezels commonly occur in late 2nd millennium Greater Mesopotamia (e.g. Boehmer 1982; Beyer 1982) but in the function of seals they seem to be a characteristic of 14th to 13th century Hittite-dominated western Syria and Anatolia, where the rings or their imprints have been found at, e.g., Ugarit, Boğazköy, Korucutepe, Emar-Meskene and Tell Faq'ous (Schaeffer 1956:37, 52 and figs. 54, 78; Boehmer 1982:40-41; Boehmer and Güterbock 1987:75-76 and Tafel XXX-XXXI; Dinçol 1993:128 and Pls. 22-23; Van Loon 1980:147 and Pls. 46e, 49b-c; Larcho 1982:57; Beckman 1988:67-68; Margueron 1995:134-35; see also Buchanan and Moorey 1988:84 and Pl. XIX). One of the Ugarit documents carries a ring imprint of Kummija-Ziti of Carchemish (Schaeffer 1956:52 and fig. 78), indicating that signet rings were used at this Hittite centre as well. The ring impressions of the "Chief of Chariots" found both at Emar, capital of the Hittite province of Astata, and at Emar's citadel at Tell Faq'ous indicate that both sites were united under the same military authority, which in its turn was subordinated to the kingdom of Carchemish and, ultimately, the imperial seat at Hattusa (Margueron 1995). The present examples clearly suggest that the use of signet rings was largely restricted to high-ranking officials or members of the royal families in the land of Hatti.

The Sabi Abyad ring impressions closely resemble the west-Syrian and Anatolian examples with respect to their shape, the presence of tripartite palmets and the occurrence of (Hittite) hieroglyph-like signs. In this respect, it seems highly probable that the ring-sealed envelope was originally sent from a place somewhere in the land of Hatti to the Assyrian governor at Sabi Abyad (the Hittite stronghold of Carchemish comes first to mind, when taking into account that, according to one of the Sabi Abyad texts, caravans from Carchemish passed through Sabi Abyad on their way to the Assyrian heartland; cf. Akkermans and Wiggermann, forthcoming). Unfortunately, none of the texts uncovered so far at Sabi Abyad can be associated with the envelope but it can hardly be doubted that this document must have been of an official nature (so far, all texts found at the site belong to the sphere of public administration). Apparently, the governor's administration at Sabi Abyad maintained direct contacts with its Hittite counterparts.

Some Concluding Remarks

Generally, the occurrence of seals and seal impressions as devices of control conforms to expectations in the case of Assyrian government-directed sites like Sabi Abyad. Various kinds of administrative and economic documents arrived or were kept at the site, and some of them were sealed, emphasising their official status. The cylinder-seal impressions as well as seal SAB88-Z3 are all in Assyrian style but each shows peculiarities not found on the known glyptic repertoire of the Assyrian heartland; perhaps these items are representative of a variety of seals mainly found in the western part of the Middle Assyrian empire. Only the envelope with ring impressions seems to have had an origin beyond the Assyrian realm; most likely, it came from the Hittite-ruled land west of the Euphrates.

It can hardly be doubted that sealed documents not only entered but also left the governor's office at Sabi Abyad. Moreover, it appears that the practice of sealing was not restricted to texts but included commodities as well. Solid proof in this respect is a letter addressed to the governor at Sabi Abyad with the order to seal all goods coming from Carchemish (Akkermans and Wiggermann, forthcoming). However, it is questionable whether the few seals uncovered at the site so far truly served the Assyrian administration. Above it was suggested that the clay cylinders (SAB86-Z1, Z93-3, Z93-6) were amulets rather than seals. Moreover, their iconography is wholly non-Assyrian but fits the Levantine and western Syrian glyptics; these items must have been local products (cf. Jas 1990 on the presence of non-Assyrian persons at Sabi Abyad). Likewise, it is highly improbable that the scarab (SAB88-Z2) or the Early Dynastic seal with the banquet scene (Z93-1) were used by the Assyrians for administrative purposes.

More likely, these items served as ornaments or amulets (the Early Dynastic seal may also simply have been kept as a curiosity).

Only the seal from the mass burial (SAB88-Z1) seems to have been truly Assyrian. The presence of this seal in a mass grave lacking appropriate burial treatment suggests that its owner was a victim of warfare or execution, perhaps to be associated with one of the periods of destruction at Sabi Abyad. Assyrian settlement at our site must have been of a fluctuating and intermittent nature, subjected to ever-changing political and military relations in a most unstable part of Assyria (cf. Akkermans et al. 1993).

It seems reasonable to assume that originally more seals than the one found in the mass burial were in use at the governor's administration of Sabi Abyad. When taking into account that the seal from the grave was once carried on the body by one of the dead men, it appears that the absence of seals among the extensive in-situ deposits uncovered so far is mainly due to the fact that they were precious items carried by their owners, who had left the site at the time of its destruction. In this respect, it may not be without significance that both the clay 'seals' and the Early Dynastic seal were found in debris contexts; apparently, these items had a restricted intrinsic value and were easily discarded.

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