

# Ancient Near Eastern Seals - Enduring Envoys

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**Abstract:** UNESCO has received, over the years, a small collection of objects donated to it by member countries. Iraq has given one cuneiform tablet and two seals. This paper discusses the seals, a stamp seal and a cylinder seal, and considers the significance of the imagery of the sun god.

## Preface

Since my university days I have always been interested in ancient history and art, especially in the form of the glyptic of the Near East, specializing in cylinder seals of the 1st millennium BC Achaemenid period, but of course concerned with earlier glyptic which underpinned this last phase of their administrative use.

During the course of a diplomatic life with my husband, Robert S. Merrillees, an Australian working for the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, I have been very fortunate to be able to keep up these interests, visiting and staying in many countries that allowed me to pursue my research and gave me access to many famous museums. When and where I could I made notes and drawings of the seals that were often part of the collections of many of these institutions. In 1991, we found ourselves in Paris where Robert was accredited for four months to assist with the election of Mr. Barry Jones to the Executive Committee of The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

UNESCO has received, over the years, a small collection of objects donated to it by member countries. Iraq, in keeping with its ancient and venerable history, had given one cuneiform tablet and two seals (Figure 1). I thought then of the endurance of seals in the diplomatic/trade sagas of their times and that one day they it might make a worthwhile article. This paper gives me the opportunity to illuminate, perhaps in a different light, certain well worn paths that hopefully lead to a better understanding of stamp and cylinder seals and their value in bringing different places, cultures, and times closer together.

## Introduction

The two different shaped seals from Iraq in UNESCO, the stamp and the cylinder, each relate to two very important events in human history as it evolved in the ancient Near East, extending from Anatolia (Turkey) in the west, south to the Gulf and Egypt and east to Iran, encompassing Mesopotamia, made up of north-east Syria and Iraq, the area of the seals' origins.<sup>1</sup> Stamp seals belong to the beginnings of settled life during the Late Neolithic Pre-historic period c. 8000 B.C., considered to have arisen in the northern and western regions of the Near East with the domestication of crops and animals, the making of pottery and its attendant dwellings, goods and chattels at

Çatal Hüyük (Mellaart 1975:55ff; 98ff; fig. 53), and in the Levant (Braidwood 1960:499-501; Moore 1982/84:65ff; Moore & Schwartz 1985:50-74). Cylinder seals appear just before the Early Bronze Age c. 3500 B.C., at about the same time as writing, which was to enable the recording of the increasing complexities of urbanization, particularly along the great water-ways of the Euphrates and Tigris which facilitated the intermingling of people and the long-distance exchange and bartering of goods.

Stamp and cylinder seals were both developed and used for the identification and safe-guarding of collective and individual goods, chattels and properties and at a later stage the recording of these activities. However, the earlier stamp seals, found in areas to the north and west of Mesopotamia are, due to the absence of seal impressions, considered to have been probably used more for decorative purposes. Their circular, oval, and cruciform bases deeply incised with linear and spiral designs, with their backs forming small loop or stud handles, may have been dipped into pigments and stamped as repeating patterns on textiles, for body ornamentation, and even as bread stamps

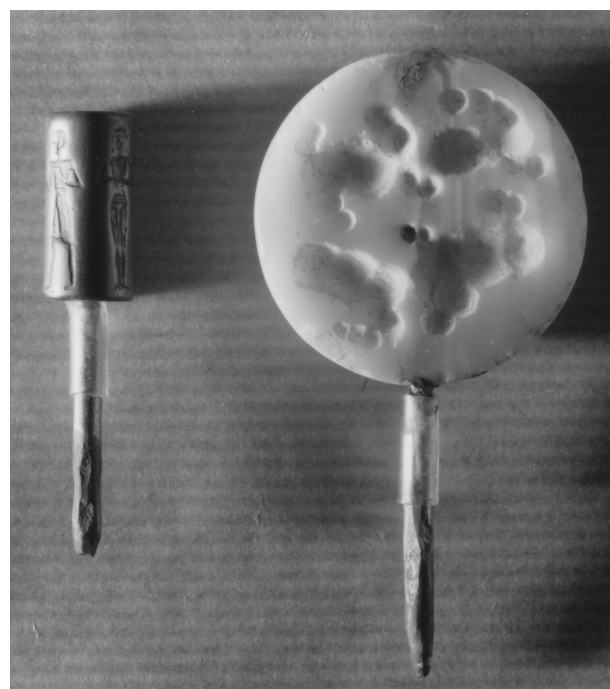


Figure 1: Photo of the UNESCO Cylinder and Stamp seals.

– still used to-day (Buchanan 1984:1). Some stamp designs recall the wall decorations of buildings from Catal Hüyük in central Turkey - c. 6100 B.C. (Mellaart 1967:fig. 24, illus. 121). Stamp impressions on gypsum plaster have been found at Tell Bugras and Tell al-Kaum, just west of the Euphrates and on baskets and ceramics from Tell Sabi Abyad in north Syria dated to c. 5500-5100 B.C. (Collon 1997:11, 21). Stamp and cylinder impressions have also been found on pottery from Palestine, Syria and Lebanon dated to the Early Bronze Age B.C. (Collon 1981:499-501) and later in Cyprus from c. 12th Century B.C. (Smith 1994 238ff). Perhaps significantly it was the stamping of pottery and bread which gave the potters and bread makers the idea of individual ownership identity and securing of property rights. To this process may be attributed the appearance of stamp and cylinder designs impressed on wet clay lumps (bullae) securing the string or rope round various portable goods, door knobs of properties or store rooms, culminating in the impressions (sealings) over clay tablets, the original documentary material, and rolls of papyrus and much later parchment (Frankfort 1939:1-3; Collon 1997). These utilitarian roles performed by seals, particularly in regard to protection, may have also carried some amuletic connotations that increased their intrinsic value evident from their discovery in burials and sanctuaries (Woolley 1934:323; Mallowan 1947:39-41; Carter, Hole et al. 1992:30.)

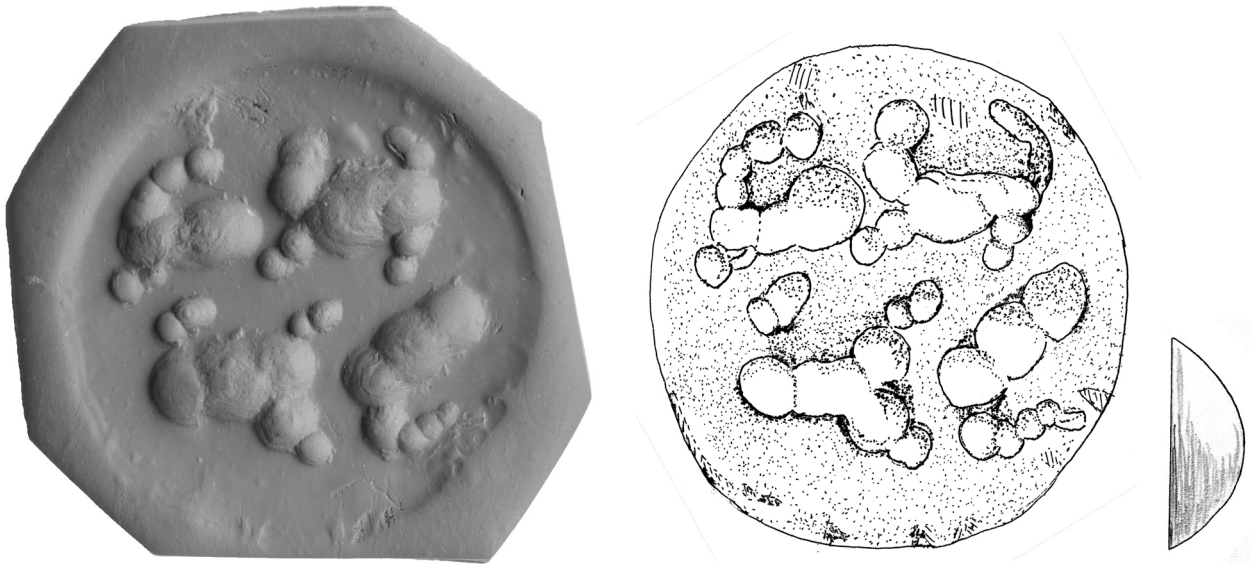
Stamp seals were the predominant sealing tool for over 5000 years and maybe even more, until superseded by cylinders with the advent of writing. However, they continued intermittently in parts of the Near East (Collon 1989:17-19; Merrillees 2001:45, 55) and re-emerged at the end of the 2nd millennium B.C., becoming the main sealing device with the gradual supplanting of cuneiform by alphabetic scripts and the use of parchment during the 1st millennium B.C. when the Hellenistic, and Roman worlds came to dominate in the 1st millennium A.D., together with the Parthians and Sassanians. Indeed the stamp seal never disappeared and in various guises, as for example, signet rings, continues into the modern age.

With larger settlements went concomitant organisation of the river systems and land for agriculture commodities, especially in the alluvial south and plains of Mesopotamia. The rise of Uruk, an early temple state in the south, is a good example of the growing necessity of not only securing and identifying, but also documenting the management of surplus commodities to be exchanged, such as primary produce for materials like minerals and timber lacking in these farming areas but found in the higher northern areas of Mesopotamia and its eastern surrounds (Roux 1964/92:7-15, 69-76). Methods of recording had already started as early as c. 8000 B.C. with a basic system of counting and differentiation by means of multiple shaped, small, plain tokens, representing the various commodities such as units of grain, oil, or wool and even animals, to be kept or exchanged. By 3500 B.C. these tokens had become more diverse with new shapes and markings,

reflecting a more complex socio-economic milieu. These representative tokens, accompanying the consignments to the various destinations not only of primary but now also finished goods, were enclosed in hollow, spherical clay balls (comparable to an envelope) which were then marked with verification signs of the consignments and sealed by stamps or the newly introduced cylinders which were found to be better able to cover the curved surfaces of 'envelopes' (Collon 2005:13).

The invention of writing is considered to have grown out of the counting and marking signs of the tokens, initially produced as pictographic signs, more easily accommodated on flattened pieces of clay, dispensing finally with the somewhat cumbersome system of tokens and their holders, which had resulted in a kind of double accounting method (Merrillees 2001:45-46). This momentous step appears to have started in a number of places in the Near East, but probably initially in Uruk in southern Iraq and Susa in south-west Iran. The abundance of clay in both environments, which supplied the material for the clay coverings of the token system as already mentioned, was certainly a factor in the making of clay tablets. Perhaps also the region's chief building material, the sun-dried clay brick with its flat sides (except for the curved top Sumerian plano-convex brick) influenced in a smaller form the shape of these tablets. This also gave an adequate surface surround to the cylinders' larger and more detailed impression. The attendant iconography could also be rolled as a continuous frieze (see Collon 2003:254 on the areas of the cylinder seal's first appearance). The other element in the beginnings of writing would have been the reeds growing in the marshes covering the southern part of the Tigris-Euphrates delta (Roux 1964/92:11-12). These plants must have been found eminently suitable, when cut, to produce the wedge-shaped marks and symbols of what became wedge-shaped writing of cuneiform (from Latin 'cuneus' meaning 'wedge') scripts on the soft clay tablets to be later sun-hardened for permanent keeping. This permanence led to their eventual discovery and history over 5000 years later.

Both stamp and cylinder seals were at first made mainly from soft materials that could be cut fairly easily. They ranged from calcite and limestone, serpentinite, chloritite, soapstone and at times the more valuable lapis lazuli (a medium hard stone) which indicated contact and trade of materials as far distant as Afghanistan. Examples from Tepe Gawra are given by Tobler (1950:176 pl. LXXXVIIIc). Other materials were ivory, faience, glass, metal, wood and baked clay, and there are examples of the use of hard stones such as rock crystal during the 3rd millennium B.C. (Merrillees 1990:26-27). Many of these minerals had to be imported from areas where they existed to areas without them as part of trade exchanges, as noted above. In the early periods of both types of glyptic, the designs were incised with hand-held tools, such as files of various types, pointed, straight or curved such as at Tell Asmar (Merrillees 1990:23, 30 fn. 7, pl. 1a, b) for horizontal and diagonal cuts,



**Figure 2:** Photo and drawings of the UNESCO Stamp seal.

and micro-chipping. Holes were either gouged or drilled using drill bits powered by hand-held vertical bow drills with the seal kept secure in a small, wooden block. For the engraver's work, the cutting tools were made initially of flint and then copper and possibly wooden sticks coated with honey or resin dipped in a quartz based abrasive such as fine sand (Merrillees 1990:41; Wilkinson 1983: illus. 54; Sax et al. 1998:18-19).

By the end of the 3rd millennium B.C., harder stones such as the black and grey hematites and brownish goethites began to be used, moving into more colourful quartzes by the second half of the 2nd millennium B.C., like the chalcedonies, agates, cornelians and jaspers, while the soft stones especially serpentinite, chloritite with the addition of faience (a reconstituted quartz material, an influence from Egypt) continued to be used, particularly for less important seals (Segnit, 2001:73-95 for analysis of gem materials). Although hard stones were already used for seals from the 4th millennium B.C. (see above) the development of more efficient cutting tools led to their increasing popularity. Research on the various types of engraving cuts has now established that cutting wheels and drills mounted horizontally, which allowed a greater degree of dexterity and speed, began during the 18th century B.C., in the latter part of the old Babylonian period (Sax et al. 2000:157-176; Buchanan 1970:53ff.).

Together with the differing materials and technical innovations, another dimension should be taken into account relating to the designs and inscriptions on ancient glyptic - their development and change according to their perceived need, use, economic and religious significance. Such areas of study can give indications of the seals' geographical regions, historical period, and social context, while with the evolving iconographical depictions help reveal some of the beliefs and mores of these ancient times. It is in this vein that the two UNESCO seals will be considered.

### **1. UNESCO Stamp seal - Fontenoy, Paris.**

Don de la République Irakienne à l'occasion de son XXV<sup>ème</sup> anniversaire (4 novembre, 1971).

**Shape, Material, Size:** Hemispheroid - light grey/green in colour with faint wide undulating striations through the soft stone (?marble). H. 12mm., 35 x 35 mm. with oval-shaped bore 5 mm. The seal is in good condition and has been marked in white ink with Arabic letters which have been translated by a member of the UNESCO Secretariat as possibly meaning 'Mikraran 3346'.

**Description:** Animal scene(?): four separate groups of merged large and small drilled depressions producing zoomorphic 'blobs'.

**Date:** C. 3200-3000 B.C. - Jemdat Nasr period.

**Parallels:** Provenanced examples include an almost identical example from Jemdat Nasr (Mackay 1931:283, pl. LXXIII no. 14), from Girsu/Tello (Buchanan 1967:533 nos. 5, 8, Pl. 1 nos. 3, 4); from Kish (bought) and no. 212 from Jemdat Nasr (Buchanan/Moorey 1984:29 no. 209). For a good unprovenanced example see Goff (1963) no. 417 and Basmachi (1975/76 illus. 39 left and 4 down) - stamp seals from various Sumerian sites dated to between 3000-2400 B.C..

The UNESCO hemispheroid stamp seal belongs to an interesting group of this type and design which signalled the end of the stamp seals' early period of dominance and the introduction of the cylinder seal c. 3500 B.C. with writing (see above). Hemispheroids appeared in two phases. The first group appear in some numbers with impressions in c. 5th millennium B.C., although possibly found during earlier periods. They are considered, from provenanced examples, to be predominately from the northern regions of Mesopotamia and Syria. They were usually small in size with their bore holes through the higher section of their rounded backs and made of dark



Figure 3: Photo and Drawings of the UNESCO Cylinder seal.

coloured stones (possibly black chloritite or serpentinite), engraved with linear designs, which at first seems to have been a continuation of the previous geometric patterns, but changed to interlocking figurative designs of humans and animals (Tobler 1950:175-176, pl. LXXXVIII; Buchanan 1984:5-6; Collon 1989:22).

The second phase in the 4th millennium B.C. to which the UNESCO hemispheroid belongs, is characterised by Buchanan (1967:267) as “the floruit of the stamp seal” in the Late Prehistoric into Early Protoliterate - the transition between the Late Ubaid and Uruk/Jemdat Nasr - c. 3900-3500 B.C. In contrast to the previous hemispheroid type these later stamps were larger in size and appear not only as circular shapes, but also ovoid and sometimes tabloid. They were made of more colourful stones with their perforations closer to their base (Buchanan/Moorey 1984:26; Collon 1989:31). The greatest concentration was in south Mesopotamia and Susiana, which may have been the centres of their production, but they have been found throughout Mesopotamia, no doubt carried by trade and travel along well trodden routes (Buchanan 1984:26-27).

The designs on the bases of these later hemispheroids were mainly of different kinds of animals (not always recognisable), made in a drill-hole patterning style that was also used on the bases of the beautifully carved animal amulet/seals of the same date and regions (Collon 1989:30, 36). In describing the method of executing this drilled style Collon (1989:31) writes that drill-holes “are almost invariably executed with extensive use of a fairly large drill, at times the drill holes are linked together by gouging, and some details are indicated by lines...”. Furthermore as Buchanan (1984:26) points out these stamp seals and their drilled technique, made during the emerging stages of the cylinder seal, probably influenced certain of these new type seals, particularly the small, squat Jemdat Nasr types where a number of the designs, especially the seated pig-tailed figures, were drilled. It is also interesting to note that although there are clay impressions from figured stamp seals, this does not seem to be the case for drill-hole stamps (Collon 1997:12). Perhaps they, together with the small animal shapes, were primarily amulets.

## 2. UNESCO Cylinder seal - Fontenoy, Paris.

Don de la République Irakienne à l'occasion de son XXVème anniversaire (4 novembre, 1971).

**Shape, Material Size:** Cylinder - Black/grey in colour (?hematite). 20 x 9.5 mm. Bore hole 4 mm. The engraving is worn with possible recutting over the inscription area; there are two chips beside the foot of the figure facing left (on the impression) and slight chipping along upper edge. The seal has been marked in white ink with Arabic letters, part of which has been translated by a member of the UNESCO Secretariat as the number 3350.

**Description:** Presentation scene of three figures: a male deity stands facing left with torso presented frontally; he is bearded and his hair ends in an ‘S’ shaped loop on the nape of the neck; he wears the horned headdress and a full-length belted mantle with pleated skirt open; one foot is placed forward on a crosshatched, square shaped object, probably representing a mountain; one arm rests across his chest while the other hand is slightly raised holding a ‘saw-tooth blade’. Before the deity stands an unbearded ‘priest’ personage, whose hair or headgear is not easily ascertained; he wears a belted wrap-over tunic with double border edge; his hand over his chest is raised with palm facing outwards, his other hand holding a simplified frond(?) is raised towards the deity. Behind the worshipper stands a nude female facing frontally, she is the same size as the other two figures; her hair falls each side of her face and three horizontal lines across her waist possibly indicates a belt (Collon 1986:131-132). To the side stands a single feline standard (rather faintly outlined).

**Date:** c. 1822-1750 B.C. - Old Babylonian period

**Parallels:** The juxtaposition of the three figures on the UNESCO seal is somewhat rare, particularly with the nude female, who more often appears with the two group figures of the god/king with the mace and the suppliant goddess and not so often with the ‘sun-god’. Porada (1948) nos. 471 and 489 show a priest-like figure with a staff, and on the second seal there is also the nude female; Collon (1986) nos. 329, 333, 352, 368, are all examples of the priest figure with the ‘sun-god’. Often another one or two figures are depicted as on no. 352, which also shows the nude female.

The Old Babylonian Period 1900-1600 B.C., to which time and style the UNESCO seal belongs, is considered to be the 'heyday' of the cylinder seal when its administrative value gained importance from the spread and use of cuneiform throughout the Near East for recording and regal correspondence (Collon 1997:16). It is also pertinent to note that with the Old Babylonian period, the change from soft to hard stones, specifically hematite, was taken up throughout the Near East (Collon 1982:130). It is tempting to speculate that the greater use of this type of stone may have been associated with the trading colonies set up by the northern Assyrian city of Ashur in Cappadocia, central Anatolia, at about the same time c. 1940-1720 B.C. At that time Assyrian merchants, during their travels across Anatolia and northern Mesopotamia, trading in gold and silver, could possibly have encountered materials such as hematite or possibly greater outcrops of this mineral, whose medium hardness, but hard-wearing properties and ability to produce impressive sealings was recognised, becoming then the chosen stone for cylinders for the next four hundred years (Roux 1964/92:231ff; Teissier 1994:1; Merrillees 2001:49).

The scene shown on the UNESCO cylinder was part of the repertoire of Old Babylonian symbolic iconography. This can be traced back to the 3rd millennium B.C. and earlier when the ancient beliefs of Mesopotamia were formulated, particularly in the Sumerian period and subsequently during the Akkadian period (2334-2193 B.C.). The unification of the region under the Sargonid dynasty was enhanced by the confirmation and canonisation of the religious philosophy and practices as manifest in the Mesopotamian divine pantheon, which although believed to be superhuman and immortal, was 'conceived as a replica of the human society' of that time and place (Roux 1964/92:85-87).

In the 'Presentation' scene, the main figure is the one in the 'ascending posture' position. It is the stance used by a number of deities, such as the 'smiting' god, the weather god, the warrior deity, but most frequently by the 'sun-god'. In this case it is probably the latter god represented together with his 'saw-blade'. The second figure before the 'sun god' probably represents a priest. He appears on a number of seals and seems to be associated with the 'sun-god', sometimes taking the place of the suppliant goddess. The priest usually placed behind one of the main personages and in some cases standing on a dais is dressed in a kilt and carries a pail and cup or a stick-like object which has been described as a frond, fan, torch or like a knife weapon. In this instance, the position of the priest standing directly before the 'sun-god' without another deity or king figure in between is unusual. The role of this figure, however, is not completely understood, but he has been linked with another similar figure who carries a bird and could possibly be an interpreter of omens and dreams, which would explain his connection with the 'sun-god', one of the main deities concerned with omen and divination queries (Collon 1986:35, 139-140; Starr 1990:XIII-XIV).

The third figure designated the 'nude goddess/female' appears to be of Western origin attested by the Egyptian 'Hathor-like' hairstyle and her link on seals with the crook of Amurru and the Weather god's lightning fork, both symbols attached to Anatolian deities; Özgüç (1968:66 pl. XIIIIC) show an interesting juxtaposition of a 'nude goddess' and the Hathor head on a seal impression from Kültepe dated to Level Ib, c. 1614-1782 B.C. On seals, and as terracottas, the 'nude goddess/female' was popular between c. 1822 and 1750 B.C., and Collon considers that she may have been "the object of a popular cult rather than part of the official pantheon", with a connection to itinerant 'dwarf' musicians and naked female dancers accompanied by monkeys that made an appearance in the 20th century B.C. (1986:45-46, 131-132; cf. Al-Gailani-Werr 1988:15, 20-21). The 'nude goddess/female' seems to make her original appearance in miniature guise, as a filling motif on well cut seals that showed the 'king with a mace and suppliant goddess' scene. This 'standard' Old Babylonian theme replaced the Ur III and Isin-Larsa seated presentation scenes c. 1895 and continued to c. 1712 B.C. (Collon 1986:61, 100f). The appearance of the 'nude goddess/female' as a full-length figure seems to be a secondary development and is found for the most part on poorly cut seals which show other less well-defined characters as on the UNESCO cylinder. It is possible that the manifestation of the 'nude goddess/female' and other uncertain motifs belong to the gradual infiltration of influences from Anatolia in c. 1940 B.C. (see above). This is a reversal of influences, as it were, and suggests that such seals could belong more to the peripheral north-western areas of Mesopotamia (Porada 1948:54ff).

Somewhat in contrast to this scenario, other sites in north-western regions and 'along the Assyrian-Cappadocian trade route' such as Tell Leilan in the plain of Habur (now north-east Syria), have yielded seal impressions, the majority of which emphasise the strength of the Old Babylonian glyptic tradition. They depict, it would seem carefully and finely as one their chief themes, 'the man with the mace facing the suppliant goddess'. These particular impressions have been dated to between c. 1807 and 1728 B.C., which covers part of the reign of ShamshiAdad of Ashur (1813-1781 B.C.). Tell Leilan has been identified possibly with Shubat, originally a 3rd millennium B.C. city called Sehna, considered one of the capitals of the 'Great Kingdom of Upper Mesopotamia', which included Mari. Within these boundaries, the glyptic from Tell Leilan "provides documentation for the production of high quality Old Babylonian seals for the end of the 19th and beginning of the 18th centuries (B.C.)...", while beyond these frontiers other glyptic styles from Anatolia and Syria prevailed, see above and Parayre (1990:556, 558-566), Parrot for Mari (1959:156ff) and Al-Gailani-Werr for the Diyala region (1988:3ff).

Finally, I would like briefly to reflect upon one of the figures portrayed on the UNESCO cylinder - that of the 'sun-god'. This was a deity that endured through the ages from the Sumerian UTU, Akkadian Shamash, Elamite Nahunte and

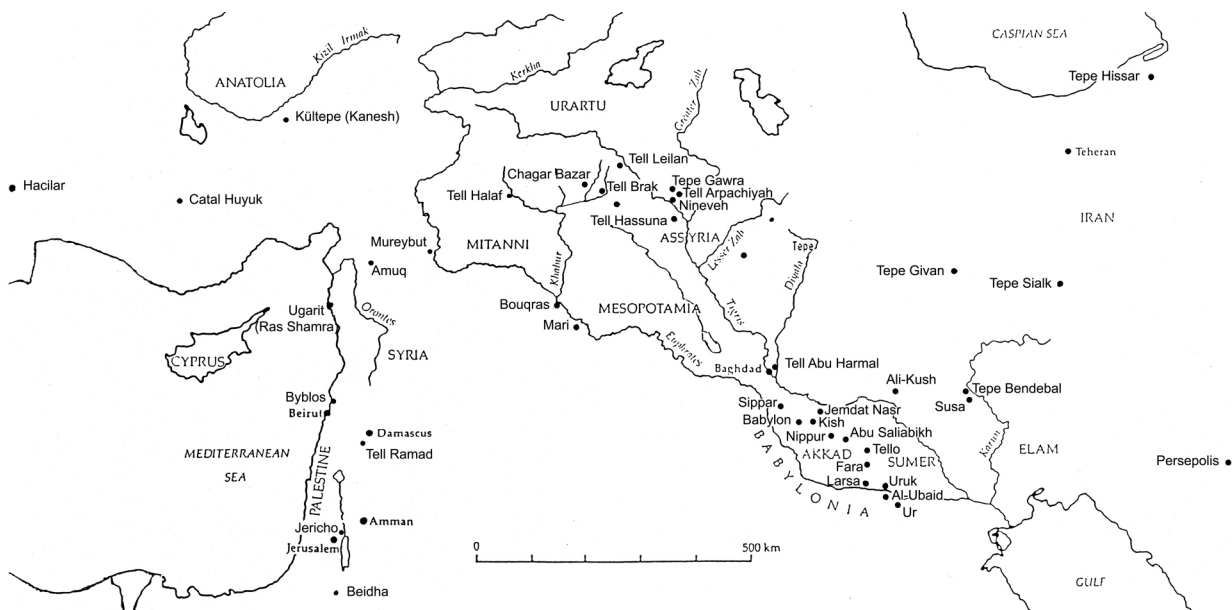


Figure 4: A map of the ancient near east.

Iranian Mithra, and possibly into the Classical period as Helios and/or Apollo. The powers of the sun-god extended from the obvious ones - the giving of light and warmth - to overseeing the course of truth, justice and right as god of omens, contracts and oaths. This latter function evolved from the sun-god's daily passage through the skies, making all clear on earth. It was a role retained well into 1st millennium B.C. and beyond.<sup>2</sup>

It was in the Early Dynastic III period (c. 2600-2400 B.C.) that the god of the sun appears holding his saw blade, rays emanating from his shoulders and sitting in a boat (Frankfort 1939:67-70 Pl. XVj, n). For the sun-god's attributes at this time, it is worth examining the role of Shamash in the epics of the king/hero Gilgamesh of Uruk. The surviving written forms of the stories were produced from about the beginning of the 2nd millennium B.C. to the Neo-Assyrian period and contain different versions, but some of the original tales appear to be from the Early Dynastic period. In them it is the sun-god who, despite the importance of the two chief deities of Uruk, Anu and his daughter Inanna, appears to play a central role in decision-making, succouring and aiding Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu. The sun-god is also presented as the all-seeing deity and valiant warrior in his path through the dense darkness of night to the light of day (Dalley 1989:39-153). It is in these last manifestations that Shamash assumes and maintains through the millennia his most important role as god of the light/truth and upholder of right/justice by warring against dark/evil, cf. Black and Green (1992:184).

In the next period, the Akkadian (2334-2154 B.C.), the most frequent imagery of Shamash was of the deity with rays and saw-blade, stepping out from between two mountain peaks (Collon 1982:83, nos. 168-171). Shamash, in simpler guise, but still with the saw-blade, continued into the Old Babylonian period (1900-1640 B.C.), when he became the most popular of the gods worshipped, especially in Larsa

in Sumer and Sippur in Akkad. The Code of Hammurabi (1792-1750 B.C.), represents the sun-god holding a wedge and ring - measuring rod and tape - and describes him in the epilogue in the terms first set out in the Early Dynastic period "...Shamash, the great judge of heaven and earth, may my justice prevail in the land" (Pritchard 1969:178 (80); Al Gailani-Werr 1988:8-10). The seal inscriptions of the period of Hammurabi, particularly the contest scenes and some with Shamash himself, evoke the name UTU/Shamash and his consort a-a/AYA, although the link with the inscribed names and the engraved figures does not always match.

From the texts the saw-blade has been interpreted as the 'sassar' weapon used by Shamash in his role as 'Supreme Judge' to 'cut decisions' and before whom oaths were taken. In his role as the Sun-god, the saw-blade was the tool by which he opened the mountain to allow out the first rays. The mountain peaks became the 'portals of the sky' between which the sun emerged. Both these roles were retained on Old Babylonian cylinders, although the mountain appears to have been reduced on our seal to a type of square stool (cf. Frankfort 1939:95-100, 160-162; van Buren 1945:179-180, Porada 1948:24 nos. 178, 179; Teissier 1984:23-24; Merrillees 1990:nos. 31, 32). Of the supernatural beings and animals associated with Shamash such as the bull, bull-men and scorpion-men from the Akkadian period and possibly the horse from the Middle Assyrian period, it was the animals - the bull and horse - that were to remain important symbols in Zoroastrian beliefs linked to the sun and Mithra (Boyce 1975:151, 172-173; Black & Green 1992:39-40, 48-49, 103, 104, 161).

By the Neo-Assyrian/Babylonian period, Shamash seems to have assumed a more universal presence. Hymns to the sun dating to the time of Ashurbanipal (668-633 B.C.), though perhaps of earlier origin, emphasise this development (Pritchard 1969:386-389):-

..light of the great gods, light of the earth,  
 illuminator of the world regions,  
 ..exalted Judge, the honoured-one of the  
 upper and lower regions;  
 ...Thou dost look into all the lands with thy light...

In keeping with this idea, the glyptic of the 1st millennium B.C. seems to show the sun-god in a more symbolic and ethereal manner - one of the first deities to be so considered. The actual god does not appear to be clearly represented, but it is rather the motifs appertaining to the persona of the sun that are used. One of the most important of these symbols is the disk and rays of the sun, often attached to wings symbolising the skies and 'heaven' (Porada 1948:nos. 637, 640-651, 691, 725-731, 771-775; Collon 2001:79). This imagery was employed par excellence by the Achaemenid hierarchy with the winged disk or bust appearing on seals and sculptures throughout the empire (Schmidt 1957 :pls. 3-10). It is used also at about the same time in the book of one of the minor Biblical prophets 'Malachi', where 'Yahweh' is alluded to in a striking metaphor "But for you who fear my name, the sun of Justice/righteousness shall rise with healing in his rays/wings" (I am indebted to Dr. D. Collon for this reference).

Has the sun-god become an aspect of a universal god? Does this point to a shift away from the ancient anthropocentric presentation of gods to a more abstract thought concerning the nature of the world and the heavens? Such questions will continue to be asked. They become part of the quality of ancient seals as enduring envoys that conveyed messages during their own historical existence and today carry good-will messages from an historical land to a modern concept - UNESCO, as well as continuing to tantalise us in trying to interpret their iconography.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Collon (1997:11) defines such regions of the ancient Near East.
- 2 For the vexed question of the equation between Shamash and Mithra see Zaehner (1961:106-111), Gershevitch (1967:26-44), Thieme 1975:21ff) and Boyce (1982:28-29), and for Mithra as 'guardian of contracts' see Frye (1975:64) and Boyce (1975: 24ff, 267; 1982:219, 268 and above).