**Mesopotamian aquatic symbols in the British Museum glyptic collection**

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**Introduction**

“Animals are among the first inhabitants of the mind’s eye” (Mason, 2007, p. 18). Since the dawn of human history, nature plays an important part in the creation and development of human imagery. Given that human beings can live in different ecosystems, the cultural notions about nature differ according to the specific contexts where human agglomerates develop.

The aquatic element was fundamental for the Mesopotamian civilization, given the importance of the Persian Gulf, the Mediterranean Sea, and the rivers (Tigris, Euphrates and their subsidiaries) for the development of agriculture, herding, and commercial contacts with neighbouring regions.

The life-giving abundance of water was thus transferred to the symbolic sphere, with aquatic elements appearing as iconicographic motifs of objects produced by the Mesopotamian historical agents. With this poster, we aim to present some of the ongoing results of our analysis of these aquatic motifs in some seals dated from the Jemdet Nasr period (3100-2900 BCE) of the Lambert Collection, British Museum, which intertwines Ancient History, History of Religions and Environmental History.

**Stamp and Cylinders Seals’ origins and functions**

It is believed that stamp seals, used as amulets, were developed very early in the Near and Middle East, around the 6th/5th millennium BCE (Collon, 2001; Porada, 1993). The evolution to a cylindrical shape happened around the 4th millennium BCE (Collon, 2001; Porada, 1993). This change of shape did not seem to modify the iconicographic motifs, as we can see by comparing the stamp seal BM 2013,6001.85 (stone, 4.2 cm x 3.1cm) with cylinder seal BM 2013,6001.1304 (stone, height 2.7 cm, diameter between 0.9 cm-1.0 cm). They both display fishes and cattle, and though it is difficult to grasp the full meaning of this zoomorphic motifs, we can suggest that they were both used as amulets of fertility.

Diachronically, stamp and cylinder seals were profusely used in antiquity with multiple coexistent functions: as amulets; as ornaments; as identifiers of its owner; and as administrative tools. The precious materials used for their fabric (for example hematite; lapis-lazuli, quartz, serpentine, etc.) also displayed the socio-economic power of its owners. On another hand, the iconicographic contents that, sometimes, were accompanied by written signs, added a profound aesthetic and artistic value.

**The Cylinders Seals of the Lambert Collection British Museum**

The seals analyzed are still unpublished. Our choice to focus on these examples is due to the aquatic zoomorphic elements they display. The exact site where they were exhumated is unknown, except for seal BM 105075, which was found in a side of a train line in Bagdad, a possibly Carchemish cemetery (Wiseman, 1962). Even though seal BM 105075 is not part of the above-mentioned collection, we integrated it in our set, given the parallels we can identify between it and the seal BM 2013,6001.1338.

The seal BM 2013,6001.1240 (stone, height 2.4 cm, diameter 1.25 cm) displays at the centre an animal of four legs with horns. Before the animal’s head there are two fishes, and in front there is a fish tail. The seal BM 2013,6001.1248 (marble, height 2.0 cm, diameter 1.5 cm) shows, on the left, three dots and, on the right, 3 fishes. Each one is aligned with the dots.

The seal BM 2013,6001.1338 (stone, height 2.85 cm, diameter 2.5cm) we can see a pair of fishes, a pair of circular forms that resemble eyes, and a pair of aquatic animals - a fish and a crab. About the latter, we find a parallel in the seal BM 105075 (Baghdad, stone, height 1.2 cm, diameter 2.2 cm), where we can find two fishes and a similar form that we identify as a crab.

**Discussion**

The period of Jemdet Nasr was marked by a profound economic growth of the urban agglomerates in Mesopotamia. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the main symbols we identify are zoomorphic, probably evoking the fertility and abundance of its natural fauna. Clearly, in seal BM 2013,6001.1240 the main protagonist is a land animal. However, the scene also integrates fishes, probably to display a combined vision about fertility, which was obtained from the human activities over both aquatic and non-aquatic animals.

On the other hand, in seal BM 2013,6001.1338 we think we can identity a crab, which can allude to the species potamon mesopotamicum, a crab of fresh waters identified in this territory. Though Wiseman (1962) identified a similar element as a star, in seal BM 105075, due to the stylistic parallels we suggest that it was also a crab. The use of this crustacean in incantations for exorcisms, necromancy, and protection against malevolent entities (the demons) is attested in later Mesopotamian sources, related to magical and medicinal practices (Finkel, 1983; Scurlock, 2014). Therefore, if indeed we are before the representation of a crab in these seals, we can identify its iconicographic expression earlier in time, in objects that also had an apotropaic value.

**Conclusion**

The importance of the aquatic environment in the construction of the symbolic imagery in Mesopotamia is, thus, attested in the examples analyzed above. Moreover, archaeological expeditions in Erdu (modern Tell Abu Shahrain) have identified remains of aquatic animals, such as fishes and turtles, within the cultic structures, dated to the 5th and 4th millennia BCE. Although there is no information about the archeologically sites where our seals were found, we can suggest that they were also used as apotropaic objects in ritualistic actions

**Bibliography**


