

## 2M CYLINDER SEALS AND CONTRACT-MAKING: AN AMORITE OR HURRIAN TRADITION?

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**SUMMARY:** By drawing on seal practice and text archives of the period, an attempt is made to read more fully the iconography on four sealings from merchant Adad-Šulūli's archive in his house in the Kültepe Kārum (dated c.1940-1840BC). More background information is included than there was time for in the seminar, whilst the map, some subsidiary images and the chronological table given then are left out. We wish to engage text experts with the idea that 'iconography' means 'picture writing' and that visual imagery is used to convey intended messages just as much as written texts - art historians would like to work with them. PAPER READ AT THE ORIENTAL INSTITUTE OXFORD APRIL 2013.

### GENERAL INTRODUCTION

In the first half of the Second Millennium merchants made the journey across Syria from Aššur to Kültepe in Anatolia to bring their famed textiles and tin from further east to exchange for Anatolia's silver (and a little copper). In the overall scale of things it was a short journey, mainly using donkeys as pack animals. Their contact with native Anatolians was in some respects at arm's length, but in others required administrative cooperation with the local palace. Slightly earlier, at the turn of the 2M, the political situation across this latitude saw the Ur III Dynasty in Mesopotamia give way by 1900 to the Isin-Larsa and beginnings of the Old Babylonian kingdoms - the latter of whose most relevant king for our study is Hammurabi. His 'Super-King' reach gradually led to treaties with surrounding kingdoms in the Diyala and Syria - even with Zimrilim of Mari. Middle Kingdom Egypt was in full flow, interacting with Syria further south and along its coast, a trend we do not give much attention to here. At this time we have patchy knowledge of the earliest Old Assyrian rulers - the background swell for Aššur's activities - until Babylon gained primacy over them too.

### HURRIAN -V- AMORITE SEAL INDICATORS

North Syria was open territory caught between all these crosscurrents, with vast regions to the south running into Arabia, heartland of the Amorites: they were *bedū* (the Arabic word for nomads) on the move, with different customs from Syro-Mesopotamian norms, theirs being an itinerant, rather than urban, culture. In the East Anatolian and Khabur region the more elusive Hurrians had been around since Akkadian times, often only distinguishable by their language, but playing an increasingly recognisable part from the mid-millennium from within the Mitanni Empire after the fall of Babylon to the Hittites. One of my tutors at the University of London was Diana Stein, succeeding Edith Porada as the expert on Nuzi seals, her drawing of the best-known example of which (from the Silwa-Teshub archive) is reproduced from one of her papers (*no. 42*)<sup>1</sup> below left.

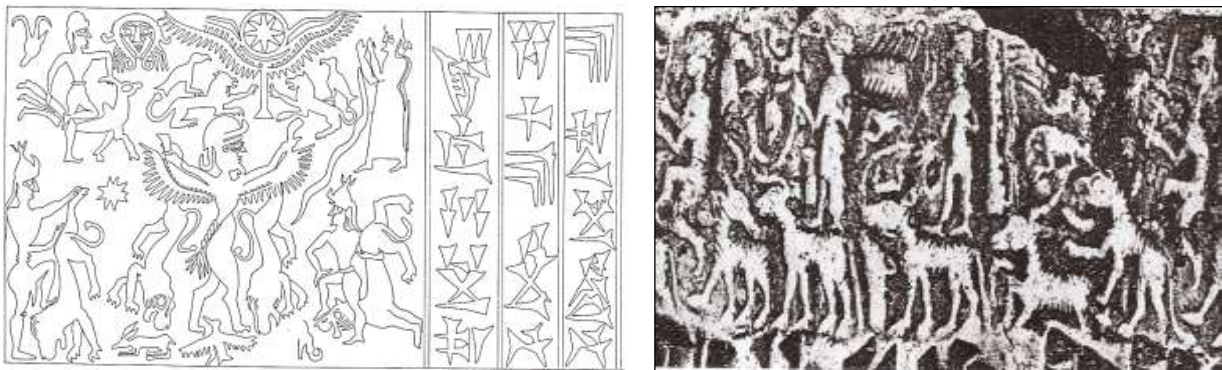


Figure 1: Compare the Seal of Shaushtatar, King of the Mitanni from the Silwa-Teshub Archive, Nuzi (c.1450) with a typical Syro-Cappadocian seal (right) of c.1900 (*no.28* from N. Ozgüç' Kültepe Catalogue 1965

<sup>1</sup> Diana L Stein 'Mythologische Inhalte der Nuzi-Glyptik' in Volkert Haas (ed.) Hurriter und Hurritisch (Konstanzer Altorientalische Symposien Band II - XENIA 21) 1988, 173-209

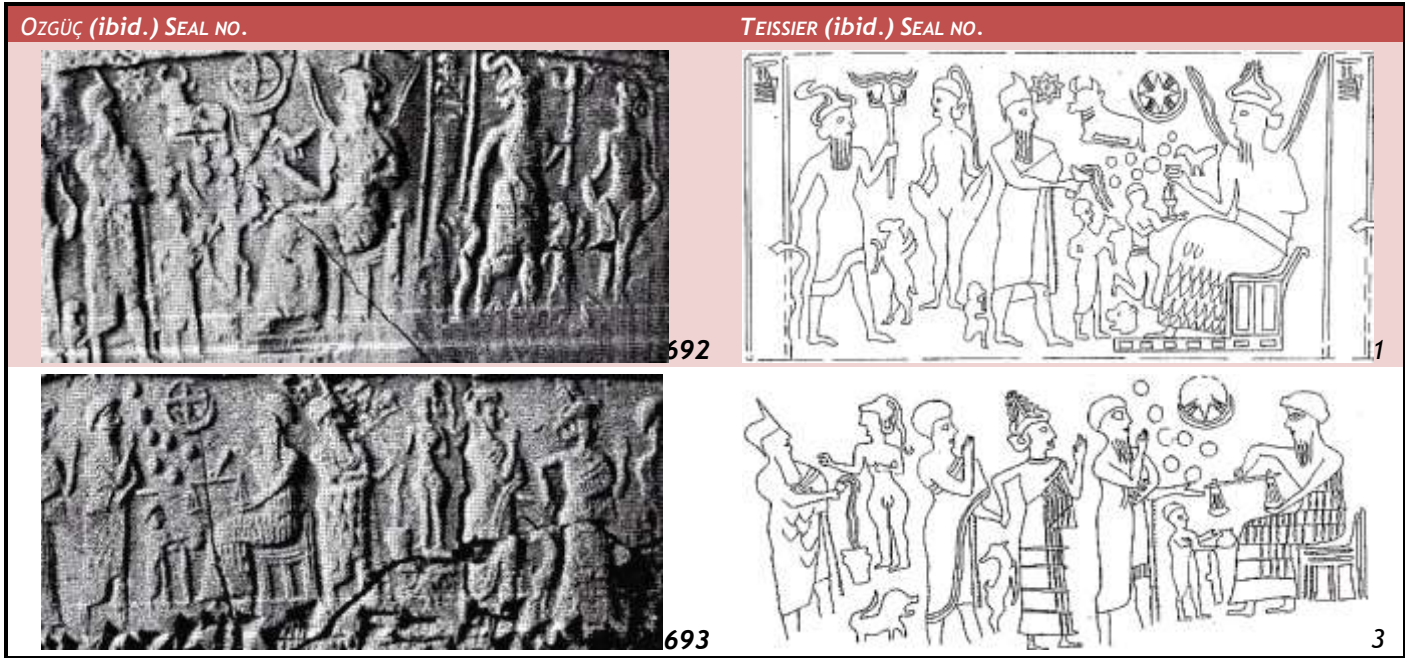


Figure 2: First pair of seals under discussion - sealings photos from Ozgüç (ibid.): drawings from Teissier (ibid.)

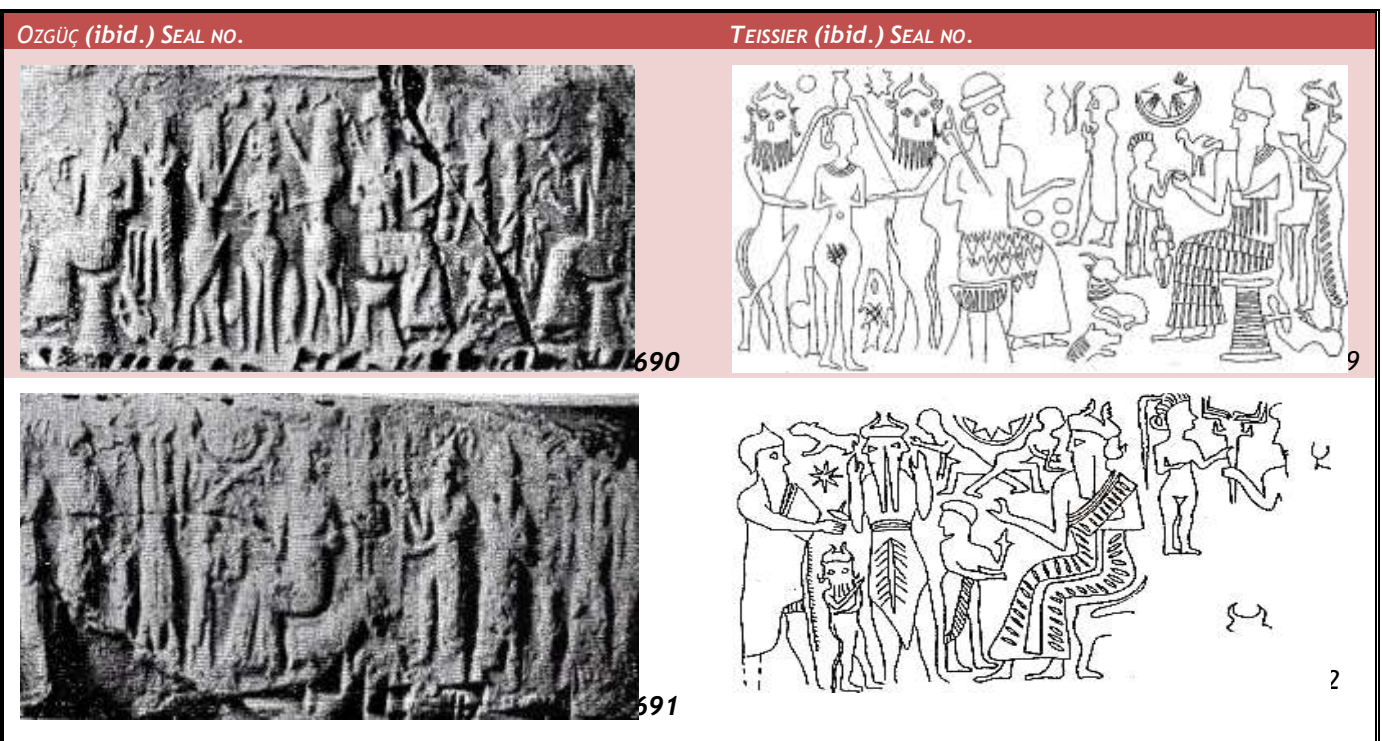


Figure 3: Second pair of seals under discussion - sealings photos from Ozgüç (ibid.): drawings from Teissier (ibid.)<sup>2</sup>

Hurrian elements in the seal imagery - though dating much later (to roughly 1450-1350) show similar trademarks to the much earlier local Anatolian seals of Kültepe (above right) in mixing Mesopotamia-derived groups of hero struggling with bull or lion, or heraldic motifs such as the Tree of Life, with features betraying

<sup>2</sup> Photos of the clay sealings and their drawings are quoted direct from their respective publications, simply for utilitarian reference purposes, without aiming to be of art book quality. Teissier's drawings are an indispensable aid in deciphering their components though it is universally acknowledged that drawings can sometimes convey a false clarity compared to the imperfections of the coarse impression.

Central Asian traits, such as the Gods standing on their animal familiars holding them on reins, with hybrid creatures from variant mythologies outside the Syro-Mesopotamian mainstream. In design both have in common the same *horror vacui*, with pictorial elements spread flat over the picture plane without a ground line anchoring the figures to one level (note the floating position on the Nuzi seal of the figure with elbows bent and hands up, probably Shaushtatar himself making obeisance to his Gods - or again the small banqueting group squeezed into the sky above the procession of Gods on the Syro-Cappadocian seal).

### **AIM OF THIS PAPER**

Scholarship has reached the stage where we can now draw on catalogues and translated texts and attempt to align them with each other, whilst computer technology enables us to zoom in on the tiny pictures to be found on seals and sealings and gain further information from their iconography. It is via the seals in a confusion of styles in the first third of the 2M that we can pick up on the genesis of a population of seals and sealings reflecting the new political state of affairs whose general content can further our understanding of a crescendo of semi-stable (rather than fully nomadic) economic, political and religious bureaucratic organisations that mushroomed in the entire region at the time, and I will try to use information from other's research to cross-reference their content. The legitimacy of this approach is explained in a *Coda* to this paper that leans on the arguments of Paolo Matthiae in relation to his interpretation of artefacts from Ebla.

I start at Syro-Cappadocian beginnings, to try to tease out obvious Amorite elements in particular by studying four seals found at Kültepe (illustrated on the previous page), part of a group brought together in a paper by Beatrice Teissier<sup>3</sup>, 2M Syrian seal specialist. We need to remember that apart from a few native sealings found at Kültepe, most found there show the designs of seal-holders from outside Kültepe itself, often revealing the origins of their owner, notably of Syrians themselves. These could be used in related oath rituals whose protocols we will describe in more detail in the second half of this enquiry.

The whole of the first half of the Second Millennium in North Syria was a time of social mobility when alliances and political treaties between rising and falling kings and super-kings were made and broken throughout the region<sup>4</sup> - interspersed with mercantile contract-making to mark lawsuits or business and banking deals. A typical Kültepe clay document would be placed inside a sealed clay envelope which the parties concerned (or their agents) would ratify by rolling their personal cylinder seals between the lines of text summarising the contents and giving the names of those involved in the agreement. One shown at the seminar (not illustrated) happened to be an affidavit, sworn 'on the dagger of Aššur', whereby one merchant accuses a colleague of stealing his entire business document archive (which the other claimed was his anyway). If we look more closely at a typical, smaller envelope (next illustration) and at the detail of the top sealing on it, we see a presentation scene as standard in Babylonia, but Anatolian in character. Sealings in different styles would often appear on the same envelope depending on the owner's origins: the lower seal on the same envelope is in the Old Syrian style - to which our focus group of four seals belongs (thought by Teissier on sparse, but likely, evidence to have belonged to a man coming from Ebla who wore a peaked cap).

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<sup>3</sup> Beatrice Teissier 'The Ruler with the Peaked Cap and other Syrian Iconography on Glyptic from Kültepe in the Early Second Millennium BC' in *Aspects of Art and Iconography: Anatolia and its Neighbors: Studies in Honor of Nimet Özgüç* Ankara 1993

<sup>4</sup> Bertrand Lafont 'La Vie Diplomatique du Proche-Orient à l'Époque Amorrite' in *Mari, Ebla et les Hourrites: Dix Ans de Travaux* (Actes du colloque international, Paris mai 1993 - published as *AMURRU Vol. II* Paris 2001)



Figure 4: Typical Kültepe envelope, with detail of the top sealing on it (right)<sup>5</sup>: - MetMusCat-37<sup>6</sup>

The seals used in the main body of the Kültepe archive are stamped on the outer envelopes of anything from invoices to payment reminders, quotations, business contracts or delivery notes, as well as litigation cases. Although some seals might belong to the merchants themselves and their witnesses, the type and number of people involved turns out to be more complex than that. Many documents had to be counter-sealed by the city prince or his officials. Most of what we know about contemporary affairs at Aššur (excavated as the site of Qal'at Shergat) in this period is derived from trade documents found at Kültepe, and as Garelli puts it, 'il est clair qu'il ne peut s'agir ici d'un État vassal de l'Assyrie, mais seulement d'un territoire faisant directement partie de l'Assyrie', yet that some texts 'font apparaître certains princes anatoliens dans la situation d'obligés des autorités assyriennes' (or the other way round - in our detail above note the pointed hat of the local ruler receiving an embassy introduced by a *lāma* priestess, and backed by the God Ea).

With the help of texts on contract-making at this time - mostly quoted via Bertrand Lafont (*ibid.*) from the Mari archive - my idea, then, is to focus on the four similar presentation scenes on sealings from Kültepe of the Old Syrian type like the one at the bottom of the envelope above, to see what further information we might be able to glean from the human interaction on them. Teissier's paper (*ibid.*) discussed them (along with others in a larger group) for a Festschrift offered to Nimet Ozguc, who with her husband initially excavated the Kültepe *Kārum* - in the process becoming the cataloguer and first interpreter of the sealings found there<sup>7</sup>. They are all on envelopes from Level II in one merchant's house, named as Adad-Šulūli - so dating roughly to between 1940 and 1840 BC. In the process of combing through different sets of information we will start to gain more precision in reading the incidents in these scenes, though we do not pretend to succeed in deciphering them completely. In taking a first look at them and trying to make sense of them, it is worth stopping to consider known key functions of a seal during the first half of the Second Millennium.

<sup>5</sup> Note that inscriptions on seals and sealings may be reversed - sometimes the seal-carver remembered to carve them back to front so that they would read the right way round when sealed, though at times it is the right way round on the seal but reversed on the sealing.

<sup>6</sup> From the Metropolitan Museum of Art exhibition catalogue 2008-09 curated by Joan Aruz et al.(eds) *Beyond Babylon: Art, Trade and Diplomacy in the Second Millennium BC* New York 2008 (the 2013 paperback version changed its title to *Cultures in Contact: From Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean in the Second Millennium B.C.*)

<sup>7</sup> Ozgüç, T and N Kültepe Kazisi Raporu 1949 T.T.K. 5 Sa12, Ankara 1953 - pl. LXII figs 690-93

### **SEAL OWNERSHIP AND FUNCTIONS IN GUARANTEEING AUTHORITY**

One textual source for understanding seal-use is well summarised in Gorelick's paper<sup>8</sup> on specific Biblical texts mentioning seals (for which in this case *no* physically corresponding seals or sealings survive!):

*Since the Bible is a collection of writings, we shall naturally learn more about them [the seals] from written sources than from unwritten. ... we must remember that writing without artefacts is like flesh without a skeleton, and artefacts without writing are a skeleton without flesh.*

He counts around 60 references in the Bible to seals and sealing - roughly 30 in the Old Testament and 30 in the New. He found that seal mentions in the New Testament tend to be metaphorical in nature (such as the Seven Seals in *Revelations*) but the Old Testament cites examples of actual seal use in the region, as follows:

- ♦ To seal a purchase or sale (Jeremiah 32,10)
- ♦ To seal a covenant (Nehemiah 9,38)
- ♦ To designate authority (Kings 21,8)
- ♦ To delegate authority (Esther 2,8)
- ♦ To seal letters (Kings 21,8)
- ♦ To seal a Law (Isaiah 8,16)
- ♦ To seal a door (Daniel 12,17)

Certainly although seals acted as documents in themselves, at the time they did not *necessarily* depend on texts to be understood, though in the present reconstructive exercise they do help hugely. Against the general background of people trading at Kültepe and sealing their business documentation there, backed up by all the archaeological and textual witness, if we take the top four categories on Gorelick's list, it is the unspoken reality of individual status and levels of authority embodied in seal imagery that we need look at next.

### **SEAL USE IN THE TRADING CONTEXT OF KÜLTEPE**

Given the archaeological context of Kültepe as a trading entrepôt, the purpose of the majority of seals we are scrutinising appears immediately obvious since they were rolled on legal and business documents (indeed, for this site we have the sealings and not the seals, since the owners would have kept the latter with them on leaving Kültepe to return home). Regrettably it is rare for one scholar to publish texts and their associated envelope seals together, making it harder to see what relation imagery and the text of the document inside might have had to do with each other, but in general it has been found that the content of texts inside Kültepe envelopes rarely relate to the scenes on the sealings, whose iconography was evidently taken for granted as obvious, and simply used as identification by its owner. Similarly, Diana Stein's analysis of all the sealings of the Silwa-Teshub Archive at Nuzi from 500 years later found little connection between the choice of imagery on the seal and the activity of its owner, of whatever rank - this is in contrast to the findings of Winter's Ur III seal corpus - looked at shortly. We will come to realise that it is the Gods and Rulers shown on them - appealed to in oath ceremonies - that counted more than personal references to the owner himself.

As I have said, though we at first assume the sealings of Kültepe were made only by merchants, this must be far from being the case: merchants needed a licence to trade from the provincial royal court in the citadel of Kültepe above the *Kārum*. Here a full-blown native palace administration levied several taxes on them -

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<sup>8</sup> In L. Gorelick & Elizabeth Williams-Forte (eds) *Ancient Seals and the Bible* Malibu 1983

described in detail by Garelli<sup>9</sup> - which included import and export taxes, levies on particular goods (the tax on textiles was even higher than that on tin), entry and exit tolls and even a tax on their form of transport - donkeys. Merchants had other expenses to think of too: employees and agents had to be funded and clothed, board and lodging on the journey paid for, and their donkeys fed and watered - all eating away at potential end profits. Merchants would either pay their taxes in the *Kārum* office, or up at the palace, and between them they 'soldaient leurs comptes respectifs de taxes lors des règlements périodiques' as Garelli puts it. For all the personnel required to collect taxes, deal with monetary gains and losses, sales and confiscations - such as accountants, investors, clients, agents and partners there is an equivalent word somewhere in the Kültepe texts and each would have had their own seals, up to the king himself, and his high officials. Taking into account how palace personnel and fellow merchants sometimes asked for credit, well-off merchants in the course of their travels ended up as unofficial bankers for their Government, palace clients or colleagues: Sasson<sup>10</sup> (2001) mentions merchants even paying off a ransom for prisoners on behalf of a king in another district. Sometimes, of course, debts were never repaid and merchants suffered losses, entering into lawsuits to get their money (or property) back and associated documents would be witnessed by the seals of accusers, plaintiffs and the mediating officials involved.

Many Kültepe texts are bills itemising costs in terms of gold, silver, tin and copper which, as well as being the raw material for craftsmen to make into artefacts, served also as currency a millennium before coinage began to be stamped from those metals in Lydia under the Persians<sup>11</sup>. Overall, Hallo<sup>12</sup> makes the crucial point - expressed more succinctly in one of his book reviews<sup>13</sup> - that what was happening was 'the gradual transition from a state economy administered by palace or temple to a private capitalist economy, with the concomitant emergence of silver as the sole and universal monetary medium', and goes on to say, 'Whether or not it can be interpreted as an 'Amorite' development, it reached a certain climax in the Code of Hammurabi, whose purpose it was, apparently, to codify the commercial relations of a "free" economy'. The part played by merchants in this process here was evidently central.

This was the Bronze Age where the emphasis was on tin and copper to make bronze, but Garelli remarks that Aššur did not attempt to buy in exchange much of the large quantities of copper coming in to Anatolia from Crete and Cyprus, used with the tin coming from the east to make things in bronze. It is likely most of the tin traded from Aššur was mined in the Tabriz basin and Afghanistan comparatively close to the north and east of Assyria, whereas Crete and Cyprus were more likely to have obtained tin for their bronze from their own sources in Western Europe. According to Limet<sup>14</sup> in the Ur III Period preceding, a very small amount of tin was mined in the Byblos region, but overall Aššur had the monopoly on the tin trade as far as Eastern Anatolia', beyond which point the copper trade was in turn beyond their administrative arm.

Garelli points out that the Aššur Assembly administering the Kültepe *Kārum* was simply interested in getting commodities to where they were in demand, with no interest at their end in processing the metallic ores they

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<sup>9</sup> P Garelli *Les Assyriens en Cappadoce* Paris 1963

<sup>10</sup> See his contribution to the *Beyond Babylon* exhibition catalogue.

<sup>11</sup> (Though in this period other exchangeable commodities such as semi-precious stones, wool, resins, dates and wine were also used.)

<sup>12</sup> W Hallo, " in *La Circulation des Biens, des Personnes et des Idées dans le Proche-Orient Ancien*, (XXXVIII<sup>e</sup> RAI) Paris 1992

<sup>13</sup> Review of W F Leeman *Foreign Trade in the Old Babylonian Period* etc. In *JCS XVII* 59-60

<sup>14</sup> H Limet *Le Travail du Métal au Pays de Sumer au Temps de la III<sup>e</sup> Dynastie d'Ur* Paris 1960

traded, or in making artefacts from them. A well-known letter in the Edinburgh Museum describes the king of Aššur as no more than a super-merchant who as Aššur became prosperous on its trade, attained the status of king only a few generations on from ‘living in tents’. Larsen<sup>15</sup> cites Oppenheim’s remark that at Aššur ‘the king at that period acted only as the *‘primus inter pares* of an amphictyonic league of sheikhs’, and reminds us that in Aššur it was the *wakīl* (the equivalent of mayor) who regulated most commercial affairs from the City Hall (*bīt alīm*): thus the political structure in Aššur cultivated a balance between the king and its various city institutions in a different mode from that at Kültepe between native citadel and foreign *Kārum*.

Aššur sent its own administrative orders out to the merchants and had its own representative offices not only in Kültepe but in all the smaller trading stations beyond it and between in order to state manage their overall economy. Larsen cites the well-known letter from the Aššur administration to the assembly of all the *Kārum* merchants at Kültepe ordering them to pay 10 minas of silver as their contribution towards building fortifications at Aššur - thus overall Aššur when necessary had its own brand of penetrating authority whose tentacles reached into Kültepe when required, often sending their own officials into the territory to check and arbitrate. Larsen points to only two Old Assyrian texts referring to a royal palace at Aššur whereas several palace administrations in Anatolia are on record as intervening in the affairs of the Assyrian merchants to maintain local control over Aššur, though not to the point of arousing enmity, given their reliance on taxes.

By law the Kültepe palace administration had first choice of all goods brought into the city - textiles especially: the process is described in a letter to Inib-lštar charting the process of distribution of a freshly imported load of textiles whereby the prime pieces are described as pre-emptively picked out by members of the palace (with the occasional intervention by a queen consort<sup>16</sup>) before the remainder was allowed down to the *Kārum*. The agent writes to the importer: ‘240 étoffes... sont montées au palais. Sur ce nombre le palais a pris 12 étoffes en droits d’entrée; il en a achetées 22 [other pieces are described as taken by head officials for themselves]... Lorsque les étoffes sont descendues du palais, Adada en a pris 46 à ton sceau; Aššur-Malik en a pris 42 au sceau... Šu-lštar en a pris 30 au sceau d’Aššur-Rabi; nous avons remis le reste des étoffes à X ...[pour] mettre à vente.’ Here we have mention of the use of seals whereby different agents commit to take on the prime merchant’s products to sell on in his name or their own.

As Larsen says, ‘... we know of a large number of officials who were ... directly connected with the palace’, while Garelli’s own account of job titles gleaned from the archives shows the wide variety of staffing required at the Anatolian end to run the palace economy, the most intriguing being:

<i>Head Blacksmith</i>	<i>Head of Bronzmaking</i>	<i>Head of the Warehouse</i>
<i>Head of the Army</i>	<i>Head of the Armoury</i>	<i>Head of Livestock</i>
<i>Keeper of the Sceptre</i>	<i>Head Interpreter</i>	<i>Head of the Market</i>
<i>Captain of the Palace Guard</i>	<i>Chief of Chariots</i>	<i>Master of the Horse</i>
<i>Head of metal distribution (= Paymaster)</i>		<i>Head of Furniture</i>

<sup>15</sup> See M T Larsen ‘The City and its King: On the Old Assyrian Notion of Kingship’ in *Le Palais et La Royauté* (XIXe Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale) ed. Paul Garelli Paris 1974

<sup>16</sup> See H Otten ‘Die Königin von Kaniš’ in Garelli (ed.) *ibid.*

and many others besides. Garelli (*ibid.*) states, '*C'est par le prince et le chef de la citadelle qu'étaient authentifiés les contrats*'. The latter, the *Rabb Similtim*, or 'Head of the Stair', was in charge of receiving the loads of merchandise brought up via the staircase to the pro-pylon of the citadel, at the top of which was a wide arena where goods were laid out, delivery notes and accounts noted, and tax payments due assessed - Lewy interpreted the role as the equivalent of Head Chamberlain or Vizier (in other words the Chief Palace Administrator and right-hand man of the Prince). Garelli saw this man as '*en meme temps garde des sceaux*' evidently meaning the seals of the king and his palace officials but, as he puts it, from the records '*Nous ne voyons que les points d'intersection où les activités du palais indigène rejoignent celles du Kārum assyrien*', in itself a nice definition of a sealing. Lumsden<sup>17</sup> neatly describes the seal as an 'objectification of identity' and showed from more recent work in the field that 'following the collapse of the Assyrian trading system this shared culture was [then] given political unity by the Hittite state'. On the other hand he also mentions that outside Kültepe 'known regional [trading] centers are characterized by the apparent lack of large-scale storage facilities, the secular nature of most large structures, predominance of hand-made pottery, and *very little or no use of seals and sealing*'. Native Kültepe was therefore well ahead of most of the rest of Anatolia in picking up administrative techniques from the Old Assyrians - and the first within Anatolia to adopt cylinder seals, using their own designs and Gods on them, as opposed to other sites using non-literate administrative systems with stamp seals on storage pots - of the kind that spread thence to 3M Proto-Palatial Crete.

This detailed textual evidence is all by way of making us aware of the number of different contexts for seal use - for which there must surely be some correlation to the images on them, meaningful either to merchants, or to the authorities they dealt with, since the status of the owner expressed through it gives a guarantee of authority - and thus of trustworthiness. To underline such implications further, we next briefly consider some well documented precedents on Ur III palace seals just preceding the Old Syrian seals found at Kültepe which nicely signpost worthwhile lines of enquiry to pursue in making sense of the four Adad-Šulūli sealings.

### ***SEALS AS TOOLS OF ADMINISTRATION: SOCIAL STRATIFICATION AND MESSAGES OF MUTUAL POWER***

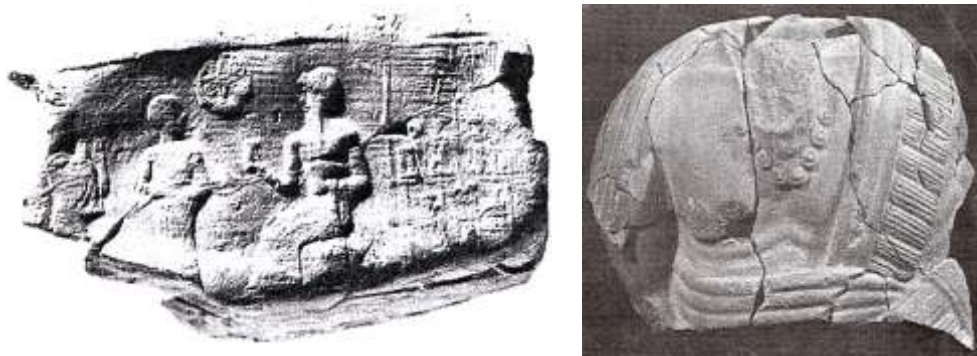
Seals as markers of authority are detailed in Irene Winter's<sup>18</sup> thorough analysis of the levels of authority brought to bear on transactions in the iconography of the Ur III period (2112-2004), whose connotations we might therefore expect to see continued at the start of the new millennium as North Syria itself picked up on such administrative devices. During Shulgi's reforms the seals of his administration were standardised to follow the template then taken up by the Old Babylonians of a presentation scene whereby the official who is the possessor of the seal is himself depicted being led into the presence of his King, who sits on his throne, bare-shouldered with long robe tightly wrapped round the torso, exactly as seen on a larger scale in the fragmentary sculpture (below right) from Ebla's temple P2, deemed by Matthiae to be an Eblaite king of the early 2M. Winter realised that when the seal owner was not a top grade royal official he is depicted as introduced by an intercessory goddess (probably enacted by a priestess in ritual fleece dress and single-horned headgear) known as a *lāma*. These Ur III royal seals, in Winter's words, were 'markers of their owners

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<sup>17</sup> Stephen Lumsden 'Material Culture and the Middle Ground in the Old Assyrian Colony Period' in C Michel (ed.) *Old Assyrian Studies in Memory of Paul Garelli* Leiden 2008

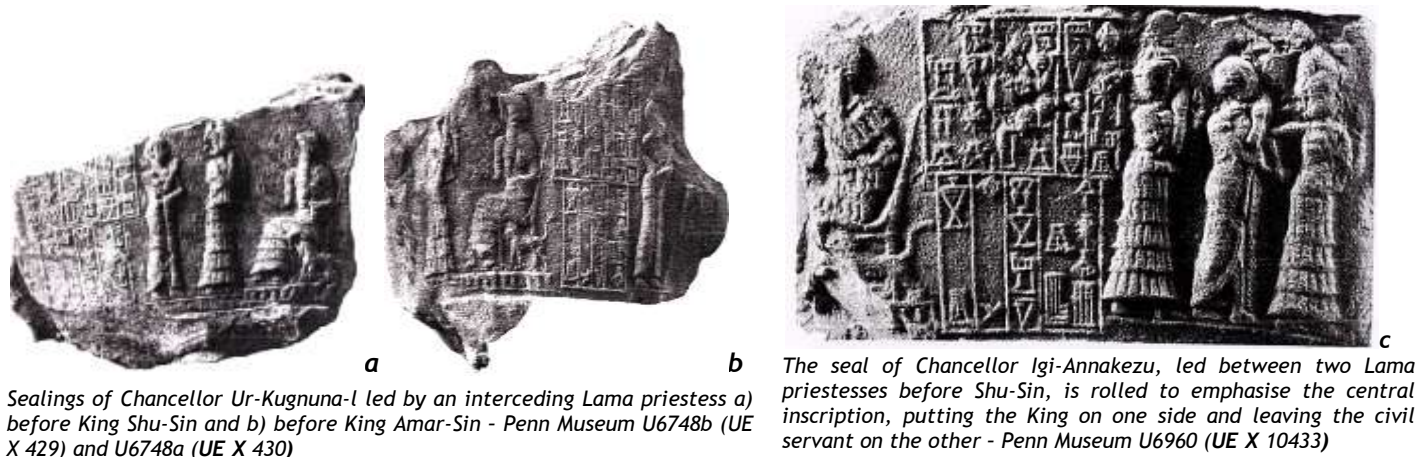
<sup>18</sup> 'Legitimation of authority through Image and Legend: Seals belonging to Officials in the Administrative Bureaucracy of the Ur III State' in Gibson and Biggs (eds) *The Organisation of Power: Aspects of Bureaucracy in the Ancient Near East* Chicago 1987/1991





**Figure 5: Ur III presentation scene with remains of *lāma* figure introducing Scribe Lu-Melam with shaven head and plain robe to helmeted and bare-torsoed Ur III King Shu-Sin on a stool, wrapped to the armpits in a robe (c.f. (right) Paulo Matthiae pl. XII<sup>19</sup>) and holding out the cup of delegation - a quartered Sun in Crescent in the sky between thm)**

... [serving to] witness, guarantee, acknowledge receipt or confirm obligation when rolled on commercial or administrative documents, letter orders, envelopes, bullae, or jar and door sealings', and she quotes Weber's useful phrase (*apud*. Goody) that the 'primary characteristic of bureaucratic organisation is the conduct of business on the basis of documents'. In fact, the Akkadians before them had begun to include inscriptions on their seals identifying their owner, but in the Ur III period from Shulgi onwards for the first time the inscription is equally as important as the image and followed the standard formula of the name of the person,



Sealings of Chancellor Ur-Kugnuna-I led by an interceding *Lama* priestess a) before King Shu-Sin and b) before King Amar-Sin - Penn Museum U6748b (UE X 429) and U6748a (UE X 430)

The seal of Chancellor Igi-Annakezu, led between two *Lama* priestesses before Shu-Sin, is rolled to emphasise the central inscription, putting the King on one side and leaving the civil servant on the other - Penn Museum U6960 (UE X 10433)

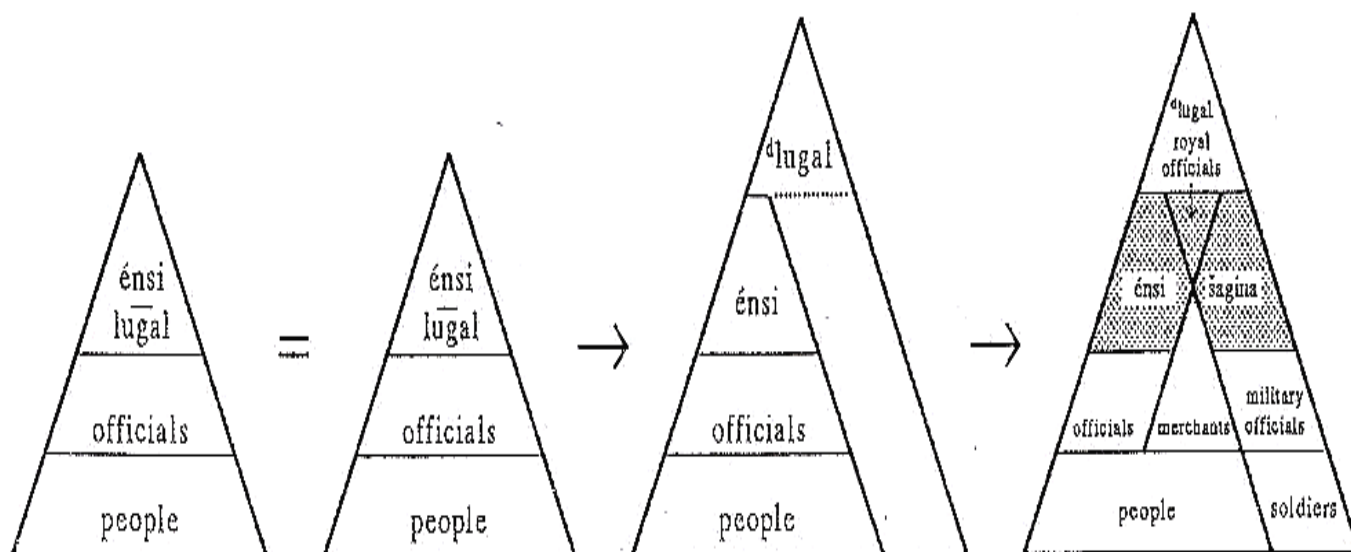
**Figure 6: Ur III presentation scenes of civil servants paying respects to and receiving authority from the King**

that of their father (if important), their job title and the king in whose name they act, as seen on the further examples given by Winter above. She managed to assemble seal examples for every one of the Ur III Kings, and points out from the way the seal was rolled that in fact the inscription was usually made to take centre stage with the figures disconnected on either side (b/c above). Although people have found the lack of variation in the Ur III seals tedious, she believes it was their standardisation under Shulgi that gave them universal weight within the network of cities and towns that came under the sway of Ur III rule on an increasingly successful trading basis - the prelude for the same state of affairs that was to mushroom further afield only a hundred years on, in neighbouring North Syria and beyond.

<sup>19</sup> 'Masterpieces of Early and Old Syrian Art: Discoveries of the 1988 Ebla Excavations in a Historical Perspective' *Proceedings of the British Academy* LXXV 1989 25-56

## SEALS OF GREAT KINGS, LESSER KINGS AND THEIR OFFICIALS -V- MERCHANTS' SEALS

By a useful schematic model (reproduced below) summarising the administrative hierarchy in the time of Šulgi, Winter illustrated how the more complex stratification of the Ur III administration worked, a pattern



**Figure 7: Schematic model of Administrative Reorganisation under Shulgi - from Winter (ibid.)**

carried over to North Syria whereby a king would make himself into a ‘super-king’ (*Dingir-Lugal*) by divinising his name, thus setting himself at a higher rank over the rulers of smaller kingdoms allied to him - and whose manufactured superior authority they were thereby constrained to accept. Thus in the Ur III period many small petty city-states<sup>20</sup> could be collected under the sway of one *Dingir-Lugal*, seen as the personification of the Sun-God Shamash and top authority because effective in maintaining law and order and meting out justice. A neat summary of the ensuing situation in the first half of the 2M across Syro-Mesopotamia is given by Raymond Westbrook<sup>21</sup> (here in English translation) in the following letter from the Mari archive:

‘At the height of the Old Babylonian period kings of the major Mesopotamian and Syrian states served as overlords to dozens of lesser kings. The famous letter that explains the political situation in the time of Zimri-Lim of Mari notes that *there is no king who is strong on his own. Hammurabi of Babylon has a following of 10 or 15 kings. Rim-Sin of Larsa the same: Ibal-pi-El of Ešnunna the same. Amut-pi-El of Qatna the same, and Yarim-Lim of lamhad has a following of 20 kings.*’

Lafont<sup>22</sup> comments of the letter that it provides a vivid snapshot of the international situation in Zimrilim’s time, confirming that were six ‘grands rois’ parcelling out the territory between them - respectively Babylon, Larsa, Ešnunna, Qatna and lamhad, encircling Mari as the sixth.

<sup>20</sup> Lafont (*ibid.*) usefully summarises the terminology from a Leilan tablet that characterises each district (*halšum*) of the Diyala territory; vassal kingdoms (*namlaktum*) and, interestingly, those Bedouin tribes (*nawûm*) who had sworn allegiance to the king of Mari who were always on the move - which meant that sometimes their own ‘chefs de pâture’ (*merhûm*) were empowered to conclude international alliances in the name of their King! The king himself (*šarrum*) called his vassal kings his sons (*mârum*), whilst his officials (*wardum*) were differentiated from his army (*sâbum*). His actual son and heir-prince (*nawûm*) might in turn have his own *namlaktûn*.

<sup>21</sup> ‘Preventing Rebellion through the Creation of Symbolic Ties of Kinship’ in Seth Richardson (ed.) *Rebellions and Peripheries in the Cuneiform world* New Haven 2010

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

The rise of Babylon is an outstanding example of the changes of fortune undergone by one city that started off at the turn of the millennium as the underdog under Isin-Larsa rulership. Its profile remained low until it was captured by the Amorite tribal chief, Sumuabum. One by one, surrounding territories under separate rulership all gradually came under the sway of Sumuabum's great-great grandson, Hammurabi ('Beloved of Anu and Enlil') who by means of negotiations or related wars was then able to maintain overall control thanks to exceptional administrative abilities. By laying down a firm Law Code, as representative of the God of Law and Justice, the Sun-God Shamash, Hammurabi became the chief arbiter of disputes in the region, developing efficient administrative techniques based on Ur III and Isin-Larsa models. As already obvious to us from seal design and practice, Babylonian methods thus became standard across Northern Syria, and we are reminded by Beatrice André-Salvini<sup>23</sup> that in the years following his adoption of the title, 'King of Sumer and Akkad', after the momentous annexation of his former ally, Mari, he added to his titles, 'King of All the Lands of the Amorites', since during his lifetime he brought together under his throne ('causing them to dwell at his command in friendship') all the Amorite kingdoms that had arisen since the end of the Ur III Dynasty. Ironically, at that point even though politically unified (or perhaps because of it) the region then polarised into Eastern and Western halves (humorously expressed as the regions of the black and the white ants), each insisting (as will emerge below) on their local customs of negotiation. Favourite Gods vary: the God of Hammurabi's local region was Dagan, but in his Law Code he specifically mentions Inanna, Nergal and 'Zababa the mighty warrior'.

From Winter's diagram we can see how when petty kings or governors became a new élite within the hierarchy, lower civil servants or military personnel answered to them in turn, further down the line, their seals likely to show their authority being endowed, not by the King, but by their immediate superior, similarly delegating authority by holding out a cup. The *Dingir-Lugal* had his own inner circle of highest-ranking royal officials with authority over the officials below them: *these* were usually shown on their seals in the presence of the King without the intercession of the *lāma* ). Winter writes of these Ur III seals, 'What I would suggest is that the imagery ... conveyed general information regarding the place of the seal owner within the system...' and that the seal calls upon 'the whole political hierarchy as party to the act for which the seal is being used' - a fruitful perspective to bear in mind in considering the four Old Syrian seals we are looking to understand.

Thus seals were not just personal identification for the merchant or ruler involved, but depicted scenes expressing his status, by indicating his allegiances - in his own right or on behalf of others - so the level of the owner's authority in terms of vassalship to an authority above him demonstrated on it would add strength to his own reputation. Gorelick cites the famous Biblical example of the seal given to the Vizier Joseph by the Pharaoh as sign of the authority vested in him to act on the Pharaoh's behalf. The question of how the seal owner is represented - paying his respects to the King and/or Gods he is deemed to be accountable to - is then the central issue on our four Old Syrian seals, the signs of delegation of authority being the Cup held out by the King or God, often with the oracular dove hovering over it (the stages of whose developing iconographies unfortunately we do not have the time to track - these are given in the fuller version of this

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<sup>23</sup> BEYOND BABYLON exhibition catalogue p.19

research on my website, p.157ff<sup>24</sup>). In return for guarantees of response and protection from his higher authority, the seal owner acting under their aegis is permanently depicted acknowledging their overlordship, further underpinning any transaction he puts his seal to.

In other words, we are looking at seals in the name of whose Gods, Kings or High Officials oaths and promises are registered and made binding. The supplicant in an audience scene on a seal, whoever he is, may be shown not just paying his respects with libation or offerings and gifts, but in some cases (especially if he is a kinglet) taking part in the rituals of national festivals such as the New Year rites. Participation in such rituals, major or minor, indicate adherence to the entire divine tradition legitimising the administrative and commercial practices of the culture he belongs to. Looking again at the four seals we have chosen to focus upon, what indications of levels of authority do we have in each of the four scenes? Do we have any indications yet whether they are mercantile, internal civil service or inter-kingdom? We come to further criteria shortly.

### **STATE -V- MERCANTILE CONTRACTS**

Noting the inner upright triangle of the last pyramid in Winter's scheme with the word *merchants* in it, we see that there must surely be a key difference in iconography between officials' seals and those of merchants, since the latter operated in the 'Private Sector', and were not directly beholden to kings or their officials within the state bureaucracy, and would not be shown taking authority from them. Even though we have noted instances where they could act as unofficial agents or ambassadors, socially merchants were still what the Victorians would call 'Trade'. Certainly for the Ur III period, as her diagram shows, Winter categorises them as ranked along with lower court or military officials. They could, though, gain government patronage (as at Kültepe) and certainly could not avoid contacts with government officialdom because the state needed their taxes, to buy non-state-owned goods from them, to use them as bankers or even diplomatic agents on a free-lance basis. Looking again at our four seals, from these small clues is the man with the peaked cap a ruler - or a merchant? On different seals he plays different roles, sometimes as the applicant to an authority above him: at others himself seated, in the role of ruler, giving audience. We need to continue our probe.

Lafont noted that none of the high-level *political* treaties he collected had seals rolled on them - a clear point of difference with commercial texts as found at Kültepe - but it is not clear whether this was because state treaties were not put in envelopes - but this means the seals under our specific consideration really must be associated with trading or legal negotiations. There is documentary evidence concerning the only *treaty* involving merchants cited by Lafont (T7), published by Eidem<sup>25</sup> who describes the distinction:

'Les marchands assyriens ne pouvaient prétendre se poser sur le meme plan que les royaumes (parfois puissants) avec lesquels ils traitaient et auprès desquels ils cherchaient simplement à faire connaître leurs droits; dans ce cas, il ne s'agit donc *pas* d'accords réellement politiques ou diplomatiques entre deux parties'.

Into Winter's hierarchical diagram we should also mentally weave in a particularly Amorite social device used to bind outsiders to core tribes, within whose framework merchants would not have featured at all.

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<sup>24</sup> [www.layish.co.uk](http://www.layish.co.uk). The link for this particular chapter is <http://www.layish.co.uk/rearattack.pdf>.

<sup>25</sup> J Eidem 'An Old Assyrian Treaty from Tell Leilan' in *Marchands, Diplomates et Empereurs: Etudes sur la Civilisation Mésopotamiennes Offertes à Paul Garelli* 1991 Paris

## BLOOD TIES AND POLITICAL 'FAMILIES'

The majority of agreements between kingdoms that survive are political treaties, which as the letters between junior and senior kings from the Mari archive show, involved continuous jostling for position. This is due to a further stratagem - beautifully analysed by Lafont on the basis of documents from Mari<sup>26</sup> and Leilan - that was used in cementing alliances on familial status. Most royal dynasties are by definition founded on family networks, and although offices of state could in some instances also be passed down from father to son in the ancient world, most enduring power structures depended on relationships within the top family, and then between them and other leading families - another reason why merchants 'did not belong': their families followed an occupation outside royal ownership with no power over land or state institutions so were not enmeshed into these networks of obligation through real, or acquired, blood-ties.

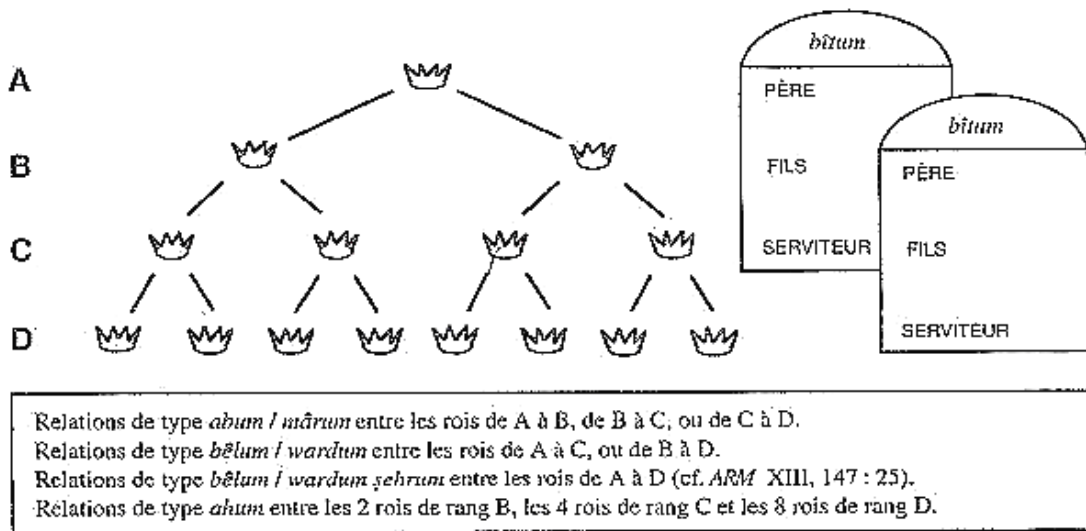


Figure 8: Schematic model of Father-Son-Servant relations in Royal Houses at the time of Zimri-Lim - from Lafont

The tribal way, as now, is to operate with one's allies in terms of networks of extended 'fathers', 'brothers' or 'sons' bolted onto one's own network of actual blood-ties, depending on the closeness and trustworthiness of the relationship. Lafont's diagram nicely sums up the situation, and he cites the letters showing how vassals jostled to be named 'son' or 'brother' - rather than simply 'servant' with overlord as mere 'master' (intermarriage would not always change their position). Lafont writes, 'L'impression ... est qu'il existe ainsi une sorte de compétition permanente entre les rois pour s'assurer la meilleure place possible'. The negotiations to earn familial ties were consolidated by exchanged gifts (meant to be of equal weight on either side) and cemented by giving help in times of war and other mutual support, as required of them. As Lafont says, these titles whose seniority or juniority was continually raised or lowered between small rulerships and their overlords 'n'impliquait pas nécessairement des liens par le sang: les partenaires acceptaient simplement d'agir entre eux *sur le mode* des relations familiales'. Thus in the texts one looks in letters to their overlords to see how petty kings call themselves 'son', 'brother' or 'father' - as equals, or as vassals - since as a sub-hierarchy *within* the main hierarchy described in Winter's pyramids above, they point to personal rights and obligations which must sometimes be expressed pictorially on seals. Apart from being an enemy, the only

<sup>26</sup> See xx (eds) Documents Epistolaires du Palais de Mari 3 vols Paris

other status a person could gain when not drawn into a royal house was that of 'friend', meaning he had a degree of autocracy. This was rare, but attested in a letter of Adal-Šenni of Burundum in correspondence with Zimri-lim. Lafont sees Amorite predominance of the early 2M as sharing many of the same characteristics as the later Amarna Age, since in both there was

- ◇ 'absence d'acteur politique réellement dominant sur une scène politique caractérisée par sa multipolarité;
- ◇ 'recours à la métaphore de la fraternité avec cohabitation de "happy families" et usage dérivé de codes de conduit spécifiques;
- ◇ 'interdépendance et solidarité entre les membres de ces "familles" autour d'une poignée de "grands rois";
- ◇ 'échanges à caractère multiforme (fondés sur la trilogie: cadeaux, messagers, femmes (the latter as given in marriage to cement political ties);
- ◇ 'avec une grande attention portée au respect de la réciprocité et de la symétrie des échanges;
- ◇ 'règles strictes de protocole et d'étiquette;
- ◇ 'recherche d'alliances et ritualisation des accords d'alliance.'<sup>27</sup>

Such was the multiplicity of diplomatic and extravagance of gift exchange at this time that we realise this era outdoes the Amarna age that followed in the second half of the millennium (during the floruit of the Mitanni kingdom) and that it was the Amorites, grounded in the mercurial personal power and charisma of tribal leaders, who had instigated these modes of interaction long before<sup>28</sup>.

When it comes to the explosion of Amorite fiefdoms during the first half of the 2M, as Lafont puts it,

*Il convient, donc, au total, de se représenter ces dynasties amorrite à l'époque de Zimri-Lim comme formant plusieurs pyramides de familles de princes reliées entre elles et dont les membres se souviennent tous, plus ou moins, de leurs origines bédouines plus ou moins communes.*

### **SOCIAL STRATIFICATION, RECIPROCAL RECOGNITION AND THE BODY LANGUAGE OF SOCIAL DISTINCTION**

We have begun to understand what distinctions in rank between enthroned figures and those approaching him might be, but may not so far have picked up on the detail of the gestures made between personnel present. A large quantity of textual evidence from the ancient world (mostly from Mari, Tell Leilan, Ugarit and the Old Testament) describes the customary gestures used between people to express social degree, some involved in the enactment of contracts. These have real potential for gaining insight into the intended messages of seal iconography, so we give a short overview of the importance of status-marking through body language.

Several scholars have extracted evidence about the body language of social ritual from cuneiform texts, many of which still have the same connotations in Western society today. Mayer Gruber<sup>29</sup> collected information about socially significant body movements not only from Ugaritic texts but also from the rich textual sources in Biblical and Talmudic tradition, all providing a mine of information with potential as background for

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<sup>27</sup> In the 'politically correct' West these days, unfortunately gift exchanges in large industrial contract negotiations are dubbed as 'bribery', and forbidden - a cultural *faux pas* which sours the dialogue.

<sup>28</sup> 'The Amarna Letters cannot any longer be considered exceptions: a formalized system of international relations existed through the entire course of ancient Near Eastern history, while the quality and amount of extant data varies, due to the obvious vagaries in the archaeological recovery of cuneiform tablets' (M.Liverani in R Cohen and R Westbrook (eds) *Amarna Diplomacy* Baltimore & London 2000.

<sup>29</sup> Mayer I Gruber *Aspects of Nonverbal Communication in the Ancient Near East* (2 vols) Rome 1980

matching gesture and stance to seal iconography, and Åke Viberg added further material from both sources<sup>30</sup>. To summarise relevant material in a nutshell, someone entering the presence of a person in authority might stand, bow, stoop, prostrate himself or even grovel on the ground and 'kiss the dust of his feet'. If it is the person of higher rank who enters a room, the gathering stands - and not to do so is an insult. Standing implies equality of rank, though in the case of messengers they would first prostrate before the ruler before standing up to deliver their message in the name of their own leader. Such rules of behaviour were by the next millennium codified by the Achaemenid Court and strictly applied to extreme degrees of finesse: these were not invented by the Persians, but had evolved out of the endless jostling for position that had gone on in the Amorite world of petty courts and officials of the early Second Millennium that included the heartland of the Medes (now Kurdish territory) during a time when a mere gesture could confer rank - or serve as a put-down. Kissing the feet of the ruler or the ground at his feet were grovelling gestures of self-abnegatory vassalship but kissing and embracing while standing together in the ritual context signified the closeness of a family relative (we do not see either illustrated on our seals, perhaps since most audience scenes emphasise social distance as the key stage before closing a deal).

In particular, there is a rich lode of hand gestures to be mined out and considered in relation to the making of contracts. Lafont cites the placing of finger or hand on throat, chin or heart as metaphors of sincerity and alliance, as also shaking hands (*la main dans la main*<sup>31</sup>) or raising the hand ('dans tous ces exemples, il est clair que la main sert d'instrument synonyme de pouvoir ou d'autorité' -also the gesture made in swearing an oath. Gruber analyses hand gestures more minutely, from which it is clear that holding *up* both hands can be a gesture of praise; holding *out* the hands a gesture of supplication but also of welcome or bestowing a favour - and so on. A common variation on commitment behaviour is seen in the oft-quoted symbolic gesture of seizing the fringe of the ruler's robe: Lafont (*ibid.*) quotes the letter of Shemshara describing Shamsi-Adad's assertion that 'From the day Yašub-Addu seized the fringe of my robe (i.e. swore fealty) I never took anything from him, whether bullion, livestock or grain'. Conversely, other letters speak of 'cutting the fringe' to imply breaking off relations. Lafont's text reference B6 even refers to proceeding to 'l'engagement solennel [à] ... nouer la frange du père et du fils pour l'éternité' - here referring to king and vassal in the familial terms already explained above. This ritual does not show up on seals, but in audience scenes hand gestures - often juxtaposed with certain symbols - feature prominently. Of course many of the gestures used in social interaction were also used for prayer and supplication to the Gods.

Such gestures subtly indicate differing levels of respect and responsibility between the petty kingdoms of North Syria and those of major powers such as the Babylonia or Assyria, on the basis of the changes in petty hierarchies described by Lafont above. Obviously, to 'walk behind the king' signifies knowing one's place as his servant, and Winter<sup>32</sup> says of the seated king (in some instances consciously the representative of the seated God) that 'In fact it may be demonstrated that the very act of sitting is synonymous with status in the ancient Near East; and the phrase 'sitting upon the throne'... is a standard formula for 'ruling' in Akkadian'

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<sup>30</sup> Symbols of Law: A Contextual Analysis of Legal Symbolic Acts in the Old Testament Stockholm 1992

<sup>31</sup> J Munn-Rankin in 'Diplomacy in Western Asia in the Early Second Millennium BC' Iraq XVIII 1956 68-110 also mentions instances of striking the hand (breaking the handshake) to undo an agreement.

<sup>32</sup> I Winter 'The King and The Cup: Iconography of the Royal Presentation Scene on ur III Seals' in *Insight Through Images* Malibu 1986

(as today: Parliament or the High Court ‘sits’ or is ‘in session’). We can imagine the archetypal audience scene taking place - as we know from texts did happen - in the throne room of the Palace at Mari where the wall paintings behind depicted rulership imagery that permanently fixed for future reference in iconic form ‘reciprocal acts of recognition’ through a spectrum of customary body gestures - still often taken for granted today. Not so far extensively matched by art historians to 2M imagery, the hierarchical relationships expressed in both Winter and Lafont’s diagrams above make strong contributions to the reading of audience scenes on seals -- though we still cannot pinpoint whether seals from trading contexts with audience scenes on them portray figures whose gestures and body position specifically indicate the enactment of business contract behaviour, as opposed to displaying political or divine relationships.

Certainly from the general texts about bodily gestures we come to the realisation that those portrayed on seals cannot avoid conveying precise messages about social level (and, presumably, trading power) in the quest for making firm what each side was seeking. Of the treaties collected together by Lafont, only his T7 from Tell Leilan<sup>33</sup>, drawn up between the Aššur *Wakīl* and Till-Abnu<sup>34</sup> of Apum/Tell Leilan in the north Khabur region (a way-station on the route to Anatolia which had a variety of *kārums* in the town representing various cities, including the one from Aššur) is specifically a commercial treaty (damaged diagonally, a third remains of what was a 220-line contract on the ‘large tablet’ consisting of a list of the Gods by whom the treaty is sworn; the treaty clauses ensuring protection of the merchants and their goods - and fairness in dealings with them; and probably ending (on the largest missing part) with imprecations against those breaking the contract. This is the only surviving trade treaty in Old Assyrian, though we can also piece together a great deal from the Kültepe correspondence about what terms must have agreed between Assyrian merchants and the Anatolian Court officials at Kültepe who, as already described above, counterstamped contracts and insisted on strict controls and tax levies. Without having time to go to other such texts we can at least analyse the common procedures followed in North Syria for any agreement event that show just the blend of symbolic act and written text that Dominique Charpin<sup>35</sup> talks of as characteristic of the time.

### **ICONOGRAPHY OF THE SEVEN STAGES OF CONTRACTUAL AGREEMENT**

In an early conference paper Lafont had brought together documentary evidence for instances of the stages of treaty-making - afterwards tabulated by J-G Heintz into a template giving the order of events usually followed. Lafont (*ibid.*) in his long paper for Amurru II in turn quoted it as a useful summary of the most commonly followed procedures, pointing especially to the account of one such treaty made with the King of Mari by Asqur-Addu of Karana and Atamrum of Andarig together, where the important final stages (4-7 below) are recorded as following on in the customary order - so important that even the key players are present in person rather than using ambassadors:

*Après qu'ils se furent concertés et eurent fait alliance, l'ânon fut alors tué. Ils se prêtèrent mutuellement serment par le dieu et ils s'installèrent pour [la cérémonie] de la coupe. Après être allés boire la coupe, chacun présenta des cadeaux pour l'autre. Puis Asqur-Addu repartit dans son pays et Atamrum repartit pour Andarig'.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Ruled c. 1750-40, near the end of the Kültepe 1b period.

<sup>35</sup> ‘Le geste, la parole et l’écrit dans la vie juridique en Babylonie ancienne’ in *Écritures: Systèmes idéographiques et pratiques expressives* (Actes du Colloque International de l’Université de Paris VII) Paris 1982



Just such exchanges were entailed in the well-documented treaty exacted from Zimrilim by Hammurabi. A fuller set of stages is recorded in the case of the treaty between Hammurabi and the King of Ešnunna, from which Heintz drew up the following full protocol of order of events (paraphrased by me from the French), involving the mixture of bodily gesture, spoken statement and written text noted by Charpin, bound into staged rituals first in a palace, and then temple setting as negotiations progressed. We will expand on this seven-stage list immediately afterwards under the same headings:

- 1 Preliminary exchange of ambassadors with discussion about proposed heads of agreement.
- 2 Next exchange of ambassadors with draft agreement on a ‘small tablet’: preliminary assent given by verbal utterance on either side.
- 3 Last preliminary exchange before the swearing ceremony, with final text of agreement on a ‘large tablet’ and assent to it marked either<sup>36</sup> by
  - a donkey sacrifice (*ḥayārī qatālum*) OR
  - b simple verbal agreement whilst touching the throat (*lipit napištim*).
- 4 Before proceeding to the oath ceremony the key parties wash their hands.
- 5 They raise their hand to their Gods before a table of offerings (set up with certain food<sup>37</sup> and drink before the ceremony begins) and swear (*nīsh ilim*) adherence to the terms agreed on the large tablet.
- 6 They drink the Cup of Alliance.
- 7 The proceedings end in general celebration: the food is shared and presents exchanged.

The use of ambassadors shows these agreements did not necessarily entail the kings involved meeting each other in person, even at the swearing. In instances of already amicable and trusting relations, Lafont cites correspondence between the kings of Mari or Babylon with rulers of Larsa and Uruk which indicate that a simple exchange of ‘letters of intention’ could be taken as sufficient in itself to secure an agreement. **Important for our purposes is to have the imagination to see how audience scenes on seals such as our chosen four might conflate these stages into one visual pantomime.**

We expand on these headings and fill in each stage from the detail of Lafont’s findings, as follows.

### **CONTRACT-MAKING: THE PRELIMINARIES (STAGES 1-3) ENACTED AT THE PALACE**

#### **1. PRELIMINARY EXCHANGE OF AMBASSADORS WITH DISCUSSION OF PROPOSED HEADS OF AGREEMENT**

Audiences between ambassadors were usually spoken dealings taking place publicly in the palace, conducted by word of mouth along with initial gifts that gave non-verbal assurances of intended commitment - though if necessary a private audience could be held. Lafont points out that although ambassadors stood in for the ruler in the early stages, all treaties were drawn up in the *personal names* of individual kings, rather than in the name of his kingdom or state. Top level ambassadors, Sasson<sup>38</sup> discovered, had in some cases been diviners earlier in their career - a pointer to how such

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<sup>36</sup> D Charpin (*ibid*) noted that it was always one or the other - never the two together, possibly indicating differences of custom between East (Babylonia) for *lipit napištim* and the more nomadic West for *ḥayārī qatālum*. Lafont cites H.Tadmor in M Tucker (ed.) *Treaty and Oath in the Ancient Near East* 1982 p.130 as in agreement with this view.

<sup>37</sup> Lafont’s tablet reference B17 runs as follows: ‘Avant que je ne lève la main vers Šamaš et que je ne m’engage solennellement, ne disposes-tu pas la farine-*mašhatum* et la farine-*saskūm*?’

<sup>38</sup> ‘About Mari and the Bible’ RA XCII 1998 117/fn 82

matters were germane to State decisions made through divination, which we could have considered further under the King and Cup symbolism discussed by Winter if we had had time.

Ambassadors, royal messengers and merchants all had special dispensation to cross borders between territories without being detained, and we know of a particular *laisser-passer* for an ambassador drawn up and sealed personally by the king himself - and also of occasions when messengers or merchants acting as agents for a king were arrested despite their supposed immunity. Such people were sometimes used as spies as well as agents<sup>39</sup>. An ambassador (*mār šiprim*) was by definition itinerant, so if there was a lot of traffic between city states the king of one would set up a house/*bīt* in the other (what we would understand today as an embassy). P. Villard<sup>40</sup> says it ‘functioned as an economic and *mercantile unit* as well as a place in which to lodge messengers’.

Although ambassadors might at times travel solo, Lafont describes how on important occasions they could be ‘à la tête de véritables délégations comprenant des interprètes, des secrétaires et des domestiques portant des titres variés ... tout en étant accompagnées d’escortes militaires pouvant aller jusqu’à plusieurs centaines d’hommes’. Such was their status that, for instance, the king of Kurda would have to bow to the ambassador from Elam<sup>41</sup> (rather than the other way round) because *their* king was a Great King! (As pointed out by F Joannès<sup>42</sup> it is significant that it was precisely during the short period when diplomatic relations were renewed between Mari and Elam ‘*qu’est attesté le fonctionnement du commerce relatif à la route d’étain*’’, quotes Lafont.)

## 2. FURTHER EXCHANGE OF AMBASSADORS WITH DRAFT AGREEMENT ON A ‘SMALL TABLET’ - WITH PRELIMINARY ASSENT GIVEN BY VERBAL UTTERANCE ON EITHER SIDE

The small tablet (*tuppum sehrum*) was, according to Lafont’s findings, always agreed at meetings in conjunction with a brief touching of the throat indicating honourable intentions for carrying the agreement forward - though not with the same depth as made in relation to the large tablet, the next stage. Certainly from correspondence referring to negotiations between Hammurabi and Zimrilim, the difference between the two stages of the small and large tablets is made quite clear as two separate stages of negotiation.

## 3. EXCHANGE OF LARGE TABLETS WITH FULL TEXT AND AGREEMENT - MARKED EITHER BY DONKEY SACRIFICE OR HOLDING THE HAND TO THE THROAT

If agreed, it is the text on the large tablet (*tuppum rabūm*) which is sworn at this stage (each side will have a copy). Dominique Charpin (*ibid.*) describes how Hammurabi’s Code - by imposing obligations on a king to require deals to be fixed by contract if they were to remain valid - for the first time showed ‘l’importance qui s’attachaient au texte écrit’ that led to more care ‘à conserver et à transmettre les documents juridiques (tablettes d’achat, d’adoption, d’héritage etc.). ...L’époque paléobabylonienne

<sup>39</sup> Following on from Lafont’s major paper (relied upon so much in this piece), Sasson in ‘On Reading the Diplomatic Letters in the Mari Archives’ for the same International Colloquium in Amurru II cites the fascinating letter of the merchant Yatar-Addu who, having spent time in the company of Elamite colleagues wrote a letter to Zimrilim telling tales about agreements Hammurabi was making with the Elamites and the former’s disapproval of Zimrilim’s reliance on Ešnunna. This information did not in the end save Zimrilim from the predations of Hammurabi, but it does show how a ‘mere’ merchant took it upon himself to warn Zimrilim.

<sup>40</sup> In Sasson (ed) *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East II* 1995 p.878

<sup>41</sup> See J-M Durand (ed.) *Les Documents Epistolaires du Palais de Mari I* no.368.

<sup>42</sup> ‘L’Étain, de l’Elam à Mari’ *CRRAI XXXVI* Ghent 1991 67-76

se distingue d'ailleurs de l'époque d'Ur III (XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle) qui l'a précédée précisément par l'abondance de ces archives privées'. Where before it had still been considered sufficient for a purchased slave to 'walk past the post' to signify his new owner's domain, or for witnesses to *remember* what had been agreed if a dispute arose on a deal, now the agreement was not only written down, but also wrapped in a clay envelope (so it could not be altered). The enveloped summarised on the outside the names of the parties, date and subject matter, and since there was plenty of blank space bore the seals of the parties and witnesses concerned. Now in cases of dispute, word of mouth was not enough: the tablet had to be produced, so that if witnesses had by now died, the imprint of their seal would still be there and the text inside fixed since first recorded. The scenes we see depicted on these early 2M envelope sealings shows a mixture of the two approaches, well expressed in Charpin's observation, 'Les oppositions brutales du type [of contract] prédroit/droit, monde du rite et du serment d'une part, monde de l'écrit de l'autre, doivent être nuancées. La Babylonie du XX-XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles participe de l'un et de l'autre, inextricablement mêlées'.

Since from the time of Hammurabi a marked polarization between Eastern (Mesopotamian) and Western (Amorite) customs had begun, having a choice of ceremony to mark the passing of the large tablet ensured the side with the most to lose was satisfied. Let us look at both.

#### A. THE DONKEY SACRIFICE

There is ample mention of the donkey<sup>43</sup> sacrifice accompanying agreement ritual in the texts (Lafont collected 25 different instances). It had serious meaning for *bedū*' tribes, especially the Bensimalites, when entering into vassalship under urban overlords. Lafont reminds us of Zimrilim's title, 'King of Mari and of the Country of the *Bedū*', and that *all twelve marriages of his female relatives to Amorite princes or kings were sealed by donkey sacrifice*.

Lafont even mentions the unusual instance of a Benjaminite clan seeking to perform the donkey sacrifice with Zimrilim ('Tuons des ânon[s] [d'alliance]!'), in order to qualify as Bensim'alites (a rival tribe already in alliance with Zimrilim). So far was it in their interest to be in alliance with this powerful overlord that, to Lafont's amazement, it meant '*un changement d'appartenance tribale*' as serious as changing parents, 'confirmant ainsi le perméabilité de la société amorite de ce temps et la dissociation qui pouvait parfois s'opérer entre groupe de parenté d'une part et communauté politique ou sociale d'autre part' and pointing to 'l'extrême atomisation du pouvoir' within Amorite society where even longstanding loyalties could give way to newer, more opportunistic ones where those in power could 'mix and match' a more strategic family.

On seals it is hard to tell if the touching of the throat ceremony is being shown, because it could be confused with other upheld hand gestures, and on seals an actual donkey sacrifice is rarely shown - which is why the bronze beaker showing the prelude to such a ritual is

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<sup>43</sup> We bear in mind that the donkey was an animal that could cope with the desert, like the gazelle of Reshef-Nergal (equivalent of Egypt's Seth, red coloured God of the desert waste. 'The wild donkey is the ghost of Enlil, as the wolf is of Anu' - Tallqvist *Götterepitheta* p.372).

particularly precious to us iconography blood-hounds. Is it significant that the scene showing the ceremony is actually beaten out on a cup perhaps made for, and commemorating, the ritual shown on it? Three of Lafont's textual references (A15/16/17) are particularly close to the lower group on the beaker where the negotiator says that in order to bring peace between the Bedouins and Idamaras, 'J'ai fait tuer l'ânon petit d'une ânesse'. It is worth sign-posting at this point that the presence of the Goddess is implicit in the sacrifice: the translators of the ritual followed at the great annual festival of Ištar<sup>44</sup> celebrated by the Mari Court note how a female donkey sacrifice forms part of the ritual, while a lustration of the the animal is described in an Alalākh text: 'Çela rapellerait l'onction des déesses Šalaš (Ninhursag) et Mārat-Iltim au moment du lavement de l'ânesse, and that perhaps the 'terme ânesse qui se dirait vraisemblablement *atānum*, ne faut-il pas lire dans ce texte 1.6 *ha-ia-ar<il> tim*: "l'âne de la déesse"?' - in other words probably either sex of donkey evoked the Goddess.

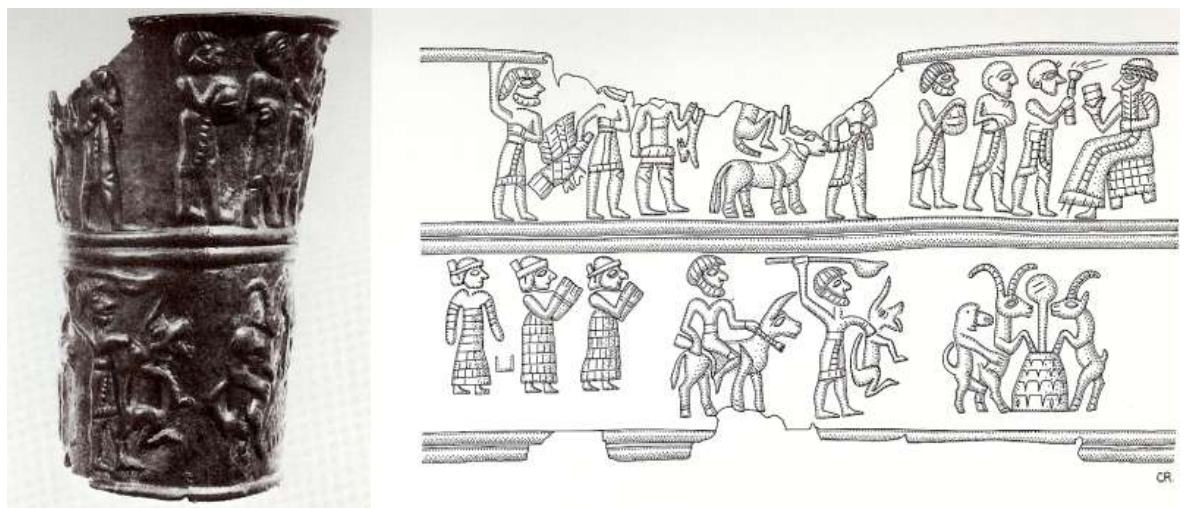


Figure 9: Amorite beaker, shown in *LADDERS TO HEAVEN*<sup>45</sup> exhibition, Ontario Museum, Cat 67

Given most of the textual references centre on Mari at the time of Zimrilim, Lafont brings in the archaeological evidence of instances elsewhere of donkey (and puppy) burials (no doubt following their sacrifice) in temple precincts at Tell Brak, Tell Mohammed Diyab and latterly Tell Haror in the western Negev<sup>46</sup>, reminding us not only of the temple context of such rituals but having us realise how widespread such practices were then. Lafont was sure that 'cette façon de sacrifier des ânon avait pu, à l'époque amorrite, prévaloir de la Méditerranée (Ugarit) à la Diyala (Nerebtum), et du Zalmagum (Harran) jusqu'à l'ancien pays de Sumer (Uruk), l'archéologie permettant meme peut-être d'étendre jusqu'à la pointe occidentale du Croissant Fertile (Negev) l'attestation de telles pratiques<sup>47</sup>.' Underlining the importance of the donkey in West Syrian culture are the Donkey Festivals mentioned in the calendars of Alalakh, lamhad, Mari, Terqa, Šubat-Enlil, Emar and even as far as Nuzi, even giving its name

<sup>44</sup> J-M Durand et al. 'Les Rituels de Mari' in *Mémoires de NABU 4 (Florilegium Marianum III)* Paris 1997 19-71

<sup>45</sup> The exhibition catalogue of the same title was edited by O W Muscarella, 1981

<sup>46</sup> Eliezer Oren, Anglo-Israel Archaeological Society Lecture 23 January 2012 British Museum

<sup>47</sup> See A Finet 'Le Sacrifice de l'Âne en Mésopotamie' in J Quaegebeur (ed.) *Ritual and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East* 1993

to a month in the calendars of Ugarit, Alalakh and Emar<sup>48</sup>. Sometimes the use of donkey sacrifice terminology was simply used as a figure of speech to refer to making an agreement (or deciding not to), as in: '*Jurez-moi un serment par les dieux, que je puisse tuer un ânon d'alliance avec le Muti-Abal*' (Lafont example A6) or '*Ne tue pas les ânon des Benjamins*' (A9) - meaning 'Do not enter into an agreement with them'. Sometimes the request was made from one side to sacrifice kids or goats rather than donkeys but this was not usually acceptable by the other side because not seen as having the same binding significance.

#### B. SIMPLE VERBAL AGREEMENT WHILE TOUCHING THE THROAT

Lafont puts it that, in miming the gesture used for sacrificing an animal on his own neck - in other words in a ritual of substitution - the negotiator was symbolically putting his own life on the line to the effect that if he did not keep his promise he should be put to death.

In the Eastern regions centring on the Diyala Triangle (according to Lafont's reading of Charpin's findings<sup>49</sup>) the substitute for the 'killing of the donkey of alliance' was the gesture of touching the throat, as if to say 'slaughter me like the donkey if I renègue!'. Certainly a parallel example in relation to the by then more usual sheep sacrifice from the later Assyrian period - quoted by Viberg (*ibid.*) - clearly spells out the intended analogy:

*This spring lamb has been brought from its fold not for sacrifice, not for a banquet, not to be purchased, ... nor to be slaughtered .... It has been brought to sanction the treaty between Ashurnirari and Mati'ilu.... This head is not the head of a lamb, it is the head of Mati'ilu - it is the head of his sons, his officials, and the people of his land. If Mati'ilu sins against this treaty, so, just as the head of this spring lamb is torn off and its knuckle placed in its mouth ... so may the head of Mati'ilu be torn off, and of his sons... .*  
[ANET 532: ASHURNIRARI VI VASSAL TREATY, 8C]

Charpin (*ibid.* 1992) came to the conclusion that in the end we probably make too fixed a distinction between Western and Eastern practices, and that the difference could have been more to do with being present in person to undertake the killing of the animal, with the use of the hand to throat gesture in cases where the parties involved were not physically present.

#### CONTRACT-MAKING: THE OATH CEREMONY PROPER (STAGES 4-7) ENACTED IN THE TEMPLE

Despite Charpin's (*ibid.*) findings about the rising importance of texts in negotiations, Lafont emphasizes that it is *not the text of the treaty itself that 'fixes' an agreement*, for the oath in the presence of the Gods was the crucial turning point: up to the moment of swearing, the treaty was not binding. On occasions the *only* stage followed in arriving at an agreement was the oath swearing, with all the other ceremonies left out. The swearing might immediately have followed agreement of the large tablet with donkey sacrifice or touching of the throat assent, but is more likely to have taken place some time later, in days, weeks or even months, since events now moved from the palace to a temple setting (two texts explicitly describe the act taking place in the temple of Sin at Harran, and a temple of Dagan - place not specified). Statues of relevant Gods (or their replicas) had to be agreed

<sup>48</sup> See M Cohen *The Cultic Calendars of the Ancient Near East* Bethesda 1993

<sup>49</sup> D Charpin 'Mari entre l'Est et l'Ouest: Politique, Culture, Religion' *Akkadica* 78 1992 1-10

upon by the parties involved and sent for from their home temple<sup>50</sup>, and the swearing had to take place on a day declared auspicious by the astrologers. Both Winter (*ibid.*) - and van Buren (*ibid.*) before her - noted how on seals statues of the Gods usually sit on chairs with backs, or stools with the temple facade pattern on the side precisely to convey the idea that the scene is taking place in a temple setting, while the appearance of bull-man temple gate guardians also emphasises the same information. There were specialist officials whose role was to administer the oath-taking (usually priests or diviners).

Lumsden (*ibid.*) says that in Kanesh there was both a Temple to Aššur and to Anna, Kültepe's local deity ('whom the Assyrians [also] venerated') where swearing could have taken place, though it is uncertain whether purely *commercial* agreements would be sealed in that setting. Witnesses in Anatolia would in their agreements swear 'by the life of the City' (referring to Aššur), or 'by the life of the City and the life of its King' - or even 'by the life of [the God] Aššur, the life of [the Goddess] Anna and the life of the City's Lord'. We can now read audience scenes showing Baal (the City's Lord) and Venus (the goddess Anna), as on Teissier's Seal 1 above, in a much more specific light as the Gods presiding over oaths being sworn. The exchange of oaths which we can no longer hear was in mercantile contexts made permanent by the seal rollings on the envelopes into which the agreement tablet was placed - whether in this context the Cup and feasting rituals followed on the same scale as for political agreements, we do not know.

In fact, looking at those very seals we remember that Winter (*ibid.*) came to the conclusion that although answerable in some respects (mostly financial) to their governments, merchants in the Ur III period only describe themselves as *paying respects to Gods - and not to rulers* - a helpful distinction to bear in mind when assessing seal iconography. As far as the Ur III period is concerned, she says, seals owned by merchants would '*contain a presentation scene before a seated god or heroic combat*'. Ambiguity can still arise, though, from the fact that rulers, too, not only depict themselves paying their respects to their sponsor Gods, but also then stand in for them in the accoutrements of the *Dingir-Lugal*/God-King. A contra-distinction to then check is Winter's claim that offering up the Cup after the oath-swearing (as distinct from conferring rank) is only ever done by rulers, and never by a God. On the whole her conclusion holds water, but the reasons for exceptions need careful thought. The differentiation between state and mercantile *dramatis personae* refines our focus, making us realise that we should in high quality seals be able to distinguish between those showing respects made to the Gods and those showing Gods or high dignitaries assigning authority to a seal owner of lower rank, but what we will *not* see is a merchant being assigned authority - by either God *or* ruler. A further distinction to bear in mind is E Van Buren's<sup>51</sup> observation that *libations are only ever made to Gods*, and never to rulers, which seems to hold good throughout.

Oath-swearing lay at the heart of Amorite transactions: 'Ainsi les paroles prononcées sous contrôle divine et devant témoins engagent-elles le jureur et donnent un contenu à l'alliance elle-même',

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<sup>50</sup> A Finet 'Les Dieux voyageurs en Mésopotamie' *Akkadica* XXI 1981 1-13

<sup>51</sup> 'Homage to a Deified King' *ZA L* (NF XVI) 93-120

says Lafont - in other words any situation reinforced by divine guarantee played a central role in all sectors of legal, diplomatic and political life. Munn-Rankin (*ibid.*) writes, 'In the Mari archives the actual treaty document was [called] "the tablet of the life of the Gods (*tuppu nīš ilāni*), a phrase that refers to the central act of oath-taking in the ratification ceremony'. He goes on to say: 'The oath was sworn by the Gods of both states so that each ruler called down on himself the punishment of the Gods of his ally, as well as that of his own deities, should he fail to abide by his treaty obligations', and also that the kings 'were acting as representatives of the gods of their respective states and the earthly treaty was but a counterpart of a divine agreement' commanded by Anu and Enlil.

#### 4. *THOSE SEEKING TO LASTINGLY BIND THE AGREEMENT BY OATH FIRST WASH THEIR HANDS*

The contract is void if the swearing is undertaken with hands unwashed. Pouring water over the hands is a distinct and separate rite indicating sincerity, to do with asserting that any previous commitments are over and that the participant is free to commit himself to the new arrangement (in the same way Pontius Pilate washed his hands of responsibility for Jesus' sentence to crucifixion instead of Barabbas. Garelli (1963) refers to a text that runs 'Where the men are in a position of judgement, pour water and cancel... where it is indicated that money should be handed over... pour water'.

#### 5. *THEY RAISE THEIR HAND TO THEIR GODS AND SWEAR (NĪSH ILIM) ADHERENCE TO THE TERMS ON THE LARGE TABLET*

We still point to the sky when alluding to God, and raise our hand in Court to swear by the Bible we will tell the truth. The key Gods sworn by were the highest in the pantheon: Sun, Moon, Anu (the Sky), Enlil (the Biosphere) Ištar and Addu/Haddād (along with local and personal Gods), wholly accounting for the routine presence in the background sky on cylinder seals for these planetary bodies. Ishtar was often also associated with the Sibitti - or Seven-Star, whether Ursa Major or Auriga - appearing on two of our four seals under consideration (we have no space to go into the detail of swearing by the stars also).

#### *THE GODS OF GOVERNMENT*

According to Lafont there were three main 'political Gods' whose presence was sought in oracular situations and invoked at oath ceremonies (Hadad/Baal of Iamhad, Dagan/Tišpak of Terqa and Shamash of Sippar, Larsa and Andariq). For understanding priorities in political choice of Gods at this time, we take as starting point Winter (*ibid.*'s) mention of a discussion with Piotr Steinkeller where (in reference to Keinast) they come to the interesting conclusion that the attempt by the Akkadians to become a Super-Kings/*Dingir-Lugal* and establish hegemony over surrounding territories was not fully successful because they had claimed overlordship under the aegis of their *local* goddess, Ištar of Agade. The success of the Ur III Kings, on the other hand, resided not simply in adding a divine component to their name, but in their choice of a more universally acceptable God - Enlil of Nippur - described as 'God of the Lands', who as God of the Atmosphere was more universal. With the situation in North Syria following on from the Ur III period where a larger number of petty kingdoms fell into line under kings claiming overlordship, it appears to be the older-generation Gods in Levantine form that feature most on the seals, since universally acceptable - Anu, Ea or Enlil/Baal,

lštar and Shamash - separately or together. From this overall assessment it then becomes clear that although the entire Pantheon may appear on seals in some special cases, usually it is just one, two, or sometimes even three of the politically favoured Gods - usually the benign Planets Sun, Moon, Jupiter, Venus - and sometimes certain Stars, that sufficiently convey the weight of divine authority appealed to for success in covenants undertaken and witnessed by sealings on the documents with perhaps its clerical aspect underlined by the presence of the Monkey, Mercury (equivalent of the Egyptian Thoth). Nijhowne already noted that Shamash and lštar are the most popular Gods on Old Babylonian seals - and we see they are just as popular on North Syrian seals adopting the Old Babylonian template (the Sun is also often confirmed in sigil form as the Cross in the Sun-Disc (for the extremes of solstices and equinoxes marking the four seasons) nestling inside the Moon Crescent to form the neomenia, whose full significance for the lštar Festival we unfortunately do not have time to look into here, though we plan to in a future paper.

By expecting to see all the Planets on the seals (even Mercury, rarely visible but whose nature was by now understood, giving rise to a surge of Nabu temples in the Second Millennium) we can account for the key Gods immediately recognisable on seals in planetary or stellar terms - most notably for this study lštar/Venus, Ea/Neptune, El/Saturn (bearded), and Baal/Jupiter with the snake of Mot in one hand and axe in the other (more commonly, later, with a weapon in each hand - see my website link).

As already mentioned, the texts inform us the oath ceremony was conducted *before statues of the relevant Gods* from either side specially brought to the interior of the temple chamber from their home establishment<sup>52</sup> so it seems the hand was raised towards the *statue* or statues concerned (Lafont's text B9 gives the exchange between Zimrilim in his Year 4 with the leader of the town of Talhayūm, as follows: 'Aujourd'hi, on doit donc fair sortir Shamash, Addu et le sceptre d'Itūr-Mēr de sa demeure pour que mon seigneur s'engage solennellement devant Shamash'). Correspondence between Hammurabi and Zimrilim discusses the choice of Gods they were willing to swear by, so that the right statues could be fetched. Of his collection of treaty texts, that between Zimri-Lim of Mari and Ibal-pi-El II of Ešnunna (T1) is described by Lafont as follows:

*Le texte est composé de la liste des dieux par lesquels Zimri-Lim doit jurer, des clauses de l'alliance avec le roi d'Ešnunna (clauses qui sont essentiellement d'ordre militaire et traitent de la bonne coopération entre les troupes de Mari et d'Ešnunna), et enfin des formules classiques de maledictions enverse les contrevenants.*

The *commercial* treaty between Aššur and Apum (Tell Leilan) (Lafont's T7 referred to earlier) also begins with a list of Gods to swear the treaty by, along with the more general divinities of the mountains, rivers, earth and sky, the mountain ranges of Saggār and Zara and the Gods of Martu (Amorite territory) and Subartu (Hurrian territory), with the senior Gods and Goddesses listed first.

## 6. THE CUP OF ALLIANCE IS SHARED

All four of our Syrian seals under scrutiny show one-register audience scenes with the raising of the cup by the king, a rite distinct from any libation ceremony to a God made by someone else in the

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<sup>52</sup> Finet (*ibid.*)



delegation. We can generalise that on most of them it is standard for the higher authority to raise his cup or small bowl, as if making a toast, often with a small bird hovering over it. It is in the texts themselves that the Cup featuring so often on seals is translated by Lafont (*ibid.*) as ‘the Cup of Alliance’. In the tribal context of 2M Syria, he speculates as to whether there had originally been real blood-letting and drinking from one cup the mixed blood of the parties - blood of course being symbolic of both Life *and* Death. There do seem to have been instances of Amorite blood-brother rituals such as rubbing of each other’s blood together from incisions, or as referred to in this Tell Leilan text: ‘I journeyed and brought back blood of Till-Abu. Before we start on the campaign let us touch his blood and let us swear an oath...’. Lafont also points out how, clearly, wine was considered as the blood *or* (referring to W Lambert<sup>53</sup>) the wine-red *tears* of a God (hence the connection between swearing by the Gods and touching or drinking blood). Lafont in a later footnote speculates from further quoted source material whether the cup could have contained wine *or* wine mixed with blood (whether human, or donkey) - because of the evocative phrase in one letter which runs, ‘If we go against our agreement, may our blood be spilled as the cup was poured!’ But if the much later ritual of Holy Communion (in the same vein, a contract between leader and followers) is anything to go by, wine was certainly by that late point in the tradition a full substitute for blood, just as eating bread is a substitute for the supposed cannibal rite of eating Christ’s body in order to absorb its *māna*.

## 7. THE PROCEEDINGS END WITH A CELEBRATION AT WHICH THE FOOD IS SHARED AND PRESENTS EXCHANGED

We have already referred to the mention in the texts of two kinds of flour associated with the swearing - which took place before an offering table laden with food and drink - as for instance: ‘Tu me feras prêter serment devant Shamash par la farine-*maṣḥatum* et la farine-*saskūm*’ (Zimrilim to Hammurabi). Viberg (*ibid.*) counts the shared meal as a further ritual whereby agreement is confirmed<sup>54</sup> - a custom that continues today. And of course the giving of presents has not ceased to be another of the strongest mechanisms for binding people together through pleasure, rather than fear.

## CONCLUSION

We end by attempting to read the content of the four Syrian seals as illustrated at the outset:

### *Teissier seal no.1/Kültepe 692*

An early rendition of Baal (with horned and feathered headdress) holds the conquered snake of Mot in one hand, and a baby palm in the other, standing next to Ishtar undressing as she descends to (or reascends from) the Underworld. The astronomical meaning of the baby griffin cannot be broached here. The man in the peaked cap makes a libation to Ea, God of Wisdom. The tiny monkey behind him is the Syrian form of Thoth/Mercury. At his face in the sky are the 8-pointed star of Ishtar, the Bull of Baal/Jupiter and the quartered Sun inside the Crescent Moon. One attendant brings a kid offering, another a libatory water jug for Ea. This God, with streams of water rising from his shoulders, is seated on a palace façade throne with small

<sup>53</sup> ‘The Tears of Ningišzida’ In NABU 1990/127

<sup>54</sup> As this paper was given soon after Easter we noted in passing how these 2M agreement rituals prefigure the events of Holy Week, such as Christ’s entry into Jerusalem on a donkey, the evergreen palm leaves strewn at His feet (a reference previously to both Ishtar and Baal’s journey to the Underworld lasting three days - and their return), and the Last Supper itself makes sense in the Levantine context as a contract event using the cup of wine and consumption of wheat bread, following set protocols already one to two millennia old.

back, a lioness head at his feet. The astronomical interpretation for the lioness throne has to be put aside here as too lengthy, but the treatment of its side points to the figure of Ea as being a statue in a temple setting, holding out the Cup with the seven-star of the Sibitti hovering over it, over which an oath is being sworn. The man in the peaked cap libating the God points to his being either a merchant or top-level ruler.

*Teissier seal no.3/ Kültepe 693*

In this seal the man in the peaked cap this time libates a naked Ishtar, standing over her lioness. Then come a man in plain robe led forward by an interceding *lāma* priestess, in turn preceded by a more senior applicant approaching a ruler seated again on a palace façade stool with slightly raised back - intimating either that he is a divinised ruler holding up the Scales of Justice of the God Shamash - or a statue of Shamash the God - again, in a temple setting.

*Teissier seal no.9/ Kültepe 690*

On this seal the man in the peaked cap is seated on a stool, seemingly now the key man in authority, with behind him a likely rendering of Baal overcoming Yam (see my website link for the motif of Baal climbing over a falling figure). This time the other human opposite is not in supplication mode but also seated on a stool, slightly lower perhaps, suggesting they are either equals or in a familial relationship of brotherhood or 'friend'. Behind this figure Ishtar stands between two human-headed temple guardian bull figures suggesting the scene is taking place inside her temple. This could well be a conflated oath-taking scene signified by the dove over the cup, along with the sharing of food handed out by the attendants.

*Teissier seal no.2/ Kültepe 691*

Here the man in the peaked cap is back in the role of supplicant, more plainly dressed, his intercessor this time being Usmu, described in myth as the Ea's Vizier, with double head looking both forward and backward in time - a Janus figure. We therefore presume the seated figure is Ea, again seated on a lioness throne and backed again by the figures of Ishtar and Baal stepping up onto his bull (the further detail on the right hand of the seal, for some reason was not recorded by Teissier, but was provided by Elizabeth Williams-Forte<sup>55</sup> in a rougher sketch of the seal, below extreme right side:



*Figure 10: Addition of the missing Baal figure standing on his Bull (right) filled in by Williams-Forte (ibid.)*

Added to the usual astronomical references in the sky are the contrasted figures of Night and Day beneath the remains of the quartered sun inside the crescent.

<sup>55</sup> 'The Snake and the Tree in the Iconography and Texts of Syria in the Bronze Age' In L Gorelick & Elizabeth Williams-Forte (eds) *Ancient Seals and the Bible* Malibu 1983

This is the start of an attempt, inspired by the example of those who have already taken such an approach, to match known information from texts to make fuller sense of visual imagery, and I hope cooperation between specialists following different lines of research will be fruitful in this regard in future. Such an approach is not always accepted - so for those with time to read it, in the Coda below I explore the criteria raised by Paulo Matthiae for the legitimate matching of text and picture.

### ***CODA: TEXTS AND ARTEFACTS AS HISTORICAL DOCUMENTS***

Writing with the authority of an experienced archaeologist and iconologist, Paulo Matthiae<sup>56</sup>, the archaeologist in charge of Ebla in all its phases, explored just such criteria in an important paper, totally apposite to the 2M material in hand, to which we turned for guidance. In it he discusses the question of when, and when not, it is legitimate to use secondary texts to help throw light on images. Its first few pages usefully sum up the criteria art historians use in this respect - which archaeologists, though responsible for digging up artefacts with visual imagery on them, are not *formally* trained to apply, though of course they do (I think of the cliché often blithely trotted out that the human-headed/lion-bull *lamassu* ‘combines the ferocity of the lion with the strength of the bull and human wisdom’ - for which there is absolutely no textual backing anywhere!). Cooperation with the translators of ancient near eastern texts is usually needed - but they themselves often decline what they see as amateurish pairing of text to image (often they have no interest in images on artefacts at all, I have ruefully found), contending that comparison is not viable when there are chronological gaps between the two,. The triangular cross-disciplinary cooperation between archaeologist, art historian and textual expert does not always run smooth and it can take much debate across barriers of misunderstanding or suspicion over a long time to secure consensus on any cross-matching at all - but when it works well it is highly informative, as in W Lambert’s treatment of Gilgamesh seals<sup>57</sup>.

Matthiae points to the milestones on the journey of art historians with archaeological training who started to apply the principles of citing texts that appeared to mesh with the visual images of ancient near eastern art, a discipline initiated in Europe from the 19C onwards by German scholars of Western Art History. In the 20C as Nazi persecution increased during the 1930s one such scholar, Aby Warburg, sought sanctuary in England and founded the Warburg Institute precisely for the study of iconography alone. Other scholars in the field came to work there and join its staff, with people such as Ernst Gombrich, Friedrich Saxl and Erwin Panofsky establishing the methodology of iconographic interpretation (at first mostly in relation to Italian Renaissance and Gothic art). The Warburg remained an Institute for post-graduate studies, in contrast to the Courtauld Institute (the Art History Graduate College at London University) which was inspired by a founder-member of the Bloomsbury Group, Roger Fry, and headed up by Anthony Blunt.

One of the early luminaries of the Warburg Institute (and indeed latterly its Director) was the Dutchman Henri Frankfort (whose personal library bequeathed to the Warburg I have often savoured using). Having participated in several digs in Iraq, he was amongst the first to apply such principles to the interpretation of ancient near eastern mythology on cylinder seals in his magisterial pioneering study (consider the full title)<sup>58</sup>.

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<sup>56</sup> ‘Figurative Themes and Literary Texts’ in Pelio Fronzaroli (ed.) Proceedings of a Colloquium held in Florene 4-6 April 1991 on *Literature and Literary Language at Ebla* Firenze 1992, 219-41

<sup>57</sup> See footnote next page.

<sup>58</sup> *Cylinder Seals: A Documentary Essay on the Art and Religion of the Ancient Near East* London 1939

He was one of several of that generation brought up in both disciplines and his book on the art history of the region<sup>59</sup>, more than his more dry archaeological reports, is still valid today for a sound overview, as he was in the rare position of being able to interpret within the bigger picture the objects he and colleagues were bringing up out of the ground. In these years everyone involved was part of a small inter-European network able to collaborate on cross-disciplinary issues with ease. Matthiae cites Frankfort as the first to grapple effectively with the question of which texts can legitimately be used to bring out the meanings of images on seals and other artefacts (apart from inscriptions actually on them, which so often rarely help, since a God cited in them may not be the figure illustrated in the image). It was too easy in the earliest days of the study of ancient near eastern art to presume ‘that figurative works were really not more than the illustration of literary works’, such that

*The chronologically undifferentiated [sic] interpretation and reconstruction which were for a long time dominant in the handbooks about Mesopotamian civilization led to perceive as unimportant, in the comparisons [sic] proposed, the eventual variants due to the development in time, and as negligible those related with local peculiarities’ (p.220)*

In the case of Frankfort’s work it would have been ridiculous for him to hold back from comparing Akkadian mythological scenes on their cylinder seals with contemporary Akkadian works in tandem with the evidently parallel divine and mythic Sumerian literary production of an earlier period. He proposed to do this, whilst consciously bearing in mind that ‘*chronological differences had to be taken into account... concretely verifying whenever possible the mutations the literary traditions showed in the course of time in order to evaluate which... could more likely be considered archaic elements...*’. In contrast Matthiae takes Moortgat’s well-known application of the Myth of Tammuz to Sumerian visual imagery<sup>60</sup> as an example of ‘*the tortuous vicissitudes of the relation between artistic and literary works*’ where a leap of imagination is made in general terms on the basis of a cultural tradition even though watertight links cannot be made between actual figurative *versus* verbal messages. In such a situation it is a matter of choice as to whether a reader takes Moortgat’s hypothesis on board or not (I personally think it is imaginative and reaches the main truth of the matter, even if implausible at times in the detail).

To be so doctrinaire as to declare it illegitimate to compare picture and text other than when strictly contemporary (most university tutors today insist on this when marking essays) is to asphyxiate the work of iconology, especially given the random distribution and rarity already of surviving documents and artefacts from the ancient past. Matthiae cites the paper by Lambert<sup>61</sup> in the Edith Porada Festschrift drawing attention to the fact that although the Naked Hero with long locks was commonly interpreted as Gilgamesh, strictly speaking the figure appears much earlier in the visual arts than the chronological setting given in texts of the historical figure of Gilgamesh, King of Uruk, in the Early Dynastic period. But this does not necessarily follow, for several reasons which we cannot deal with at length here, the main idea being that we *must* treat a visual image as in itself a separate type of documentary evidence, and not necessarily the Doppelgänger of a text. Suffice it to say that it does not feel right that such ubiquitous figures as Gilgamesh and Enkidu should be

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<sup>59</sup> *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient* Harmondsworth 1954

<sup>60</sup> *Tammuz: Der Unsterblichkeitsglaube in der Altorientalischen Bildkunst* Berlin 1984

<sup>61</sup> ‘Gilgamesh in Literature and Art: the Second and First Millennia’ in *Monsters and Demons in the Ancient and Medieval worlds: Papers Presented in Honour of Edith Porada* Mainz 1987

demoted to the currently fashionable mere *Lamassu* and *Bull-man*, given the Gilgamesh epic was so central and widespread, thus:

- (a) we cannot rule out preceding oral tradition, likely to be a long-standing astronomical myth;
- (b) the dating of King Gilgamesh is actually vague (the Sumerian King List is known to be a highly speculative area to pin down to absolute dates in real time), and
- (c)-given his central role in myth what *other* figure would represent Gilgamesh in art?

A comparable myth within West European culture is the story of King Arthur. Although historical research has shown that there *was* an actual Arthur in Britain in the Roman Period who was a Welsh or Saxon warrior and leader, the story is only attested in manuscript form in Europe from the mediaeval period, and it inspired the visual arts as late as 19C Victorian painting (most notably the Pre-Raphaelites). The mythic dimension of his story and its influence is therefore not to be dug up in solid archaeology or wholly placeable in time - especially if its basis resides in the reiteration in a new guise of archaeo-astronomical facts (Arthur and the Twelve Knights of the Round Table). In the case of the Arthurian cycle no art historian would dream of disallowing the matching of mediaeval text to Victorian images to understand which incident from it is illustrated in any one painting (without the original texts we would have no idea at all what we are looking at). The same is true for Christian art through the ages, or Classical Mythology, both of which are *enduring oral and textual traditions* perpetuated across the centuries in what I call *vertical relevance*.

It is, of course, different for what we might call *ephemeral texts* which in contrast *are* usually only valid for their time, or on occasion pointers to similar situations just before or just after they were written, this time simply of *horizontal relevance*. When it *is* possible to compare text and picture within the same period, of course for art historians that is the most desirable situation for precision of matching, as in the instances Matthiae cites of Assyrian palace reliefs that appear, according to Irene Winter<sup>62</sup> to closely mirror contemporary Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions expressing imperial ideology. Here Matthiae makes the important point that it should be possible to draw not only on mythological texts (*vertically*) but also on any other kind of immediate textual evidence of the time (*horizontally*) to gain local authenticity as well as contemporary renditions of long-standing myths and their pantheons. Pinpointing and then bearing in mind the *likely* messages intended in the early 2M Syrian seals - both implicit and explicit - there were several openings for us to use *horizontally relevant texts* pertaining to everyday life - as well as *vertically* relevant text pertaining to religion and its rituals - to make more sense of them, however partial.

Matthiae himself uses this approach to try to understand the iconography not only of the seals found at his site of Ebla, but also the fragmented pieces of decorated furniture, limestone statues and reliefs (in fact two particular reliefs from Ebla helped shed light on certain seals). He comes to the conclusion that on Eblaite material there are different categories of imagery to be dealt with:

- a) Since they do not appear to be illustrating stories, certain scenes must illustrate '*uniquely the court life with dignitaries and officials*' including the presentation of tribute and homage;
  - i. *Typically Eblaite court scenes represent the king wearing the traditional fleece skirt, facing out frontally with a swollen-brimmed turban and sometimes carrying an axe with a square-*

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<sup>62</sup> Irene Winter 'The Program of the Throneroom of Assurnasirpal II' in Harper & Pitman (eds) *Monsters and Demons in the Ancient and Medieval worlds: Papers Presented in Honor of E Porada Mainz 1987*, p.38

*ended blade. Matthiae sees a parallel between the Lugals approaching him and Royal Archive texts mentioning their delivery of gold and silver to the Treasury, also making the point that seals can sometimes, instead of the king, show his high officials, in profile, who wielded considerable authority in exacting and administering such tribute and organising its redistribution.*

- b) Mythical elements such as composite beasts (he does not think to see them as astronomical, instead relating them to the 'wild life of the Steppe' as well as to the words of songs sung to the lyre and harp);
- c) Military triumphs celebrating victories, very much in the tradition of earlier Sumerian victory stelae;
- d) Since he mostly discusses artefacts found in palace contexts (very little material covered in this paper is from a temple context), not surprisingly he reports an absence of cult themes, though in fact another paper points not only to propitiation of the God Hadad, but also to
- e) A well-established ancestor cult for the deceased royalty of Ebla, as attested also in other texts.

In other words, figures appearing in Eblaite iconography, such as on the fragmentary 'Standard of Ebla' and a small handful of seals, represent royalty, officialdom *and* stewards/soldiers of various kinds as well as mythological creatures of the divine realm (mostly in their archaic animal form - as, for instance, the lion-headed eagle Imdugud/Ninurta/Ningirsu (thought to be the archaic form of the Mountain War-God/Storm God<sup>63</sup> from whose feathers the rains stream down) clutching the rumps of the two man-faced Bulls of the Eastern Horizon. At the start of the millennium Ebla more or less had autonomy in North Syria until Babylon under Hammurabi pushed her borders back inside the sphere of influence of Yamhad. Given our mention that the Old Syrian seals found at Kültepe are most likely to be Eblaite/Yamhadite in origin (they were the earliest to set up palace workshops) - Byblos is the less likely possibility, with whom its strong craft relations show up in terms of Egyptian influence - it is surely legitimate to look for such categories of representation and levels of authority. In the Old Syrian period 1800-1600 Matthiae himself noted consistency of style in the arts of Ebla/Yamhad and Kültepe. But the end of this era was marked by the Hittite takeover of Yamhad overall, including Alalakh and Ebla, and within a decade Babylon itself was occupied by the Hittites and left under the administration of the Kassites. By the end of his paper, with all the explainable imagery on the artefacts of Ebla in mind as his particular sounding board, Matthiae capitulates and admits to the necessity of a more practical working criterion - that *'although there are no elements which might allow to single out direct relations between artistic and literary documents... some contributions... might be interpreted as meaningful parallelisms between the sphere of the literary activity and that of the artistic activity'*, in other words that *if plausible enough, they should at least be entertained* - which is exactly my position. I have already quoted several writers - not always dealing directly with seals and artefacts - whose work I found particularly helpful in doing just that. I therefore take it that I have the tacit blessing of Matthiae to cast about for oblique angles of information to amplify our reading of the seals, and I have tried especially to separate the strands of trade, civil service, royal administration and religious usage of the time that can help us make sense of the four seals we placed under intense scrutiny.

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<sup>63</sup> Two centuries later in Gudea's dream (recounted on Cylinder A) he appears in human form - in the Levant possibly the equivalent of Reshef - if not of Nergal.