



Cylinder Seals from the Site of Tell Bzikh (Zabalam)

Assist. Prof. Dr. Fayhaa Mawlood Ali

University of Baghdad - College of Arts

fayhaamawlood@coart.uobaghdad.edu.iq

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0281-268x>

Abstract:

Cylinder seals were one of those arts that embodied and immortalized an aspect of the details of life in Mesopotamia. Due to the large number of cylinder seals discovered in various ancient cities and in all periods, and the accuracy of the details represented on them, or the diversity of their topics, and the multiplicity of their scenes, it was possible to draw a clear picture of the religious and day life of the inhabitants of Mesopotamia. Seals have a great importance in archaeological studies, as they give a clear picture of well knowing about history of the periods and determining their time periods, especially when they contain cuneiform writing that mentions the name of the king or the names of people in circulation in a certain period (Moorey, 1999, p.18). Seals also contributed to giving us a clear picture or idea about human beliefs and ideas, as well as the common methods and ways of worship that brought people closer to the gods, in addition to revealing to us many religious rituals and social values of each period (Collon, 1997, p.9).

Seals also provide us with evidence of the technologies available at that time of their manufacture, the machines, stone and metal tools, or the raw materials that went into the manufacture of seals. These materials were made available through the trade relations between countries at that time (Moorey, 1999, p.17). Seals also contributed to defining the styles and artistic characteristics of each period in which they were carved and distinguishing them from one period to another (Nissen, 1977, p.18).

The writing on some seals also provided us with valuable information about the names of cities as well as the names of professions and crafts in every historical period (Collon, 1997, p.46). Finally, seals played a major role in tracking the migrations of peoples and knowing which peoples migrated to Mesopotamia by noting the changes that occur in the artistic characteristics when comparing the artistic styles of another seals (Subhi, 1969, pp.21-22).

Keywords: Mesopotamia; Seals; Motifs; Tell Bzikh; Zabalam; Gods; King.

Received: 08 May 2024 **Revised:** 10 June 2024 **Accepted:** 25 June 2024

Introduction:

The site of Tell Bzikh (ancient Zabalam) is one of the important archaeological sites dating back to the Old Babylonian period (2004-1595 BCE). The hill is located in Dhi-Qar Governorate in southern Iraq, 290 km south of Baghdad. It is also located within the administrative borders of Qalat Sakkar district. The hill is bordered from the north by the Fajr district, Maysalun village, and Al-Zaytouna village, also from the east by Qalat Sakkar district and Al-Salihiya village. But Al-Masab Al-A'am river runs from the west and south of it (see: Map No. 1-2). This hill consists of three main mounds distributed on the eastern, western, and southern sides. The general shape of the site is almost rectangular, with an estimated area of approximately 437 Acres. This site is surrounded by an external wall built of brick and clay with plaster material, and is decorated with buttresses and recesses (Haider, 2003-2004, p.170). (see: Map No. 3)

Name of the Site:

The oldest layers at the site of Bzikh (Zabalam) date back to the ancient Sumerian period or the Early Dynastic period (2400-2371 BCE), they found some votive cups with those bodies contained cuneiform writing mentioning the name of the city, also this city name appeared in the same period in the text of the conflict between the cities of Umma and Lagash, when the name of the ruler (IL) was mentioned in it, who was the head of the temple of the city of Zabalam, which is located north of the city of Umma. The name of



this city was known in the Sumerian language as (MUŠ₃.UNU^{ki}) and its equivalent in Akkadian is (Zabalam). This name became famous in the period of the Third Dynasty of Ur (2112-2004 BCE) and was associated with the goddess Inanna / Ishtar under the name (dINANNA.MUŠ₃.ZA.UNU^{ki}). There are other names corresponding to the city such as (ZA.MUŠ₃.UNU^{ki}) or (dINANNA.MUŠ₃.UNU^{ki}) or (MUŠ₃.UNU^{ki}) (Edzard, und Farber, 1974, p.241). This means that if delete the part (MUŠ₃) from the name of the city, may means that it is (the city of the goddess Inanna), and the name of this city was mentioned in one of the literary texts known for love and romance poems and was known under the title (Inanna favors the farmer), also the name of this city was mentioned in the literary text coupled with its name with the river that passes through it, which is (the Zabalam River) (Haider, 2003-2004, p.170).

Other textual references to a man from Zabalam (LU₂.MUŠ₃.ZA.UNU) also came, and the name of this city continued to appear until the Old Babylonian period (Groneberg, 1980, p.256). Among the most important material evidence found in the city itself are various architectural remains, including the remains of a temple dating back to the reign of King Hammurabi (1792-1750 BCE) which he rebuilt it and named as (E₂.ZI.KALAM.MA) it mean (House of the Life of the Land) (George, 1993, p.160). As well as some textual references within the texts of the city of Mari that mentions the river that runs through the city. The name of the city continued to appear in the same form in later periods.

Excavation works:

This hill witnessed illegal excavation works at the site, which led to it being exposed to a lot of damage, so the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH) carried out organized scientific excavation works over two seasons during the years (2001-2002). The excavation committee was headed by Mr. Haider Farhan Hussein (Many thanks for his agrees to study this seals) and a number of members who worked at that site for two consecutive seasons (Haider, 2003-2004, p.169). These works resulted in many movable and immovable material antiquities, including the discovery of various architectural remains represented by a temple dating back to the reign of King Hammurabi from the Old Babylonian period about (2004-1595 BCE). A group of important and diverse archaeological finds were also found, the most important of which were a number of clay tablets containing economic texts with the content of receipt contracts, texts of sale, purchase and including the names of witnesses and the name of the writer with seal impressions. These texts also contained a number of letters exchanged between people, most of which date back to the Old Babylonian period (Lamia Al-Gailani, 1992, p.4).

The second type of archaeological finds was a number of terracotta with different themes, including scenes of gods, warriors, naked women, and other scenes from daily life. The clay figures embodied human and animal themes, in addition to many clay vessels with different shapes and sizes, as well as a group of cylindrical seals (Haider, 2003-2004, p.178).

Seals of Tell Bzikh (Zabalam):

A group of distinguished archaeological finds, namely the cylinder seals (Haider, 2003-2004, p.169) that were found during these two seasons, and the scenes of which were dominated by religious themes, most of which were made of stone and very rarely of pottery. About 12 cylinder seals were selected from a total of (55 seals). All of these seals were examined, and we see most of them were not carved and some were completely damaged. The remaining intact group of them (12 seals) remained, which were studied in this research.

It is known that these seals had several themes, including seated deities greeting the worshipers standing in front of them, as well as the theme of the naked woman, in addition to the sacred king. There are themes represented by scenes of animals fighting with the presence of a tree in the middle, and some of them bear geometric decorations. Most of these seals were completely devoid of engravings and decorations (as if they were prepared in advance to be engraved later), and by examining them and determining their nature through their shapes its topics, therefore, made it possible to trace its history back to the Old Babylonian period (Haider, 2003-2004, p.176), in addition to the archaeological layer in which it was found.

The Motif of presentation:

This motif is one of the themes that were very common on the seals of the Akkadian period, as this ritual represents the presentation of a worshiper to the main god standing or sitting on a chair resembling the



facade of the temple, or the sacred king, and the worshiper who is represented in the presence of the main god may be accompanied by a secondary god or goddess and sometimes more than one god who presents him to the main god, in addition to the scene containing other worshipers in a position of worship, as we often notice that this scene is accompanied by the goddess LAMA the supplicant who appears raising both hands in supplication, and this subject continued on the seals of the third Dynasty of Ur (2112-2004 BCE), and the seals of the Old Babylonian period (2004-1595 BCE) (Hala, 2014, p.116, 158), and the subject of presentation can be divided into two motifs within the seals of Tell Bzikh (ancient Zabalam):

First - The motif of presentation to the gods:

The motif of presentation occupied a large part of the thinking of the people of Mesopotamia, who tried to maintain their relationship with their gods (Benzel & Sarah & Yelena and Watts, 2010, p.39). Even if the relationship between him and his god was good, his appearance in the presence of the god was done by his presentation by a secondary god sometimes, who might be the protector of that man (Lenzi, 2011, p.45), as the mediator prays and supplicates before the main god, and in some scenes included the presence of the supplicating goddess (Lama) who stands behind the worshipper and is considered a force of good to help the worshipper gain the satisfaction of the main god (Lenzi, 2011, p.10-11).

Figure (No. 1 = IM. 179824):

The scene represents a goddess (perhaps Inanna / Ishtar) standing in profile shape, wears the horned crown of divinity on her head, also wears the divinity's dress striped with longitudinal lines, revealing one of her legs, which is stepping with one of her feet on an unclear animal (perhaps a lion), and in front of her is a man with a turban on his head (similar to the turban of King Hammurabi) and wearing a long robe that reveals his right shoulder and raises his hand in greeting, and behind him is the goddess Lama the supplicant with the horned crown of divinity on her head, raising her hands in prayer and behind her is another person.



Figure (No. 2 = IM. 190840):

The scene consists of only two figures: The first figure may represent the god Nergal standing in profile shape on the right, with the horned crown of divinity on top of his head, raising his right hand in greeting and holding something in his left hand. He wears a long robe that reveals one of his legs. In front of him stands the goddess Lama, the supplicant, in profile shape, with the crown of divinity on top of her head, raising both hands in prayer and wearing the fringed robe of divinity.



Figure (No. 3 = IM. 186769):



A god is depicted sitting on a chair, and it is not clear, with a horned divinity crown on his head, and he has a longitudinal beard, and he is wearing a multi-layered divinity robe, and his right shoulder is naked, and he raises his hand in greeting, and in front of him is a crescent moon, and he is stepping on a footrest (not clear), and in front of him is a god or goddess with a multi-layered divinity crown on his head, and she is wearing a fringed divinity robe, and behind her is a god with a pair of horns on his head, perhaps the goddess Lama the supplicant, who raises both hands in prayer, and behind her is something of unclear features (perhaps the scorpion man).



IM. 186769
No. 3

We see: that the center of the event in the scenes of the subject of presentation in the presence of the god or goddess is usually on the right of the scene and the god wears the horned crown and wears the horizontally folded divine robe and sometimes they carry some symbols through which we can identify this god or goddess, while the worshipper in all the scenes heads towards the center of the event to the right and raises their hands in greeting. A similar theme had been found on a group of cylinder seals dating back to the Old Babylonian period (Frankfort, 1955, pp.736-737).

Second - The motif of presentation to the holy king:

The motif of presentation in Old Babylonian period was not limited to the gods only, but extended to the kings as well, and this type of presentation was not represented in the scenes of the seals of the periods that preceded the Old Babylonian period with the exception of the period of the Third Dynasty of Ur, in which it appeared for the first time, and usually the holy king is sitting on the right side on the throne chair, clasping his left hand on his waist and raising his right hand in front of him at chest level and opening his hand as a sign of greeting and welcome, and this movement is part of the presentation ceremonies, he wears a turban and a long dress. The secondary goddess stands in front of the king, raising her hands in greeting, and the right hand is bent back, held by the worshipper's hand. She wears the horned crown and wears the special robe of the goddess. As for the worshipper, he appears raising his right hand to the level of his face to greet the seated king, wearing a long dress. Behind him stands the goddess Lama, the invoker, raising both hands in prayer (Collon, 1990, p.46), (Ward, 1910, p.109). We put below the description of the seals of Bzikh as follow:

Figure (No. 4 = IM. 179823):

We see the holy king sitting on a chair without a backrest, different from the chair of the gods (which is characterized by the presence of a temple facade), and the king is wearing a turban (similar to Hammurabi's turban), and a long robe that reveals his right shoulder, and he is holding something unclear with his right hand, and he raises his other hand to greet, and he steps on a footstool whose details are unclear. In front of the holy king stands a worshipper who places his hands under his chest, and he is also wearing a turban and a long robe that reveals his right shoulder, and behind him stands a man (perhaps a god) who raises his right hand to greet the holy king, and in the seal there are small drawings of a crescent moon and behind the secondary god, and behind the holy king there is a curved stick topped by a lion's head.



Figure (No. 5 = IM. 181883):

We find the holy king sitting on a chair without a backrest made in the form of intersecting squares, wearing a turban and a long robe that reveals his right shoulder, and the right hand is raised in greeting and the other is placed on the waist, and two men stand in front of him: the first is a god with the crown of horned divinity on his head and he raises his hand in greeting and he wears a long robe decorated with long lines, and with his other hand he pulls the worshipper (the other man) who raises his other hand in greeting, and behind him is a smaller person who holds something in his hand that is not clear.



Figure (No. 6 = IM. 190798):

The king is depicted sitting on a chair without a backrest, made in the form of overlapping squares. His head is unclear and he is wearing a robe consisting of several layers (the fringed robe of divinity), which reveals his right shoulder. He is holding a scepter with a crescent head in his right hand. In front of him is a table, in front of which stand two men: the first is bareheaded and wearing a long robe that reveals his right shoulder. He is pulling a man with his hand who is wearing a headband and wearing a long robe with vertical lines, and holding a long stick in his hand.



Figure (No. 7 = IM. 1251):

The king is sitting on a chair with unclear features, his head is inclined to elongation and he is wearing the fringed robe of divinity, which consists of several folds, and he raises his hand in greeting, and in front of him are two men: the first is unclear in features, and the second is wearing a turban and a long robe, and behind them is something unclear.



Figure (No. 8 = IM. 181889):

The holy king appears sitting on a chair without a backrest, resembling the facade of a temple, his head is unclear, he is wearing a robe with longitudinal lines, and in front of him is an unclear person or man, perhaps the warrior hero, and behind him is the goddess Lama, the supplicant, raising both hands in supplication, and behind her is cuneiform writing, the first line of which is unclear, of which only the remains of one sign at the end of the line remain, while the second line we can see ([x].ZA.[BA?]).



Figure (No. 9 = IM. 186772):

The king is sitting on a chair without a backrest, the details of which are not clear (similar to a chair), the king's head is also not clear, he is wearing a long robe that reveals his right shoulder and raises his hand in greeting, and at the top of the scene there is a crescent symbol, and in front of him are two men: the first pulls the second, and their features are not clear, and both of them raise their hands in greeting.



Figure (No. 10 = IM. 184881):

We see the holy king sitting on a chair without a backrest, and it is square in shape (similar to the facade of the temple), the head is not clear, and he is wearing the fringed robe of divinity, and he raises his hand in greeting, and folds his other hand on his waist, and places his feet on a footstool, and in front of him is a person or a man standing and raising his hand in greeting, and he is bareheaded and wearing a long robe that reveals his right shoulder, and behind him is the goddess Lama, raising both her hands in prayer.



Figure (No. 11 = IM. 184929):

The scene depicts a seated man (or king) wearing a long robe, the upper part of his body clearly elongated, he is sitting on a chair without a backrest and raising his hand in greeting, and in front of him is a standing man whose features are not clear, and behind the seated man is the symbol of a lightning bolt consisting of three branches, and there are three circles at the top of the scene and two circles below it to fill the space.



Figure (No. 12 = IM. 179785):

The seal is broken on one side, while the remaining scene depicts the holy king appearing on the right of the scene, his head is unclear and he appears to be wearing a long robe (similar to the robe of King Hammurabi in his famous stele), and he folds his hand to his chest and raises the other hand in salute, and the remains of a crescent appear in front of his head, and the hero warrior stands in front of him with a conical headdress (similar to a helmet) on his head, and he has a long beard and wears a short apron that reveals his legs, and he holds in his right hand the curved sword raised upwards, while on the other side the remains of the bow hanging downward appear, and between these two characters the remains of an unclear animal appear.



The theme of offering to the sacred king was very common; so many similar scenes have been found on Old Babylonian seals (Collon, 2005, p.42). We notice in these scenes that the center of the event is on the right side of the seal, and the rest of the characters face it or they directed to him.

Conclusions: At the end of our research, we find:

The cylinder seals that were study here, we choose (12), display the seal of some divine figures within the motif of offering or presentation to the gods or the sacred king, which is one of the religious rituals and practices, as the relationship between the god and the human being is embodied in the attribute of the master and the slave, which is not a formal attribute, in the religion of Mesopotamia. The human being always confirmed that he was the servant of the gods, and the embodiment of that relationship in the artistic scenes was clear and showed the human being's connection to certain duties towards the gods,



represented by appearing before them, getting close to them, and performing rituals in their presence. The cylinder seal was an important and broad field that expressed these ideas and beliefs within the religious system and reflected a clear and realistic image of what they believed in of beliefs and rituals and embodied them of religious elements represented by the gods.

The motifs of these seals that were discovered in Tell Bzikh were identical to the subjects of the Old Babylonian period, through the large numbers of seals of the Old Babylonian period that seem to have been widespread and common in all the ancient Babylonian cities, it was possible to divide them into two main sections according to their subjects, which consisted of scenes of worship and scenes of combat, and each of them continued the artistic traditions of the previous periods, but at the same time each of them maintained its style independently. However, there is a small number of seals of the Old Babylonian period that mixed the two styles, as appeared in a scene on a seal in the Iraqi Museum (Adel, 1985, pp.252-253).

The most famous of these themes are scenes of offering to the gods. It is often difficult to distinguish these seals of this type because their scenes are traditional scenes dating back to the Third Dynasty of Ur, but the seals bearing inscriptions date back to the Old Babylonian period, so it is possible to establish their ownership and know their identity through the scenes that show a worshiper standing while following the goddess Lama, who is also standing and holding the wrist of the worshiper while they stand before the god sitting on a small chair placed on a bench slightly raised from the ground, with very few scenes appearing in which the god is sitting and in front of him the goddess is praying and the worshiper is facing him with their hands raised in greeting, and there is often a crescent symbol between the two gods.

The second theme is the seated king receiving a standing person followed by the goddess Lama, a distinctive theme in which we see a person wearing something like a headband as a covering and holding a vessel while sitting on a chair without backs, and often wearing a long robe with a fringed robe, usually exposing one of his shoulders, and rarely appears bearded, and sits on a chair that is often placed on a bench slightly raised from the ground, and in front of him stand two human figures, either the worshiper who is often the owner of the seal himself, and followed by the goddess Lama, whose hands are raised in the traditional way of supplication, and in rare cases the goddess Lama stands before the worshiper directly in front of the seated god, and she usually wears a long horizontal suit, and wears the divine horned crown, while the worshiper wears a long robe devoid of details and ends with a fringed robe, and one of his shoulders appears exposed, and is often bareheaded and sometimes seen wearing something like a turban.

We notice that this topic differs from the previous one from the scenes of presentation to the gods in terms of the position, clothing, and style of presenting the gods and the seated person. We see in the style of the previous topic that the head covering that distinguishes the seated person as a god is undoubtedly, while in the style of the current topic the horned hat has disappeared and been replaced by a type of circular head covering (as turban). Also, the chair on which the god sits is somewhat different from the previous one.

We also notice in the Akkadian period that the chair may be a symbol of power. For example, the goddess of vegetables and plants who sits on a hill or a pile or a threshing floor of grain or straw, and there is another goddess who sits on a symbol of mountains. In the seals of the Third Dynasty of Ur, the same traditions are found, noting that they are less common, and that there are clear differences between the character of the god and the king. The god sits on a chair that resembles the facade of a temple and is erected on a platform, and he wears the horned crown of divinity, and his robe is long and ends with what resembles fringes. While the king's character is often found standing, receiving other people face to face, wearing a round or conical hat, and a long robe with a fringed hem, these are the differences that we can sense through the two styles.

Table No. (1)

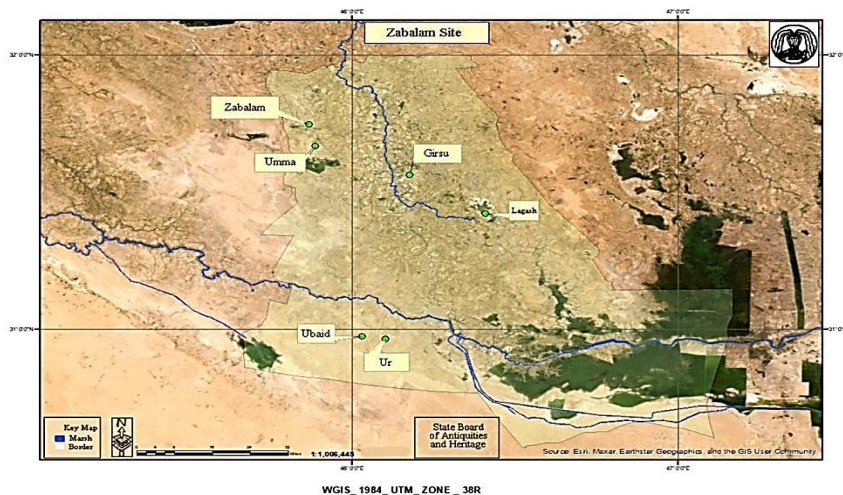
Table of the seals of the Tell Bzikh (Zabalam) site

First season 2001 and second season 2002

IM.	material	Dimensions cm	Finder
-----	----------	---------------	--------



1	179824	Stone	2.7 × 1.3 × 1	The second eastern point at a depth of 1 m
2	190840	Stone	2 × 0.8	The first western point at a depth of 60 cm
3	186769	Stone	1 × 2 × 0.5	The eastern pit at a depth of 7 m First season 2001
4	179823	Black stone	2.5 × 1.5 × 0.5	The first western point at a depth of 1.7 m First season 2001
5	181883	Stone	2.1 × 1 × 0.4	The second eastern point at a depth of 50 cm First season 2001
6	190798	Stone	3 × 0.9	The second western point at a depth of 40 cm Second season 2002
7	1251	Stone	1 × 2.5 × 0.5	The first eastern point at a depth of 60 cm 1 st season 2001
8	181889	Black stone	1 × 2	First western point at a depth of 40 cm 1 st season 2001
9	186772	Stone	1 × 2 × 0.5	First eastern point at a depth of 60 cm 1 st season 2001
10	184881	Stone	2.5 × 1.8	Second eastern point L9 at a depth of 1.15 m 1 st season 2001
11	184929	Stone	1 × 2 × 0.5	First western point H5-6 at a depth of 1.45 m 1 st season 2001
12	179785	Stone	2.5 × 1 × 0.5	First western point at a depth of 1.7 m



Map No. 1



- 7- Frankfort, H., (1955), Stratified Cylinder Seals from the Diyala Region, OIP, vol. 72, Chicago, Fig. 736-737.
- 8- George, A.R., (1993), House Most High the Temples of Ancient Mesopotamia, HMH, Indiana, p.160.
- 9- Groneberg, B., (1980), Die Orts und Gewässernamen der altbabylonischen Zeit, RGTC, vol. 3, Wiesbaden, p.256.
- 10- Haider Farhan Al-Subaihawi, (2003-2004), Archaeological Excavations at the Bzikh Site for the First and Second Seasons 2001-2002, Sumer, vol. 52, No. 1-2, Baghdad, p. 170.
- 11- Hala Karim Ibrahim, (2014), Religious Themes in Cylinder Seals from the Uruk Period to the End of the Neo-Sumerian Period, Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Baghdad, College of Arts, Department of Archaeology, Baghdad, p. 116, p. 158.
- 12- Lenzi, A., (2011), Reading Akkadian Prayers and Hymns an Introduction, Atlanta, p.45.
- 13- Moorey, P.R.S., (1999), Ancient Mesopotamia Materials and Industries the Archaeology Evidence, USA, p.18.
- 14- Nissen, H.J., (1977), Aspects of the Development of Early Cylinder Seals, SSANE, Malibu, p.18.
- 15- Subhi Anwar Rashid, (1969), History of Art in Ancient Iraq, The Art of Cylinder Seals, vol. 1, 1st ed., Beirut, p. 6, pp. 21-22.
- 16- Ward, W.H., (1910), The Seals Cylinder Western Asia, Washington, p.109.