

Introduction

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

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

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

Stamp and Cylinders Seals’ origins and functions

It is believed that stamp seals, used as amulets, were developed very earlier in the Near and Middle East, around the 6th/5th millennia BCE (Collon, 2001; Porada, 1993). The evolution to a cylindrical shape happened around the 4th millennium BCE (Collon, 2001; Porada, 1993). This change of shape did not seem to modify the iconographic motifs, as we can see by comparing the stamp seal **BM 2013,6001.85** (stone, 4,2 cm x 3,1cm) with cylinder seal **BM 2013,6001.1304** (stone, height 2,7 cm, diameter between 0,9 cm-1,0 cm). They both display fishes and cattle, and though it is difficult to grasp the full meaning of this zoomorphic motifs, we can suggest that they were both used as amulets of fertility

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

The Cylinders Seals of the Lambert Collection British Museum

The seals analyzed are still unpublished. Our choice to focus on these examples is due to the aquatic zoomorphic elements they display. The exact site where they were exhumated is unknown, except for seal **BM 105075**, which was found in a side of a train line in Bagdad, a possibly Carchemish cemetery (Wiseman, 1962). Even though seal **BM 105075** is not part of the above-mentioned collection, we integrated it in our set, given the parallels we can identify between it and the seal **BM 2013.6001.1338**.

The seal **BM 2013,6001.1240** (stone, height 2,4 cm, diameter 1,25 cm) displays at the centre an animal of four legs with horns. Before the animal’s head there are two fishes, and in front there is a fish tail. The seal **BM 2013,6001.128** (marble, height 2,0 cm, diameter 1,5 cm) shows, on the left, three dots and, on the right, 3 fishes. Each one is aligned with the dots.

The seal **BM 2013,6001.1338** (stone, height 2.85 cm, diameter 2,5cm) we can see a pair of fishes, a pair of circular forms that resemble eyes, and a pair of aquatic animals - a fish and a crab. About the latter, we find a parallel in the seal **BM 105075** (Baghdad, stone, height 1,2 cm, diameter 2,2 cm), where we can find two fishes and a similar form that we identify as a crab.



Discussion

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



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



Seal **BM 2013,6001.128** also presents interesting elements. The three dots can symbolize the number 30, which we can identify connected with the Mesopotamian lunar deity, Nanna/Sîn. Within the Mesopotamian mental framework humans were created to work the land, in order to satisfy the needs of deities (as we can see in the literary account *Atrahasis*). Therefore, the act of killing fishes (and other animals, for the matter) were understood as a necessary deed to fulfil the primeval function of humans. Hence, the association between the fishes and the three dots can manifest this close connection between deities and the action of Mesopotamians over natural elements.

Conclusion

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

Bibliography

- Collon, D. (2001). How seals were worn and carried: The archeological and iconographic evidence. In I. J. Winter & W. W. Hallo (Eds.), *Proceedings of the XLV Rencontre Assyriologique: Seals and Seal impressions* (Vol. 2). Bethesda, Ma: CDL Press.
- Finkel, I. L. (1983). Necromancy in Ancient Mesopotamia. *Archiv Für Orientforschung*, 29/30, 1–17. Retrieved from <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41661902>
- Mason, J. (2007). Animals: From Souls and the Sacred in the prehistoric times to symbols and slaves in Antiquity. In *A cultural history of animals in antiquity* (Vol. 1, pp. 17–45). New York: Berg.
- Porada, E. (1993). Why Cylinder Seals? Engraved Cylindrical Seal Stones of the Ancient Near East, Fourth to First Millennium B.C. *The Art Bulletin*, 75(4), 563. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3045984>
- Scurlock, J. A. (2014). *Sourcebook for ancient Mesopotamian medicine*. Atlanta, Georgia: Society of Biblical Literature.
- Wiseman, D. J. (1962). *Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum*. London: Trustees of the British Museum.