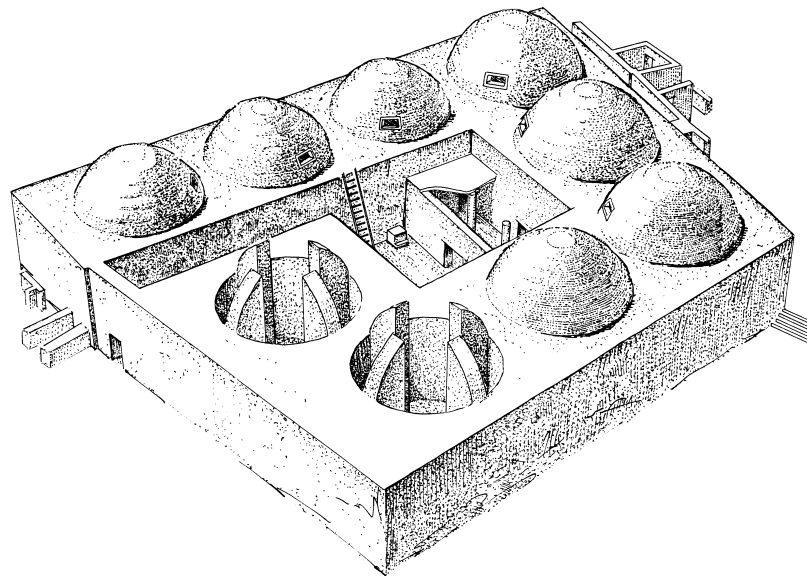


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EARLY BRONZE AGE SEAL IMPRESSIONS FROM THE JEZREEL VALLEY AND THE PROBLEM OF SEALING IN THE SOUTHERN LEVANT

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INTRODUCTION

An Early Bronze Age (EB) seal impression was discovered during the 1996 excavation season at Megiddo. Four EB seal impressions were also found in 1995 during a survey of Mizpe Zevulun in the northwest Jezreel Valley. These sealings present the opportunity again to address two of the outstanding issues of the Early Bronze Age: the nature of socioeconomic and political organization, and the nature and extent of “foreign” contacts.

THE SEAL IMPRESSIONS

Megiddo

The seal impression (reg. 96/H/004/AR001) depicts two horned animals facing left, one behind the other (fig. 19.1). The rightmost animal appears to be in the foreground, while that on the left is in the background. The head of the animal on the right is indistinct, which may be partially a function of its position in the composition and also due to wear. The horns of the animal on the left are rounded and curve downward, while the tail on the right-hand animal dips downward and flares up over what may be pointed ears. This may indicate that the left-hand animal is an ibex (*Capra ibex nubiana*) while the right-hand animal could be a lion or leopard (*Felis leo* or *Felis pardus*).

The Megiddo impression was discovered in Area H, one of the major fields currently being excavated to reexamine the Iron Age stratigraphy of the mound. This find is especially unusual in that the vast majority of fills encountered in Iron Age contexts excavated in 1994 and 1996 contained virtually no EB pottery. The particular context of this object was Locus 004, a fill below the courtyard of Building 1853, a structure generally assigned to Stratum III at Megiddo and dated after the Assyrian conquest of Israel in 732 B.C. (Joffe 2000a).

The impression is on a small sherd of pink (Munsell 5 YR 7/4) calcite tempered ware typical for the EB. The sherd itself is 1.8 cm wide and 2.7 cm high. The impression is only 1.3 cm high. Three sides of the sherd appear to have been straightened by chipping. The shape and condition of the sherd suggests that it had been found, modified, and preserved some time after the original impression was made. It might have been a curiosity, trinket, toy, or heirloom.



FIGURE 19.1. Megiddo seal impression (reg. 96/H/004/AR001) depicting two horned animals. Scale 2:1.

Parallels

The Megiddo seal impression has its closest parallel in an example excavated in the “Stages” on the slope of Megiddo by the University of Chicago. Seal impression 34.2754 shows at least two horned animals facing left with one behind the other (Ben-Tor 1978: no. IIA-4; Engberg and Shipton 1934: 36, figs. 10:C, 11:C). The curved horns of the right-hand animal suggest it is an ibex. The stratigraphic position of the earlier Megiddo sealing, interpreted by Ben-Tor as a pit in Stage V (Ben-Tor 1978: 43–44), simply places it in the EB I. Other impressions from the Megiddo Stages and from the tell are much less similar to our example. A fragmentary impression from Jericho shows a feline pursuing an ibex (Ben-Tor 1978: no. IIA1–3). A recently published example of a feline striding left is found on a handle recovered during a survey of Dayr Qiqub, near Pella (Vieweger 1997). Less precise parallels may be drawn with the stamp seal impression of an ibex from Tell el-Hesi (Ben-Tor 1978: no. IIA-6), the impression of a schematic ibex from Tell el-Fâr‘ah North (Ben-Tor 1978: no. S-3; Keel-Leu 1989: no. 35), and the stamp seal from Tell Qishyon (Ben-Tor 1978: no. S-4; Keel-Leu 1989: no. 20). There is no indication of *tête-bêche* arrangement as found on seal impressions from Megiddo, ‘En Shadud, and Tel Qashish, and which Ben-Tor regards as the product of a distinctive Jezreel Valley “school” (Ben-Tor 1995: 67–68).

Overall the new Megiddo example fits well in the corpus of small naturalistic seal impressions (Ben-Tor’s Class IIA: Animal File [1978: 8–9, 52–57]) and should be dated on the basis of the ceramic fabric and the impression to the late EB I.

Mizpe Zevulun

Mizpe Zevulun (Khirbet el-Mushreifeh, 1697: 2389)¹ is a classic EB “enclosure” site, located on a spur overlooking the western Naḥal Zippori. It is approximately 6 ha in size and is defended on the north, south, and west by heavy fortification walls. Gate complexes are visible on the northwest and the southeast. There are three descending terraces which appear to be

1. Note that the grid references given in Gal 1992: 17 are incorrect.

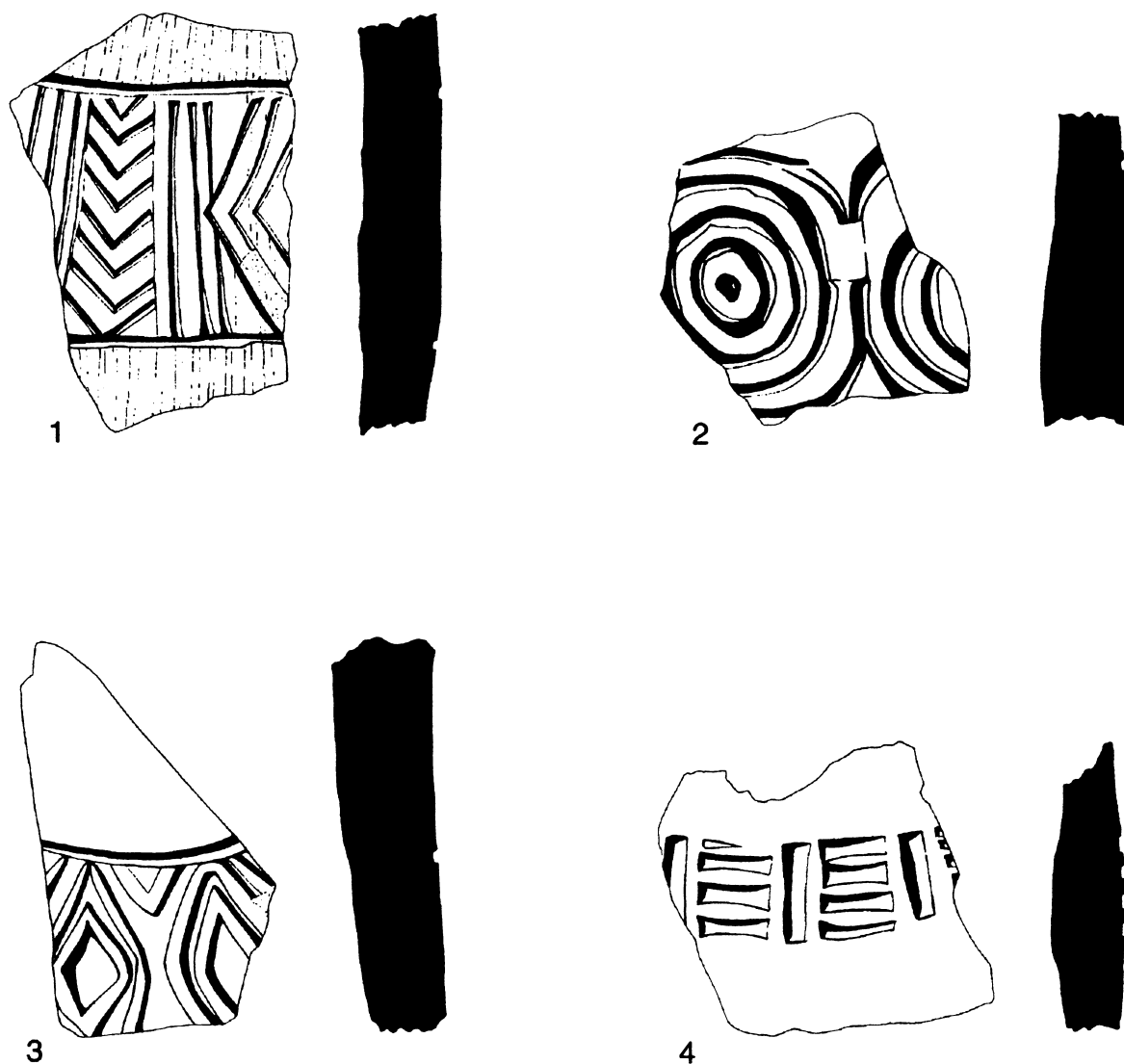


FIGURE 19.2. Seal impressions (reg. 16–23/99/01) from Mizpe Zevulun (Khirbet el-Mushreifeh). Scale 1:1.

separated by fortification walls. The arrangement is uncannily similar to that of Tell el-Fâr'ah North, Mitham Leviah in the Golan (Kochavi 1994), Giv'at Rabi near Sepphoris, Mitham Shahal on the Naḥal Tabor (Gal 1988), and other examples in the eastern lower Galilee and western Samaria (Zertal 1993).

The Mizpe Zevulun sealings were discovered on the surface in 1995 during a survey of the western Jezreel Valley, directed by Professors Israel Finkelstein and Baruch Halpern in connection with the Megiddo project. The site had been previously surveyed by Raban (Raban 1982: no. 69) and Gal (Gal 1992: 17), but its true extent had not been realized. In contrast to previous research, the 1995 survey found some EB I and possibly EB III pottery, and an overwhelming predominance of EB II material, especially “Metallic Ware.” The four seal impressions (fig. 19.2) and two figurine fragments were discovered roughly in the center of the site.

Seal impression 1 (fig. 19.2:1) contains a herringbone flanked by three vertical lines, and half of a lozenge, which cuts into the vertical lines, framed by horizontal lines. It is 4 cm wide and 5.5 cm high. The sherd is pink (Munsell 7.5 YR 7/3) and is the shoulder of a medium storage jar. Vertical combing is present above and below the impression.

Seal impression 2 (fig. 19.2:2) contains two concentric circles. It is 3.3 cm wide and 3.8 cm high. The sherd is light reddish brown (Munsell 5 YR 6/4) and is probably the shoulder of a medium storage jar.

Seal impression 3 (fig. 19.2:3) contains two lozenges separated by a triangle above a single horizontal line. It is 3.2 cm wide and 5.5 cm high. The sherd is pinkish gray (Munsell 7.5 YR 7/2) and is the shoulder of a medium storage jar.

Seal impression 4 (fig. 19.2:4) contains two crudely impressed ladders separated by vertical lines. A third ladder may be partially preserved. This impression is 3.7 cm high and 3.9 cm wide. The sherd is light red (Munsell 2.5 YR 7/6). It is probably the shoulder or body of a medium jar.

All four seal impressions are on Metallic Ware, although number 4 has a slightly different surface appearance and contains more visible calcite grits. Numbers 1–3 contain traces of white lime wash, while 4 does not. Combing is evident on Number 1 but might have been present on other parts of the vessels from which Numbers 2 and 3 derive.

Parallels

The Mizpe Zevulun examples have a number of general parallels but few precise ones in the increasingly large Southern Levantine corpus of seal impressions. Overall they fall into Ben-Tor's Class I of geometric motifs (Ben-Tor 1978: 4–8, 47–52).

The herringbone is paralleled on examples from a number of sites such as Tel Dan (Greenberg 1996: fig. 3.40.88, 11), and Shamir (Ben-Tor 1978: IE-3, IE-5). Concentric circles are found on a number of impressions but usually in association with herringbones or rhombuses that frame or connect the circles. It is of course possible that such motifs existed but are not preserved on our sealing. Parallels are found with impressions with full circles such as Tel Dan no. 100091 (Greenberg 1996: fig. 3.41.15), Tel Qashish Qa 81/86 (Ben-Tor 1994: fig. 12), and the half-circles of Bâb edh-Dhrâ' no. 2947 (Lapp 1989: 3–4, fig. 3). There are also many parallels with the unpublished seal impressions from Khirbet ez-Zeraqun.² The use of multiple lines as a divider and the lozenges which use concentric lozenges rather than horizontal or vertical lines as fillers are unusual and lack parallels at present. The ladder motif is found on many impressions, such as IE-6 from Hazor (Greenberg 1997: fig. III.4), but is usually surrounded by other elements. The shortness of the ladders also has no parallel.

Interestingly, the Mizpe Zevulun sealings do not contain any animal, human, or architectural representation similar to examples from nearby Jezreel Valley sites such as Tel Qashish and Giv'at Rabi (Ben-Tor 1992). The Mizpe Zevulun sealings should be dated to EB II–III on the basis of their style and ware. The question of whether they can be dated more precisely is addressed below.

2. I am grateful to Matthias Flender for sharing copies of the unpublished Khirbet ez-Zeraqun seal impressions with me.

THE FUNCTIONS OF SEALS AND SEALINGS IN THE EARLY BRONZE AGE

Approaching Seals and Sealing

What were the functions of seals and sealings in the southern Levant? Most scholars either state or imply that they are administrative devices used by complex institutions and/or in complex economic interactions taking place over long distances (Ben-Tor 1995: 76). Motifs that include groups of people and structures in particular have been interpreted as representing or belonging to religious institutions (Beck 1976; Ben-Tor 1992; Epstein 1972).

In order to discuss how seals and sealings might have worked in the Early Bronze Age southern Levant, it is useful to review the features of sealing systems. As elements of a visual communication system, seals must contain a limited number of motifs which, while usable in a variety of combinations, still retain sufficient consistency to make them recognizable. Formal variability in size, shape, treatment, and execution may also vary, but not so much as to compromise recognition. The number of repeatable elements may be large, so as to be presentable as a formal syntax, but not so large as to exceed the capacity of individuals or groups working, in the southern Levantine case, without mnemonic devices. As administrative devices sealings serve as “witness to a fact of a legal or administrative nature, elaborated by observing certain set forms which are destined to guarantee its reliability and to give it the force of proof” (Fissore 1994: 340).

What features associated with seals and sealing practices elsewhere are not present in the southern Levant? These can be easily enumerated:

1. There is no writing system, and no other evidence of literacy or numeracy in the form of other mnemonic or accounting systems, such as tokens.
2. There are no bullae in the form of door locks, indicative of sealed installations.
3. There are no bullae that sealed baskets, bags, or other portable items (with the exception of the locally made EB I Egyptian examples from ‘En Besor, Tel Erani, and the Tel Ḥalif Terrace [van den Brink 1995] indicative of a variety of containers and goods being recorded for transport or storage.
4. There are no caches of bullae or vessel sealings, indicative of temporary or permanent archival activities.
5. There is no practice of countersealing the same object, indicative of information being processed by more than one office or administrator.
6. There is almost no other imagery that extends or complements seal iconography in EB I and none at all in EB II–III.
7. Large EB II and EB III architectural complexes such as Building 3177 at Megiddo, the “Building with Circles” at Beit Yerah, and Area G at Tel Yarmuth, all suggested to be elite residences (“palaces”), storage facilities, or both, have no published seals or sealings at all.³
8. There are extremely few excavated examples of seals and sealings from even broad exposures at major EB II and EB III sites, such as at Arad, Tell el-Fâr‘ah North, Beit Yerah, Tel Yarmuth, and Megiddo.

3. The assemblage from Khirbet ez-Zeraqun and its context remain unpublished.

9. EB II–III sealings have an extremely limited distribution, primarily the Jezreel, Huleh, and Northern Jordan Valleys, the Galilee, and Northern Transjordan.

These lacunae suggest that southern Levantine sealings have a fundamentally different structure and function from those in the Syro-Mesopotamian, Anatolian, and Iranian worlds (e.g., Alizadeh 1988; Ferioli and Fiandra 1983; Mazzoni 1992; Ferioli and Fiandra 1994; Rothman 1994). Unfortunately, the vast majority of seals and sealings from the southern Levant, the present examples included, were found in either secondary contexts or on the surface. Our ability to reconstruct the use of seals is therefore severely limited. An examination of the motifs of EB glyptic, however, in conjunction with other data gives some indication as to the larger purpose of sealings.

Early Bronze I Seals and Sealings

There are few securely dated EB I seals and seal impressions but many that display a variety of motifs largely oriented toward wild animals and agro-pastoral activities. The splendid stamp seal from Tel Kitan showing two cattle pulling a plow is the most elaborate example of an agro-pastoral scene (Keel-Leu 1989: no. 42). A seal impression apparently depicting a cow suckling a calf was found at Beit Yerah in an EB IV level but is consistent with late EB I styles and ceramics (Bar-Adon 1973; Ben-Tor 1978: no. IIC-3). The “Animal File” and *tête-bêche* arrangement may also depict ovicaprids. These objects find conceptual parallels in other EB I material culture, such as the bowl from Tell el-Fâr‘ah North containing two yoked oxen (Amiran 1986; de Vaux 1952: 577, pl. LXXXb) and the “laden animal” figurine from Azor (Amiran 1985).

Wild animals, primarily lions and ibexes but also snakes, fish, and a crab, are also common on EB I seals. The most elaborate examples are the impressions from Jericho (Ben-Tor 1978: IIA-1, 2, 3) and a purchased seal in the École Biblique, probably from Byblos (Ben-Tor 1978: IIBb-2). Wild animals, including lions, cattle, and ibex, are also found on the famous Picture Pavement in the courtyard of the Stratum XIX temple at Megiddo (Loud 1948: pls. 275–79), now securely dated to the late EB I period (Joffe 2000b). The long-standing cultic significance of lions and felines is also evident from the Late Neolithic mosaic pavement at the open sanctuary Uvda 6 and other sites in the southern Negev and eastern Sinai (Avner 1984), all the way to the Iron Age, where lions are found on cult stands and an actual skull was found in the temple at Jaffa (Kaplan and Ritter-Kaplan 1993: 656). The carved basalt (or phosphorite) ibex bowl from Cave 134 at ‘En HaNasiv is an especially beautiful example of EB I art (Amiran 1989; see also Braun 1990; Philip and Williams-Thorpe 1993).

Several seals depict wild and domestic animals together. Seal impression c538 found in Megiddo Stratum XI, but certainly originating in EB I, depicts a horned ox and may include a lion (Ben-Tor 1978: no. IIC-2; Loud 1948: pl. 160:4). Numeira impression 1301 shows a horned animal followed by a lion (Lapp 1989: fig. 7).⁴ In contrast, a series of geometric impressions also date to EB I and are localized to the central Jordan Valley, especially Tell Umm Hamad, Jawa, and nearby sites (Helms 1987; 1991b: 110–29, figs. 160–69; 1992:

4. The appearance of animal procession motifs on sherds dated to EB III from Tell el-Handaqq South suggests the survival or imitation of an older style (Chesson 1998: fig. 12).

fig. 272; Leonard 1992: fig. 22). A possible seal with cross-hatched design carved from a small wadi cobble was found on the surface of Tell el-Handaquq (Mabry 1989: fig. 14.5). The geometric impressions would appear to represent the continuation of Neolithic-Chalcolithic stamp seal traditions (Keel-Leu 1989).

The contrasting animal motifs represent a fundamental tension in the EB I society, between lifeways and perhaps ideologies oriented toward “proto-urban” agro-pastoral activities and those that were more wild. EB I society found itself divided between the lion and the oxen, between subsistence and prestige activities which were rapidly shifting from village to small-scale urban socioeconomic bases. That this tension is captured, however fleetingly, in the glyptic and other art of the EB I reflects the transformational nature of the period. Amiran’s persuasive analysis of the ‘En HaNasiv ibex bowl as an EB I variant of a Chalcolithic shape also supports the idea of significant continuity between the two periods, a conclusion indicated by settlement pattern and other data (Joffe 1993: 36–37, 41–48).

Only the broad outlines of seal distribution in the EB I can be detected at present. Both agro-pastoral and wild animal motifs have been found at the same sites, such as Megiddo, and agro-pastoral motifs have been found at extremely small sites, such as Tel Kitan. The excavated Megiddo examples derive from the domestic area on the slope of the site, while the tell itself was occupied contemporaneously by an extremely large religious complex that has produced no seals or sealings whatsoever. That geometric motifs predominate in the central Jordan Valley may indicate a greater degree of continuity with the Chalcolithic period than elsewhere (Joffe 1993: 37; Joffe and Dessel 1995). But sealings appear on a variety of shapes and sizes of vessels, suggesting that they are not being used as part of a system of administration.

At best we may say that the EB I seals and seal impressions were emblems that might have symbolized emic concepts and visually facilitated communication, not economic contacts. Like other types of the EB I art, they symbolize a selective and idealized view of society, which though increasingly urbanized, still had very little need or capacity for administrative devices.

Early Bronze II–III Seals and Sealings

The practice of sealing in the EB II–III periods is qualitatively and quantitatively different from that of the EB I. First there is a major dating problem to be addressed. While the Metallic Ware tradition clearly begins at the very end of the EB I and overlaps, at least regionally, with the Grain Wash tradition (Esse 1993), the bulk must now be dated to the EB II (Greenberg and Porat 1996). Production of a limited variety of larger storage jars continues, however, into the early part of the EB III prior to the appearance of the Khirbet Kerak tradition. Given that the Mizpe Zevulun and Tel Dan seal impressions come from sites with no appreciable Khirbet Kerak component, a date in late EB II or early EB III seems most likely. The position of Khirbet ez-Zeraqun and its extensive assemblage of sealings in this scheme must await fuller publication. These issues will only be resolved with further radiocarbon assays.

How did seals and sealings function in the EB II–III periods? Once again it must be noted that there are no caches of seals or sealings, although sites such as Tel Dan and Khirbet ez-Zeraqun have produced numerous examples. Vessels were impressed with seals before firing, indicating that the information encoded permanently was known or available at that stage of production. There is a greater degree of repetition and consistency in the geometric and

representational motifs employed. The human, animal, and architectural motifs have been found at a number of sites ranging from the very small, such as Rosh ha-Niqra, to the very large, such as Beit Yerah.

The strong connection of the sealing with Metallic Ware, and the restricted distribution of the latter, indicate that encoded information was highly localized and highly specific. While Metallic Ware is distributed into the central Levant (Marfoe 1995: 96; Mazzoni 1985, 1987), sealings appear to be restricted to the Jezreel, Huleh, and northern Jordan valleys and immediately surrounding regions. And while a number of sites display similar motifs, such as the “ritual dance,” all the examples are made by separate seals. Indeed, virtually all the EB II–III impressions now known, over 200, were made from different seals. Even at sites with large corpora of seals show almost no duplication. Furthermore, no geometric seal impression has been found on any post-EB I southern Levantine vessel in Egypt. This fact also argues for dating sealings later in the EB II after the cessation of Egypto-Canaanite trade. In short, while there was a significant amount of sealing being done, there were not many vessels impressed with the same seal, and sealed vessels were not carried especially far or in significant numbers from one site to another. The geographic extent of known EB II–III sealings is perhaps 80 by 80 km. That they are found almost exclusively on storage jars and pithoi indicates that, if they moved at all, vessels and the commodities they contained traveled only short and medium distances. Petrographic and neutron activation analyses of seal impressions are necessary to determine more precisely the production and distribution patterns of vessels.

If sealings did not play a role in administering long distance trade, what did they do? As noted above, the institutional basis of sealings has been much discussed. Major architectural complexes are becoming better known from all periods of the EB, with “temples” in particular being the focus of much attention (Miroschedji 1993). Were religious institutions separate from political or economic institutions, or were they all one and the same? It has been argued elsewhere that EB II organization was largely communal, with urban elites sharing political, economic, and religious roles (Joffe 1993: 84–87). But by the late EB II and certainly EB III, changes in settlement patterns, the layout of sites, and intrasite architecture all indicate a more centralized and competitive environment. Huge, unequivocal temples appear at Megiddo and Khirbet ez-Zeraqun during the EB III, along with apparently more specialized facilities, such as the Building with Circles at Beit Yerah, and the large “palatial” complex at Tel Yarmuth. In short, late EB II and early EB III see the transformation of the social and economic landscapes of the southern Levant creating new requirements for control of commodities and attendant information.

In the second half of the EB II as Egyptian contacts evaporated, intra- and interregional exchange of commodities, especially Mediterranean crop products, expanded. Local elites, probably urban based, exchanged goods with one another and expanded local control over the rural landscape through control of production, consumption, and exchange of Mediterranean crops. These practices, probably by a variety of competing and increasingly specialized economic, political, and religious elites, culminated in the fully specialized landscape of the EB III (Esse 1991: 98–124; Joffe 1993: 82–86; Rosen 1995). Seals and sealings were another method for local elites, including religious elites with aspirations to become major economic institutions, to control the flow of goods around specific regions and between regions. The proliferation of seals indicates that there were a great number of aspirants, or a great number of local participants, in this system. The reorganization of the landscape coincided with the

tremendous expansion of Metallic Ware, providing in a sense an increasingly standardized medium for communication and means of exchange. But the system remained highly localized, and institutions never felt the need or achieved the capability to go beyond literally superficial communication. Seals were symbols that marked either producer, distributor, or consumer of the storage vessel and/or its contents and had no further use beyond a single event or transaction. They were in a sense advertisements rather than records of transactions. And once the institutional landscape was fully articulated and centralization intensified around sites, even this amount of information was no longer necessary.

The lack of geometric and representational sealings at Arad, the largest and most important southern site during the EB II, may be accounted for in several ways. First, it was well outside the area of Metallic Ware where most impressions are found. Second, its primary socioeconomic interactions were not with other urban sites but with sedentarizing pastoral nomads in the Negev and Sinai, perhaps even as “urbanism of the nomads” (Finkelstein 1990). Third, Arad might well have been in rapid decline by the time the northern sealing tradition began. Overall, Arad, and the Dead Sea Plain sites which continued into the EB III, had different administrative, organizational, and ideological needs. While the latter sites did employ a few geometric motifs similar to those on Metallic Ware, most were more idiosyncratic (Lapp 1989, 1995).

Seals in Cross-Cultural Perspective

Lerna may provide a hint about the use of seals by highly localized intra-urban institutions, such as the House of Tiles, with specific functions not necessarily related to long-distance trade. Aegean sealing practices provide important similarities and contrasts with those of the Levant. First, only stamp seals are known. Their distribution is also limited, with most sealings deriving from the excavations at Lerna, although several actual seals have been found elsewhere (Heath [Wiencke] 1958; Wiencke 1969; Pullen 1994; Weingarten 1997). But it is in contexts and function that Aegean seals diverge most profoundly from their Levantine counterparts. Stamp seal impressions are used to decorate ceramic hearth rims and vessels (Wiencke 1970; Caskey 1990; Pullen 1994). But at Lerna they are also found on clay bullae uncovered within a corridor room of the House of the Tiles with sealing boxes, jars, and baskets (Wiencke 1969; Aruz 1987: 192–96; Pullen 1994: 43–46). This usage parallels that of earlier and contemporary Mesopotamia, southwestern Iran, Anatolia, and Egypt and indicates an inchoate record-keeping system that is conspicuously absent from the Levant.

Lerna is not the only site with seals and sealings, but it does have the largest corpus (Pullen 1994: 49–50, table 2; Aruz 1994). What was in the various containers being sealed at Lerna? What did the system record: the origins of tribute or offerings received, the ownership of goods being stored, or the destination of disbursements? What is the time span represented? And what is the nature of regional organization? Pullen suggests that the system recorded the contributions of followers to the chief or paramount at Lerna but dismisses the possibility that the seventy separate seals represent items being stored by or for individual groups (Pullen 1994: 45–47, n. 47). In contrast, Wiencke notes that the Lerna sealings were not necessarily administrative or indicative of contents or quality. She believes that the “simplest conclusion is that the different seal designs indicated the providers of goods” (Wiencke 1989: 505). Finally, Weingarten suggests that Lerna was an Anatolian trading outpost employing eastern sealing practices (Weingarten 1997).

It should be noted that Lerna is only 1.5 hectares in size (Konsola 1990: 469), which makes it an unlikely candidate for an urban site with wide-ranging contacts. It also casts suspicion on the site as the center of a powerful chief, since the resident population was also extremely small. In this respect it resembles Late Neolithic Sabi Abyad (Akkermans and Duistermaat 1997) or Ubaid period Tepe Gawra, both similarly endowed with rich corpora of sealings but with small resident populations (Rothman 1994). Some urban-rural hierarchies existed in Greece, but these were highly localized. No pan-regional pattern of hierarchy is evident. More notable are a handful of large “corridor houses” (Shaw 1990), lacking any storage facilities, mostly at coastal sites with little other evidence of significant social differentiation (Wiencke 1989). The conclusions here can only be that intraregional integration was uneven, and interregional integration sporadic, at best. The Early Helladic sealings should therefore be interpreted in a minimalist fashion: at best as precocious but highly localized efforts at administration, token gifts given in patron-client relationships, or more likely as lower order signs of personal identification within a framework of communal storage and ritual activities.⁵

The lack of bullae or record-keeping indicates that southern Levantine sites did not move goods, secure facilities, and process information at the same level as sites in regions to the north. Whether or not the sealed vessels represent gifts to institutions or from institutions is one major outstanding question, which could be partially addressed by analyzing the ceramics and their sources. The individuals and institutions sealing vessels apparently had no need for more complex information, such as quantitative or volumetric data, probably lacked the ability to process such information, and rarely executed transactions over distances of more than a few dozen kilometers. But the apparent success of sealing on pottery at EB IV Ebla (Mazzoni 1992) indicates that the method itself was useful, provided that the institution needed and was capable of processing information encoded in such a manner.

The EB II–III sealings in the southern Levant should be interpreted in a minimalist fashion, as efforts to encode limited quantities of information on highly specific types of commodities that traveled only short and medium distances. Sealing was a system that served as an ideological statement as much as administrative information. When the ideology and organizations that sealings supported was fixed and the environment transformed, other means of ideological maintenance and administration became necessary.

SEALS AND FOREIGN CONTACTS DURING THE EARLY BRONZE AGE

Foreign iconography in EB glyptic has been extensively debated, but the significance of motifs alleged to be foreign, the conditions of their adoption, and possible routes and mechanisms of transmission have not. This review proceeds chronologically.

Early Bronze I

The question of southern Levantine contacts with the north during the EB I has been discussed by several authors, most notably Hennessy, Amiran, and Ben-Tor (Amiran 1970; Ben-Tor 1985, 1986, 1989; Hennessy 1967). Relations with Egypt are of course well documented, but their precise nature remains a topic of debate. Ben-Tor has discussed in a number

5. See generally Rutter 1993.

of publications what he sees as widespread Mesopotamian and Iranian influences on the EB I southern Levantine seal iconography and practices. Other scholars such as Beck and Lapp have similarly stressed these influences (Beck 1975, 1976, 1984; Lapp 1995). Interestingly, the discussion by a Mesopotamian glyptic specialist, Beatrice Teissier, concludes that Mesopotamian and Iranian motifs were used haphazardly in southern and northern Levantine glyptic, suggesting little or no understanding of the iconographic vocabulary (Teissier 1987). Several of her points may be repeated and amplified.

First, it must be recognized that the cylinder seal is a Mesopotamian innovation of the (Middle?) Uruk period which increased the ability of an impression to contain information and complemented existing administrative systems based on stamp seals and tokens (Nissen 1977: 16; Pittman 1994: 25). The adoption of the cylinder seal in Syria and the Levant built on preexisting carved bead and stamp seal traditions and was strongly related to the contacts between Uruk settlements along the Euphrates River and in Egypt in the mid to late fourth millennium. These contacts, although probably small-scale, were of enormous significance for Egyptian political iconography.⁶ But the evidence for Uruk material culture in the southern Levant is virtually nil. Locally made bent-spout vessels (Amiran 1970, 1992) and some Uruk-like pottery at the Eastern Desert site of Jawa (Helms 1991a)⁷ are the only tenuous evidence for northern contacts during the EB I. With one possible exception (‘En Besor [Ben-Tor 1976]), there are no southern Levantine seals or impressions that can be argued to have been imported from Mesopotamia or Iran, while there are a number of examples at Byblos and in north Syria that may be imports from the Uruk settlement sites along the Euphrates (Teissier 1987: 40–41). Thus, while the concept of the cylinder seal seems to have arrived in the southern Levant either directly from the north or via Egypt, there are few other data to provide a context for this “influence.”

Second, there is the matter of glyptic styles. Animal motifs similar to Iranian examples prevail in southern Levantine glyptic, but as noted above these build on both the local stamp seal tradition and particular local iconographic and ideological conditions. The most distinctive Iranian motifs—such as animal protomes, griffins, animals on snakes, rosettes entwined by serpents, lions attacking quadrupeds, and birds perched on animals—are very rare in the southern Levant, especially during the EB I. Far more common are *tête-bêche*, a device rather than a motif, animals with extra-long goatees, three pronged tails, five legged animals, and exaggerated curved horns (Teissier 1987: 43–45). Given the agro-pastoral economy of the Early Bronze Age, we may ask whether these motifs are simply local innovations rather than foreign imports. Most of these motifs are also common to earlier stamp seal traditions of both Iran and Syria (see generally von Wickede 1990) and the stamp seal traditions of Anatolia (Aruz 1992) and the Levant. The most distinctive Uruk, Jemdet Nasr, and Early Dynastic scenes are conspicuously absent, including scenes of battle, manufacturing, such as weaving and potting, contests, and banquets (see generally Brandes 1979).

6. See Boehmer 1974a, 1974b, 1991a, 1991b; Boehmer, Dreyer, and Kromer 1993; Moorey 1990, 1995; Sievertsen 1992; Smith 1992; von der Way 1992; 1993: 67–75; Mark 1998; Hendrickx and Bavay forthcoming; Joffe 2000c.

7. The dating of Jawa and its pottery is problematic. The “Uruk” elements may, in fact, be slightly later than even the second phase of expansion proposed in the new chronology. See McClellan and Porter 1995; Philip 1995.

Teissier concludes that “traits characteristic of Iranian glyptic are less common in Palestinian glyptic than those found in sites in the Lebanon and Syria. What can be detected is more likely to have been derived from the north than received second hand from Egypt” (Teissier 1987: 47). She goes on to state that in Syro-Palestine “motifs were absorbed into glyptic art only . . . stripped of their context and used singly” (Teissier 1987: 49). The route of transmission for these motifs to the Levant and Egypt appears to have been via the Uruk period settlements on the Euphrates.⁸

That complex Uruk institutional imagery with a rich iconographic vocabulary is paralleled by only limited animal motifs in the contemporary EB I southern Levant indicates that the southern Levant received nothing directly from the Syro-Mesopotamian world and comprehended less.

Early Bronze II–III

The question of southern Levantine contacts during the Jemdet Nasr and the Early Dynastic periods raises other problems. Does any other evidence exist to suggest late fourth and early–mid-third millennium contacts between the southern Levant and Syro-Mesopotamia? Despite extensive excavation and study, little can be cited besides model beds (Beck 1993; De Cree 1987–88), decorated bone tubes (Zarzecki-Peleg 1993), and most recently a burial at Tell Assawir containing north Syrian pottery (Yannai 2000). Glyptic style and practices comprise the only other evidence. The matter of Khirbet Kerak ware and related material dating to EB III requires separate discussion and has no (clear) bearing on the questions raised here.

The relationship of geometric and representational motifs on southern Levantine and Greater Mesopotamian glyptic has been approached in a way that emphasizes specific motifs rather than the larger iconographic vocabulary and contexts of use in either region. The Early Dynastic period “piedmont” or “geometric International style” (Collon 1987: 20) has recently been discussed by Pittman (1994), who refers to it as the “glazed steatite style.” This style is distributed from western Iran to Syria, primarily in peripheral regions surrounding the Mesopotamian basin. The similarities between this widely distributed style and the glyptic of the southern Levant have been long pointed to as evidence for early third-millennium contacts with Mesopotamia. The sealings on vessels from Tell Gubba in the Hamrin Basin have recently been cited as showing practices similar to those of the southern Levant and by implication some organic relationship between the two regions (Ben-Tor 1995: 71; Esse 1990: 31–32; Ji 1988).

The southern Levantine use of several motifs such as concentric circles, lozenges, and chevrons do indeed echo the “piedmont” or “glazed steatite” style (Collon 1987: 23). Without any evidence of imports or other contacts, however, it is difficult to reconstruct a mechanism for transmission. A closer examination of the style in Greater Mesopotamia may yield some insights on its use and possible conditions of transmission. Pittman has suggested that the “glazed geometric style” motifs are at least partially related to signs in the proto-Elamite script, which was emerging at precisely this time. The presence of these motifs on seals in the piedmont suggests proto-Elamite activities in central Mesopotamia (Pittman 1994: 260–61). Matthews disagrees, noting that geometric motifs are found on earlier Uruk sealings (D. Matthews

8. Teissier’s conclusions on the Iranian elements of Levantine glyptic also agree with those of Algaze and Moorey on the role of Susa in the Uruk expansion (Algaze 1993; Moorey 1990, 1995).

1997: 79–86). Both scholars agree that the style and motifs must be seen in the context of Uruk–proto-Elamite interaction.

Rather than seeing the seals as elements of a commercial network, however, Pittman believes that the style might have emerged as a way of visually mediating between two or more language groups (Pittman 1994: 261–62). She also draws parallels with the Jemdet Nasr and Early Dynastic I city seals that apparently relate to specific items exchanged between Mesopotamian cities named on the seals (R. Matthews 1993; Pittman 1994: 262). In both cases geometric motifs complemented other forms of visual communication to facilitate contacts between diverse units. D. Matthews (1997: 84–85) notes that the function of the seals differed in the core areas of glazed (or, as he prefers, fired) steatite glyptic of southwestern Iran, southern Mesopotamia, the Hamrin, and at Nineveh; central administration, ritual contexts, on vessels, and on containers, respectively. The degradation of meaning is apparent over space, as well as over time.⁹

In the absence of long-distance trade networks, local exchange of commodities served as means for down-the-line transmission of motifs. The presence of geometric motifs on sealings served as a form of visual communication, originally based on proto-Elamite forms, which facilitated local interaction along the eastern and northern peripheries of Mesopotamia. From there the motifs, increasingly few in number and without their original symbolism and steatite technique, eventually reached the Levant some centuries after their original diffusion. Whether or not the original intent of the motifs was intact is unknowable, but the simplicity and local effectiveness of sealing pottery with geometric motifs could be relearned or reinvented at each step along the way. In the southern Levant the style, now reduced to a bare handful of motifs, fell on fertile ground (cf. Mazzoni 1993; Flender in Finkbeiner 1995).

The use of architectural facades, animals, masked humans, and other devices raises other problems since these are sometimes suggested to be in direct imitation of Greater Mesopotamian practice (cf. Ben-Tor 1992: 164). These raise again the problem of Early Bronze Age religion and cult. Two problems should be separated. The first is whether religious institutions existed and were socioeconomic entities during the EB II and III periods. The evidence of temples during this period is clear, although it must be noted that no significant associated storage installations have been detected at Megiddo, Khirbet ez-Zeraqun, Ai, Arad, or Tell Yarmuth. This may simply be an accident of excavation. Suggestions as to how such institutions might have used sealings as visual advertisement is offered above. A second and critical question is whether southern Levantine religion and cult were at all related to or modeled after Mesopotamian practice. Amiran (1962, 1972a, 1972b), for example, has long suggested that specific Mesopotamian deities such as Dumuzi were worshipped in the southern Levant, and that this unity of beliefs goes back into the Neolithic.

9. A parallel may be drawn with the third millennium “Intercultural Style” of carved steatite bowls, distributed widely from the Indus Valley and eastern Iran to Greater Mesopotamia and containing complex representational iconography. Most studies have stressed the role of chlorite vessels as commodities in complex interregional and international exchange mechanisms (Kohl 1978, 1982). Recently, however, Lamberg-Karlovsky has reexamined the data and suggested instead that the vessels were highly symbolic objects relating to death and burial and whose motifs united widely divergent groups that shared similar beliefs and ideologies (Lamberg-Karlovsky 1988, 1993).

If it was indeed the case that a set of beliefs and practices was common across western Asia from prehistory onward, we are presented with possible explanations for the motifs on cylinder seals that appear to depict Mesopotamian cultic scenes, such as masked individuals, temple facades, and processions of animals. One possibility is that specific motifs and their meanings were indeed transmitted to the southern Levant, although as noted above, complementary evidence is lacking. A second possibility is that an underlying matrix of pan-western Asian beliefs provided a similar background for religious iconography in Mesopotamia and the southern Levant. These concepts, including the same basic pantheon, cosmology, and cosmogony, manifest themselves in parallel iconography when similar social conditions developed in each area. Given that religious and cultic scenes in the southern Levant never duplicate entirely Mesopotamian iconography but appear to use only isolated or singular motifs, this latter suggestion may be more reasonable.

Motifs such as the “ritual dance” (groups of people holding hands in front of buildings) have only conceptual parallels on Mesopotamian glyptic. Other iconographic elements suggested as importation—such as the use of masks—are well attested in the Levantine Neolithic, while specific motifs such as masked individuals seated before structures echo Chalcolithic iconography—evident, for example, on Ghassul wall paintings. In other words, southern Levantine iconography could be a local and parallel development. In the absence of clear and demonstrable archaeological evidence for early third-millennium contacts and cultural transmission between Mesopotamia and the southern Levant, the deep common roots of the two areas may suffice to explain most iconographic parallels.

The similarities between southern Levantine sealing practices and those at Lerna have also been frequently cited (Ben-Tor 1995: 74–75; Wiencke 1970; see generally Aruz 1994). The Early Helladic IIA period, or Korakou culture, and Lerna III specifically should now be dated to ca. 2500–2400 B.C. (Manning 1994: 186), some two centuries after the beginning of the Levantine EB III. If southern Levantine motifs and techniques current in late EB II and early EB III indeed reached the Argolid, several possibilities are raised. The first is that they arrived in Greece ca. 2700 B.C. but could not be effectively employed until much later. The second is that contacts were sporadic and that information regarding seals and sealings did not arrive until Early Helladic II. A final suggestion is to see the Lerna practices indirectly inspired by areas increasingly remote from the southern Levant: EB Byblos, EB IVA Ebla (Mazzoni 1992), the Syro-Anatolian traditions of sealing bullae, and the increasingly attested practice of sealing vessels, such as at Late Uruk Hasssek Höyük (Behm-Blancke et al. 1981: 24–28; Behm-Blancke 1993) and EB Jerablus-Tahtani (Peltenburg et al. 1996: 5–6, fig. 4; Peltenburg et al. 1997: 4, fig. 3). Overall, the internationalism of the mid-third millennium provides a better context for Aegean-Levantine contacts than the more insular world of EB II (Joffe n.d.).¹⁰

CONCLUSIONS

The Megiddo and Mizpe Zevulun sealings are, respectively, typical and atypical examples of Southern Levantine glyptic in the EB. While glyptic art was, in a most attenuated fashion, related to larger Western Asian styles, the motifs and practices were particularly attuned to

10. See also Broodbank 1993; Agouridis 1997.

local ideological and organizational needs. That these features in the southern Levant differed dramatically from those in contemporary large-scale societies points again to the importance of understanding local, small-scale complexity first its own terms and then in comparative perspective.

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