

REVIEW ARTICLE

The Akkadian Cylinder Seal – Metonym for Life in Akkad

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ABSTRACT

Akkadian cylinder seals, though tiny physical objects, were useful and significant to the Akkadians. This work explores those uses and significances in order to understand the cultural complexity reflected in these small items. Religious scenes on cylinder seals detail the spiritual beliefs and practices of the time. The deeply intertwined relationship between religion and state power in Akkad is also present in the decorations of some cylinder seals. The materials from which cylinder seals are made indicate trade with distant groups and signal the passage of both materials and cultural influences between groups. These cylinder seals also reflect the complexities of daily life; politics, distribution of resources, the specialization of craftspeople, and art can all be read in these minute cylinders. As well, the making of cylinder seals was a technologically complex process, demonstrating sophistication of technique and of material choice that points to the sophistication of the people who made them. Ultimately, these physical and social properties of cylinder seals indicate that they had multiple meanings in the life of Akkadians.

Keywords: cylinder seal, Akkad, religion, trade, daily life, technology, culture

INTRODUCTION

In humanity's ancient quest to distinguish between "yours" and "mine," the people of the Ancient Near East developed the cylinder seal (Gorelick and Gwinnett 1981, 17). During the years of the Akkadian period in Mesopotamia (2350–2150 BC) the cylinder seal took on new meanings influenced by the cultural context of Akkad (The Metropolitan Museum of Art 2004). The Akkadians and their culture assigned various significances to cylinder seals and, through using them, connected the seals to the larger world outside of Akkad. Indeed, Akkadian cylinder seals are more than just a physical item to denote ownership; they reflect the cultural complexity of the Akkadians. By examining art, religion, trade, and social significances in the form and function of cylin-

der seals, this essay demonstrates that Akkadian cylinder seals are an excellent metonym for life in the domain of Akkad.

Akkadian cylinder seals are a well-researched topic, dating back to Sir Leonard Woolley's excavations at the Royal Cemetery of Ur in southern modern-day Iraq between 1922 and 1934 (Irving and Ambers 2002, 206). While Ur is the primary site at which Akkadian cylinder seals have been found (Porada 1960, 116), others have been discovered at Umma (Sax 1991, 91) and Mari (Kantor 1966, 147). Some researchers devote their careers to studying these information-rich items. Margaret Sax (1991) published numerous papers on the technological aspects of cylinder seal-making (Sax, Collon, and Leese 1993; Sax, McNabb,

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and Meeks 1998), and Edith Porada was posthumously called “the world’s leading expert on Mesopotamian seals” (Possehl 2006, 42). While both women are experts in the field, their approaches to understanding Akkadian cylinder seals differed.

The research on Akkadian cylinder seals has been done with a variety of methodologies. Some researchers used highly technological approaches, such as Sax (1991) who used air-path X-ray fluorescence and energy-dispersive X-ray analyzers on minute paint samples present on some seals (91). These analytical tools survey the relative concentration of particular elements found in the paint used on seals through the reflection of secondary or fluorescent X-rays, providing information about material composition that can hint at other variables like age and provenance (Pessanha et al. 2019, 7). These types of X-rays are well-suited to examining the ancient and delicate cylinder seals as they are non-destructive (de Viguierie, Solé, and Walter 2009, 2015). Later Sax, Collon and Leese (1993) analyzed the crystalline properties of seals using X-ray powder diffraction and Debye-Scherrer cameras (78). X-rays travel through a powdered crystalline sample, and the dispersed reflections of those rays are analyzed from up to 20 different angles to reveal clues about the crystal’s structures, properties, and makeup (Dutrow and Clark 2020). As used by Sax, these types of technology can provide information about a cylinder seal’s material properties, its provenance, its trade routes, and the technology used to craft it. X-rays of many varieties are helpful research tools for unlocking the secrets held by cylinder seals.

In contrast, Porada (1960, 117) used both her extensive background knowledge and an in-depth visual analysis of the Sargonid cylinder seal to draw her conclusions. The Sargonid seal was a particularly noteworthy example of Akkadian cylinder seals, found by Sir Leonard Woolley in his excavations at the Royal Cemetery of Ur, and is thought to have been

made during the reign of King Shar-kali-sharri (Porada 1960, 116). Porada engaged by studying the deeply thematic and artistic aspects of the seal and relating them to historic contextual clues from other Akkadian artifacts. By using visual and thematic analysis, Porada accessed different types of data than did Sax, poring over motifs and significances that were deeply entrenched in Akkadian context and culture. In this way, cylinder seals can be read as texts that, through the art of interpretation, can tell stories of the Akkadian people. While existing research touches on many aspects of Akkadian cylinder seals, the methodologies used to understand these amazing and miniature bundles of information can be as diverse and beautiful as the objects and as the culture that created them.

DEVELOPMENT OF AKKADIAN CYLINDER SEALS

As the history of research shows, the cylinder seals of the Akkad period are complex items, rich in cultural significance. They reflect a long tradition of technological development stretching back into the Paleolithic period where bead making in the Ancient Near East first began (Gorelick and Gwinnett 1981, 17). The development of stone beads eventually led to the distinctive shape of the cylinder seal, and ornamentation gradually became the varied and visually rich depictions of complex scenes characteristic of Akkad (Gorelick and Gwinnett 1981, 19). On the surface, these seals were intended to denote ownership of goods by rolling the seal through the clay that was used to seal packages. However, the seals also had other uses, such as being religiously significant, providing protection through magic, or being beautifully decorative (Gorelick and Gwinnett 1981, 19). Seals developed alongside other methods of marking items of material significance, such as stamp seals and hollow clay bullae containing incised clay tokens (Gorelick and Gwinnett, 1981, 19). As a result, the cylinder seal reflects the growth of urbanization that

had been slowly growing in the Ancient Near East since humans first began the process of agriculture. The history of the Akkadian cylinder seal demonstrates that these seals developed apace with Akkadian culture and that the growth of human life in Akkad is mirrored in the development of the cylinder seal, making the seals a wonderful metonym for Akkadian life.

AKKADIAN ART, RELIGION, AND CYLINDER SEALS

When looking at cylinder seals from Akkad, a common feature is their beautiful and richly detailed carvings. Kantor (1966) notes that the Akkadian style is easily identified by the accuracy of the physical details in the carvings' figures (146), while Porada (1960) points out that Akkadians distinctively focused on naturalism in their figural representations (116). The subject matter depicted on these seals can range from scenes of quotidian existence to views of the gods and the fullness of Akkadian religious life (Kantor 1966, 147).

One seal, as shown in Figure 1, demonstrates a religious scene, with gods and goddesses arrayed around lush landscape

elements that would not have been typical of Mesopotamia at the time. The principal god figure sits on a throne of mountains, surrounded by verdant vegetation and flowing streams, a stark contrast to the alluvial plains and fields of agriculture typical of the area (Kantor 1966, 147). The Akkadian focus on naturalism, as depicted in the art of the cylinder seals, was a direct reflection of their desire to dominate the natural world (Kantor 1966, 147). In addition, the multi-layered horns on the deities of this seal are emblems of divinity and a signal to the authority held by the gods (Süring 1984, 330). These horns are also associated with the bull-god cult and directly relate to the expansionist views of the kings of Akkad, attempting to unite “the totality of the countries” under their rule (Lewy 1971, 735). No one better exemplifies this mix of religion and politics than the first king of Akkad, Sargon.

King Sargon of Akkad sought to create political unity when he seized control of what came to be Akkad, and carvings on seals from the time demonstrate his success by portraying the power the Akkadian gods had to legitimize both their domain and their rulers (Heinz 2007, 67). It was important for Sargon to spread



FIGURE 1—Drawing of a seal from Mari (Kantor 1966). Reproduced with permission from the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, University of Chicago Press.

material proof of his divinity and fitness to rule as he had made sweeping changes to Akkadian life in order to reinforce his claim to religious authority. One such change was a shift in religious focus away from An, the creator god, to the goddess Inanna, whose domains were love, sexuality, and war. In this shift, Sargon made his daughter the high priestess for Inanna in the city of Ur, thus giving her significant political and cultural influence with which to support her father (Schneider 2011, 22). By consolidating religious power within his family, Sargon was using religion to legitimize his rule. Though Sargon claimed to be descended from ancient Mesopotamian kings and had the birthright to be ruler, he was not actually of royal blood and could therefore have been considered a usurper, or someone illegitimately claiming royal power (Nigro 1998, 85). To keep the populace from rising against him, he engaged heavily in propaganda to give himself airs of legitimacy. Most of this propaganda is famous in Mesopotamian archaeological circles, such as the impressive Stele of Ishtar and Sargon's Stele; their size and intricate detail gave them archaeological celebrity. The cylinder seals bearing religious scenes of beauty and power are also propaganda because they send a subtler message about Sargon's right to kingship. The divine authority of the gods was demonstrated in the lushness of their carved surroundings, and by associating himself with that authority, Sargon proclaimed himself chosen by the gods and thus the legitimate ruler of Akkad (Nigro 1998, 86). Thus, the cylinder seals from this time reveal the fascinating dynamics of political legitimacy and the conquering of the natural world within the religion of the Akkadian period.

It is within this complex interplay of political legitimacy, religious power, and artistic motifs that cylinder seal's metonymic qualities can be seen. These beads demonstrate important factors of daily Akkadian life, as ancient Akkad and its quotidian rhythms were permeated with religion. Religious personnel

worked both in and out of temples, and religious myths were regularly told to provide structure and guidance in everyday situations (Schneider 2011, 6). Cylinder seals are often adorned with religious themes because of how pervasive religion was in daily Akkadian life. In addition, the political structure of Akkadian life was just as omnipresent in regular Akkadian affairs. As king, Sargon used his political will in a way that would have had an immediate impact on the life of Akkadian citizens, such as dictating local architecture, deciding the administrative and physical organization of towns, and forcing populations to relocate if he so chose (Heinz 2007, 67). The political forces of Akkad could be felt in the regular lives of Akkadian citizens and therefore became common themes in cylinder seals. The depictions of religion and politics on cylinder seals are an accurate reflection of life for ancient Akkadians, making the seals an excellent metonym for the power of gods and kings in Akkad.

TRADE, AKKAD, AND CYLINDER SEALS

Cylinder seals from Akkad reflect the deep importance of trade to Akkadian life. Sargon of Akkad had changed the economic basis of his domain by shifting economic control over the far-reaching networks of trade through his palace and away from the priesthood (Heinz 2007, 68). This secular change in economics was accompanied by a shift in materials used to create cylinder seals, a change precipitated by trade. As Sax, Collon, and Leese (1993) note, Akkadian cylinder seals were made of extremely hard stone, like serpentinite and greenstone, that are not found natively in the lands of the Akkad domain and were likely imported (79). When the Akkadian "empire" was interrupted by the Gutian invasions, the existing trade network dissolved and subsequent historical periods are characterized by softer stones that were sourced from an area closer to home (Sax, Collon, and Leese 1993,

80). Other materials were also used to create cylinder seals in the Akkad period such as shells from coastal areas, lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, and rock crystal of unknown provenance, which demonstrates the existence of strong trade networks within Akkad (Sax 1991, 91). These examples point to the influence of trade on cylinder seals within Akkad, but Akkad also influenced other groups through trade.

Trade saw the exportation of Akkadian influence to additional Mesopotamian groups. The Hurrians resided north of Akkad, and Akkad's presence was heavily felt by this group living in the Anatolian plains. Traded obsidian of a foreign source was found in a Hurrian palace, and the stone was heavily incongruent with Hurrian practices, suggesting Akkadian influence in the region (Frahm and Feinberg 2013, 1123). In this palace a cylinder seal impression was found, bearing a legend that gave tribute from the Hurrian leader to the Akkadian king Naram-Sin and his daughter. There may have been an alliance between this daughter and the Hurrian king, suggesting that the Akkadians were trying to exert control over Hurrian trade, possibly resulting in the influx and importance of obsidian (Frahm and Feinberg 2013, 1123). The traded obsidian was used to create fine tools, mostly flake and blade. Obsidian, when handled properly, can produce a very sharp edge and can become tools that would have been extremely useful in the creation of cylinder seals (Frahm and Feinberg 2013, 1124). Even outside of Akkadian-made cylinder seals, the importance of trade is intertwined with these tiny yet informative objects.

Hurrian tools were not the only example of Akkad's enormous hunger for trade. Ten Akkadian cylinder seals were found at the citadel of the Anatolian site of Seyitömer (Bachhuber 2013, 504–505). As their primary purpose was to denote ownership, the seals at this site suggest at least some level of Akkadian administrative control in these northern

areas of Mesopotamia. However, seals at the Seyitömer site could also have been used for decoration or amuletic protection. Regardless of the ultimate purpose of those seals, their presence in Anatolia points firmly to an established network of exchange between Akkad and the cultures that surrounded it (Bachhuber 2013, 506). The metonymic properties between cylinder seals and Akkadian life can be seen in the trade that helped to create the seals.

By demonstrating the economic connections between Akkad and the various groups with whom they had trading relationships, cylinder seals reflect the economic life of Akkadians. Ancient inscriptions bear witness to King Sargon's vast trade networks, with ships sailing to exchange goods in many places, including what is now India. These ships brought to Akkadians a wide array of imported goods, including luxury materials like metals, ivory, beads, and precious stones (Mallowan 1965, 2). Many of these materials reflected Akkadian wealth and prestige, themes that were echoed in the material quality and narrative carvings of some cylinder seals. Those seals indicated the real-life importance of Akkadian trade in the movement of goods, but they also portray trade's movement of people. Beginning with King Sargon, trade had come under the control of the palace, but palace officials did not employ middlemen to go between the traders and the buyers. Instead, it was usually individuals who purchased luxurious and expensive trade goods directly from tradesmen, leading to new relationships and exposure to different cultural influences (Stech and Pigott 1986, 41). These influences could lead to wider cultural shifts, such as changes of decorative styles, shifts in preferred materials for construction, or new kinds of narratives being told. As a result, cylinder seals embody the Akkadian experiences of trade in both the goods to make them and the cultural influences that gave the seals meaning. Trade was a necessary and active part of Akkadian life in

many ways, and the metonymic cylinder seals are carved with the importance of Akkadian trade.

SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCES OF AKKADIAN CYLINDER SEALS

The physical qualities of cylinder seals are also of vital importance due to their place in Akkadian life. As previously mentioned, the seals were perfunctory in that they put a stamp of ownership on whatever goods they embossed (Gorelick and Gwinnett 1981, 19). In addition, they were also often worn as jewelry by being threaded onto a necklace, becoming both a symbol of status and of artistic decoration (Gorelick and Gwinnett 1990, 47). That status and decoration may have served to elevate the owner (in a display of self-promotion) in the eyes of other Akkadians. For example, a hunting scene showing a man spearing ibexes could have served to display the man's power and prowess, as Akkadians saw man's domination over nature as a spiritual right and a demonstration of divine power (The Metropolitan Museum of Art 2020; Porada 1960, 118). The seal impressions of such a man might communicate his status to others, an act of self-promotion that exhibits his upward mobility in the social ranks. Another mark of status occurred alongside the progress of written language in the Akkadian period. Inscriptions on cylinder seals became more prominent at this time, demonstrating either the literacy of the seal's owner or his ability to pay for an inscription from a scribe (Pittman 2013, 323). Clearly, cylinder seals could reflect the personal power of an individual, but they also had other socially significant uses.

As has been noted, cylinder seals could represent political ties through alliances and religion. One such seal proclaimed the allegiance of a governor of the Akkadian province of Lagash to Shargalisharri, an Akkadian king (Frankfort 1939, 9). As we have seen, this intermixing of religion and power is also

important for religious symbols as they were a frequent motif in Akkadian cylinder seals. Political power was of divine origin, and because Akkadian cities each had their own patron deity, religious scenes inscribed on cylinder seals may speak to the power of the seal's owner through the favoured god (Pittman 2013, 335). Politicians were not the only ones to find power in cylinder seals; even those who decorated the seals may have found power through their carvings. The shifting economics of Akkadian life began to give more clout to the artisans responsible for making cylinder seals, and it seems as though these artisans were using artistic license to create their own designs, moving away from the dictated wishes of others (Amiet 1980, 40). The political influence necessary to alter the established social fabric is noteworthy and speaks to the changing fabric of both political power and of wealth. Unequal distribution of resources is also demonstrated by the material origins of cylinder seals. Such affluence is suggested in some seals found at the Royal Cemetery of Ur that were made of expensive imported lapis lazuli (Gorelick and Gwinnett, 1990, 50). The social significances of power and wealth are intricately tied to the decorations and carvings of Akkadian cylinder seals.

It is not only the rich materials of a cylinder seal that point to wealth; the decorations on the seal can also be valuable. The Akkadian period is noteworthy for its intricate attention to detail, and the figures on the seals of this time are far more realistic and individualized than they had been in previous eras (Pittman 2013, 334). The more complex and detailed a figure, the more time and attention it required, driving up its cost. Cylinder seals can also point to the economic relationships between the artisans who made them and the patrons who commissioned them, demonstrating the specialization in craft that came from the surplus of wealth arising from intensive food production (Eppihimer 2014, 320). Even the development of written literary traditions finds

its way into cylinder seals, as some depict the epic hero Gilgamesh. These carvings suggest an influential relationship between the various artforms, including literature and visual arts, in which the Akkadians engaged (Lambert 1979, 5). Clearly, cylinder seals reflect many aspects of Akkadian social and cultural complexity, but the seals' metonymic properties run even deeper.

The Akkad seen in cylinder seals parallels the true complexity of wider Akkadian culture. An example of said complexity is the phenomenon of fictional Akkadian autobiographies, which were written to enhance one's social standing, to feed into narratives of obtaining and retaining power, and to explain or predict various social happenings (Longman 1991, 44). One such example is a fictional autobiography of the god Marduk, meant to explain Marduk's origin and to legitimize the god in the Akkadian pantheon (Longman 1991, 45). Marduk's fictive autobiography bears similarities to King Sargon's attempts to legitimize himself and the earlier-referenced cylinder seal carvings that propagandized his divine authority. Cylinder seals were therefore an accurate snapshot of Akkadian social and cultural significances. In addition, Akkadian glyptics were a visual art form that often portrayed political and social figures in exaggerated heroic detail that blend narrative and historical influences (Briggs 1957, 48). These glyptics and their narratives were a great influence on the carvings of Akkadian cylinder seals, as heroes were often part of the imaginative iconography characteristic of Akkadian seals (Porada 1993, 568). Both the fictional autobiographies and Akkadian glyptics are significant cultural elements that rearrange form and time to understand and characterize important people and moments. By reflecting themes of political legitimacy and hero-making from life to carving, Akkadian cylinder seals echo Akkadian culture. Akkadian cylinder seals filled many complex social and personal roles

for the Akkadians, reflecting the cultural complexity of the people who created and used them.

CONCLUSION

The information present in cylinder seals of the Akkadian period provides a detailed, though incomplete, account of life in Akkad. Akkadian kings legitimized their power through the influence of religion, and the religious significance of dominion over nature are reflected in the art of Akkadian cylinder seals. The materials from which these cylinder seals are made speak directly to the prevalence and importance of trade during the Akkadian period and the complex interconnections of social life are present in the look and use of Akkadian cylinder seals. While these aspects of Akkadians, as well as their cylinder seals, have come to light, further research would provide a more holistic understanding of the seals and the role they played in Akkadian society. These amazing artifacts and the information they hold are vital to understanding the prosperous and successful Akkadian domain. As archaeology must extract abstract and contextual information from the material remains of culture, Akkadian cylinder seals provide an excellent and complex source of this vital information. Indeed, Akkadian cylinder seals are truly a metonym for life in Akkad.

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