

# New Light on Cylinder Seal Impressions Showing Cult Scenes from Early Bronze Age Palestine

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THERE are few cult-related archaeological remains from Early Bronze Age Palestine. These are confined mainly to structures identified as temples — at Jericho, Arad, Megiddo, 'Ai, Yarmut and other sites, as well as a small number of artefacts found in or near these buildings, such as the 'Dumuzi' stele from Arad, the 'stone waterskin' from 'Ai and several animal or human figurines.<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, research into the ritual practices of this period has had to rely increasingly on cylinder seal impressions, the most numerous of the cult-related artefacts from this time. They can be used to help us to try to understand, albeit partially, what went on in these temples and their immediate surroundings. The total absence of any contemporary documentation naturally renders such attempts no more than 'working hypotheses'.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, these hypotheses are based upon an analysis of these minute impressions and similar finds, especially from Mesopotamia, where textual evidence is available to assist in the interpretation of these works of art.

Analyses of cultic scenes on Palestinian seal impressions have heretofore led to the conclusion that there was one basic composition: a scene consisting of a building, humans and animals (always horned), although some scenes depicted only buildings and humans.<sup>3</sup> In recent years, however, excavations and surveys in Israel have revealed fresh evidence which makes possible the division of this family of seal impressions into two groups. In one group, the scenes consist of a number of people located behind a building, apparently engaged in a ritual dance.<sup>4</sup> On none of these impressions does an animal appear, although it is more than likely that some of the humans depicted are dressed up as animals.<sup>5</sup> The other group of impressions is

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1 For a summary of cult-related finds from Early Bronze Age Palestine, see A. Ben-Tor (ed.): *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel*, New Haven — London, 1992, pp. 91–93, 115–118; A. Mazar: *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible*, New York, 1990, pp. 98, 125–127, 136–139.

2 A. Ben-Tor: *Cult Scenes on Early Bronze Age Cylinder Seal Impressions from Palestine*, *Levant* 9 (1977), pp. 90–100 (henceforth: *Seal Impressions*).

3 *Ibid.*; *idem*, *Cylinder Seals of Third-Millennium Palestine*, Cambridge, Mass., 1978, pp. 57–61 (henceforth: *Cylinder Seals*).

4 *Idem* (above, n. 2, *Seal Impressions*), Figs. 13–16, 21.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 96, Figs. 13, 21.

characterized by a single human figure, a building taller and narrower than the ones in the former group, and what looks like a horned animal, but could be a human masquerading as one.<sup>6</sup> In addition, there are a number of published impressions too damaged to be assigned with any confidence to either group.<sup>7</sup> The similarities between the groups, particularly in such details as the representation of humans, rule out the possibility of two distinctive schools of glyptic art or two different cults, and suggest, instead, that these are two aspects of the same cult.

In light of the recent discovery of three seal impressions depicting cultic scenes of the second category, this article will be confined to a discussion of the latter group of impressions. Two of the three (Figs. 1, 2)<sup>8</sup> were discovered during excavations at Tel Qashish in the Jezreel Valley;<sup>9</sup> the other (Fig. 3) is from Giv'at Rabi in the Lower Galilee. Two other seal impressions, from Beth Yerah (Fig. 4) and Tel Dan (Fig. 5), will also be discussed.

One impression (Fig. 1)<sup>10</sup> was found in an assemblage dated to the end of the Early Bronze Age sequence at Tel Qashish. It cannot be dated with more precision because a pit disturbed the stratigraphy at the point of discovery. It was found, however, under a building dated to the end of the Early Bronze Age and over the city wall that seems to have gone out of use some time during Early Bronze III.<sup>11</sup>

The seal was impressed on the shoulder of a metallic-ware storage-jar bearing traces of diagonal combing. The building depicted, apparently a temple,<sup>12</sup> is visible mostly on the right of the impression, with a little on the left. It has three vertical rows of windows, a feature common to all the buildings depicted in this group. The roof has two protrusions (columns?) extending above it, one on each side of the building.

The human has an oval head,<sup>13</sup> and its left arm — the one held out to the animal — widens in the direction of the hand. This can be understood only by comparison with similar impressions (see below).

6 *Ibid.*, Figs. 18, 20.

7 *Ibid.*, Figs. 17, 19; see also *idem* (above, n. 3, *Cylinder Seals*), Fig. 10:66.

8 All drawings and photographs are to the scale of 1:1. The drawings in Figs. 1–5 are by Ruhama Bonfil of the Institute of Archaeology of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The photographs in Figs. 1–2 are by G. Laron, the photographer of the Institute of Archaeology of the Hebrew University. The photographs in Figs. 3–5 are by Z. Radovan. Figs. 6–10 are taken from P. Amiet: *La Glyptique Mésopotamienne Archaïque*, Paris, 1961.

9 A. Ben-Tor and Ruhama Bonfil: Tel Qashish, the 1984–85 Season, *Ḥadashot Arkhaologiyot* 100 (1987), pp. 21–22 (Hebrew); A. Ben-Tor *et al.*: Regional Study of Tel Yoqne'am and its Vicinity, *Qadmoniot* 20 Nos. 77–88 (1987), pp. 12–14 (Hebrew). The final report is currently in preparation.

10 Field registration number: QA/4520 from Locus 599.

11 Ben-Tor *et al.* (above, n. 9), pp. 12–14.

12 Ben-Tor (above, n. 3, *Cylinder Seals*), pp. 57–58.

13 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 58–61, Fig. 9:59–61.

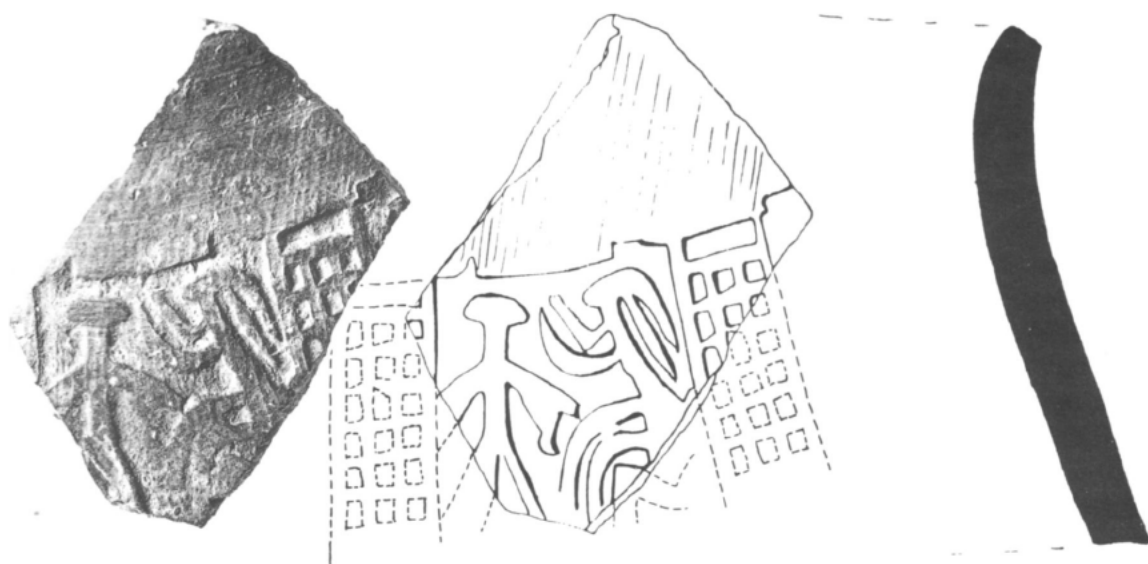


Fig. 1. Cylinder seal impression from Tel Qashish.

Between the human and the building there is a figure that looks like a horned animal, but could be interpreted as a human dressed up as an animal.<sup>14</sup> The pose of this figure, sitting on a kind of stool (a posture seen more fully in Fig. 3), with arms (forelegs?) raised in an attitude of adoration, suggests the latter possibility, although the former should not be excluded.<sup>15</sup>

Another impression (Fig. 2),<sup>16</sup> also from Tel Qashish, was a surface find from the north-eastern slope of the mound. This sherd belongs to a closed, handmade vessel, probably a jar. Although only a tiny section of the impression survived, there is no problem identifying by comparison the upper part of the building and the head of the figure, be it a human dressed as an animal or a horned animal in a human sitting position.

14 Next to the hybrid man/bull figures so common in Mesopotamian glyptic art, there are genies, generally humans with animals' heads, and animals depicted in human poses ('animaux en attitudes humaines' in Amiet's words). See Amiet (above, n. 8), pp. 107, 111, 112, 131, 133, 137, 141, 148, 158. These should not be confused with humans dressed up as animals, as in *ibid.*, Pl. 62:833. In this connection, see R.D. Barnett: *Homme masqué ou dieux-ibex? Syria* 43 (1966), pp. 259–276.

15 Amiet (above, n. 8), p. 107, Pls. 36–38. Mesopotamian glyptic art favours an animal head on a human body. (See, for example, our Fig. 9.) Not to be confused with the horned headdress, which is worn by deities and is, as a rule, portrayed as a distinct hat or crown worn on the head of the deity. On our seal impressions the horns are shown as an integral part of the head.

16 Field registration number: QA/1166 from Locus AG/16.

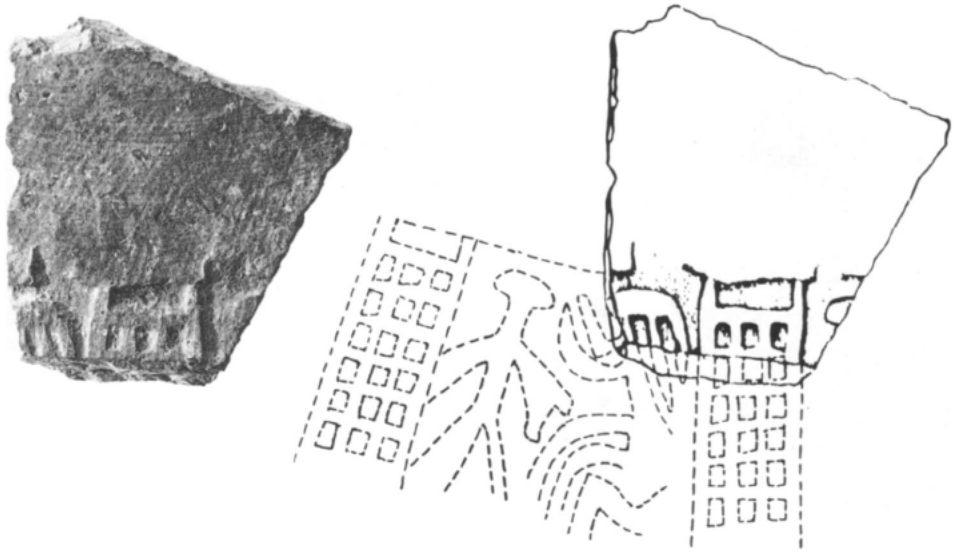


Fig. 2. Cylinder seal impression from Tel Qashish.

The restoration of the complete scene (as seen in the drawing, Fig. 2) is based on the better-preserved impression in Fig. 1. The upper borderline is identical in both Tel Qashish impressions; both were therefore probably made by the same seal.

The third impression (Fig. 3) was found by Avner Raban during a survey of Giv'at Rabi in the Lower Galilee.<sup>17</sup> The sherd is also from a closed vessel, probably a metallic-ware storage-jar, handmade with diagonal combing. The upper section of the building was not preserved; thus, it is impossible to determine whether it has the same two protrusions seen on the two impressions from Tel Qashish and on one from Tel Dan (see below).

The human dressed as an animal — or the animal in a human sitting position — is similar to the corresponding figure on the first Tel Qashish impression (Fig. 1). Small differences, however, do exist, such as the sharp facial features and the angular bending of the arms and knees on the Giv'at Rabi impression, in contrast with the soft lines on the Tel Qashish one. The Giv'at Rabi 'animal' is seated on what is

17 My thanks are extended to Avner Raban of Haifa University for allowing me to publish this impression here for the first time. Its field registration number is H.R. 57/4. The site, Jebel el-'Ein (map ref. 1751 2372; see the Israel Antiquities Authority's Schedule of Historical Monuments and Sites [1964], p. 1383) was examined by Raban as part of the Israel Survey, Nazareth Map. A large fortified Early Bronze Age site was discovered, and many EB II-III sherds were collected. A cylinder seal impression on an EB III sherd from this site was published in Ben-Tor (above, n. 3, *Cylinder Seals*), No. IIC-4, p. 10, Fig. 8:50, Pl. 8:50. See also Z. Gal: *The Lower Galilee, Historical Geography in the Biblical Period*, Tel Aviv, 1990, p. 99 (map) and p. 100 (Hebrew).

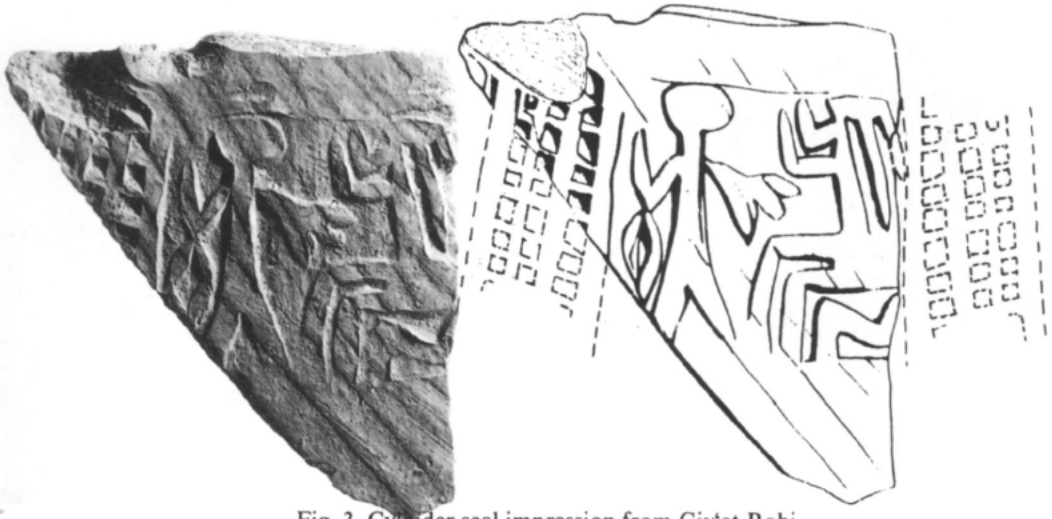


Fig. 3. Cylinder seal impression from Giv'at Rabi.

clearly a kind of stool. This was the model for the reconstruction of the barely discernible stool on the Qashish impression, where only the upper front tip can be observed.

The figure in the centre is undoubtedly a human, although its head is rounder than the one on the Tel Qashish impression. There is a major difference, however, in the position of the arms. The bent right arm (on the viewer's left) is pointing upwards, while the left arm is extended downwards towards the seated figure. On the Tel Qashish impression, as well as on the one from Beth Yerah (Fig. 4), both arms point downwards. The Giv'at Rabi human's left arm, extended towards the animal figure, is shaped like a plant with three leaves; under the bent elbow of the right arm there is an oval object, whose significance is unclear.

Another impression (Fig. 4), clearly belonging to the group under discussion, was discovered at Beth Yerah during David Ussishkin's excavations at the site in 1967.<sup>18</sup> The sherd on which it appears belongs to a closed vessel, probably a storage-jar. The metallic-ware jar was handmade with diagonal combing. Of the impressions under discussion, the Beth Yerah impression is the only one to have been found in a clear stratigraphic context (Ussishkin's Stratum III): in an EB III locus which contained Khirbet Kerak ware. This impression thus provides a chronological peg for the whole group.

The building depicted has three vertical rows of windows and, in contrast to the other impressions in this group, a flat roof without the two projections. The

<sup>18</sup> Field registration number: BY/67/226. See also Ben-Tor (above, n. 3, *Cylinder Seals*), No. IIIC-4, p. 12, Fig. 10:67, Pl. 10:67. For the stratigraphical context, see *ibid.*, p. 45. I would like to thank David Ussishkin for permission to publish this impression.

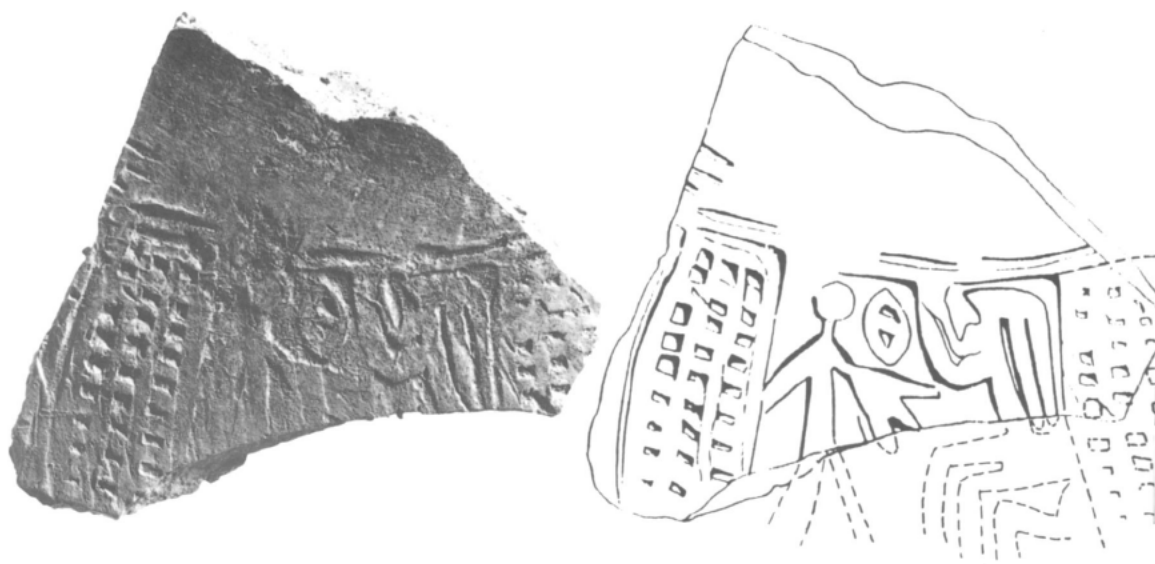


Fig. 4. Cylinder seal impression from Beth Yerah.

human figure has a round head, and both of its arms point downwards, as in the Qashish impression (Fig. 1). Its left arm (on the viewer's right) is in the shape of a plant with three leaves, almost identical with the Giv'at Rabi impression (Fig. 3). This arm extends toward the human (or animal) seated on the right.<sup>19</sup> Between the two figures and above the plant-like arm there is an oval object, whose function is unknown but which bears a strong resemblance to the object under the bent elbow on the Giv'at Rabi impression (Fig. 3).<sup>20</sup>

The fifth seal impression under discussion (Fig. 5) comes from Tel Dan. It was found in the debris fill under the Iron Age gate. This fill also contained Early Bronze and Middle Bronze II material, including other seal impressions from the Early Bronze III period.<sup>21</sup> The impression was made on the shoulder of a storage-jar which had horizontal combing.<sup>22</sup>

19 In view of the impressions from Tel Qashish and Giv'at Rabi, it seems that the drawing of the impression from Beth Yerah, as published in Ben-Tor (above, n. 3, *Cylinder Seals*), Fig. 10:67, is incorrect. The plant-like arm, which is clearly seen on Pl. 10:67, is missing from the drawing. In addition, the suggestion (*ibid.*, Fig. 10:68, and the discussion on p. 61) that impressions Nos. IIC-3 and IIC-4 are two parts of the same scene is no longer tenable.

20 A similar object appears on a second impression from Beth Yerah (Ben-Tor [above, n. 3, *Cylinder Seals*], impression No. IIC-3, p. 11, Fig. 10:66, Pl. 10:66). Thus, ovoid objects appear on impressions from Giv'at Rabi (Fig. 3), Beth Yerah (Fig. 4) and on another from Beth Yerah (IIC-3), with the long axis standing vertically in all three cases. The first is not divided at all; the second is divided in two; and the third into quarters.

21 *Ibid.*, No. IC-4, pp. 5, 43, Fig. 1:9, Pl. 1:9; No. IE-1, pp. 6, 43, Fig. 3:17, Pl. 3:17; No. IE-4, p. 6, Fig. 3:20, Pl. 3:20; Nos. IIC-6 and 7, pp. 10, 44, Fig. 8:52, 53.

22 This seal impression was first published in *ibid.*, No. IIC-1, pp. 11, 44, Fig. 9:64, Pl. 9:64.

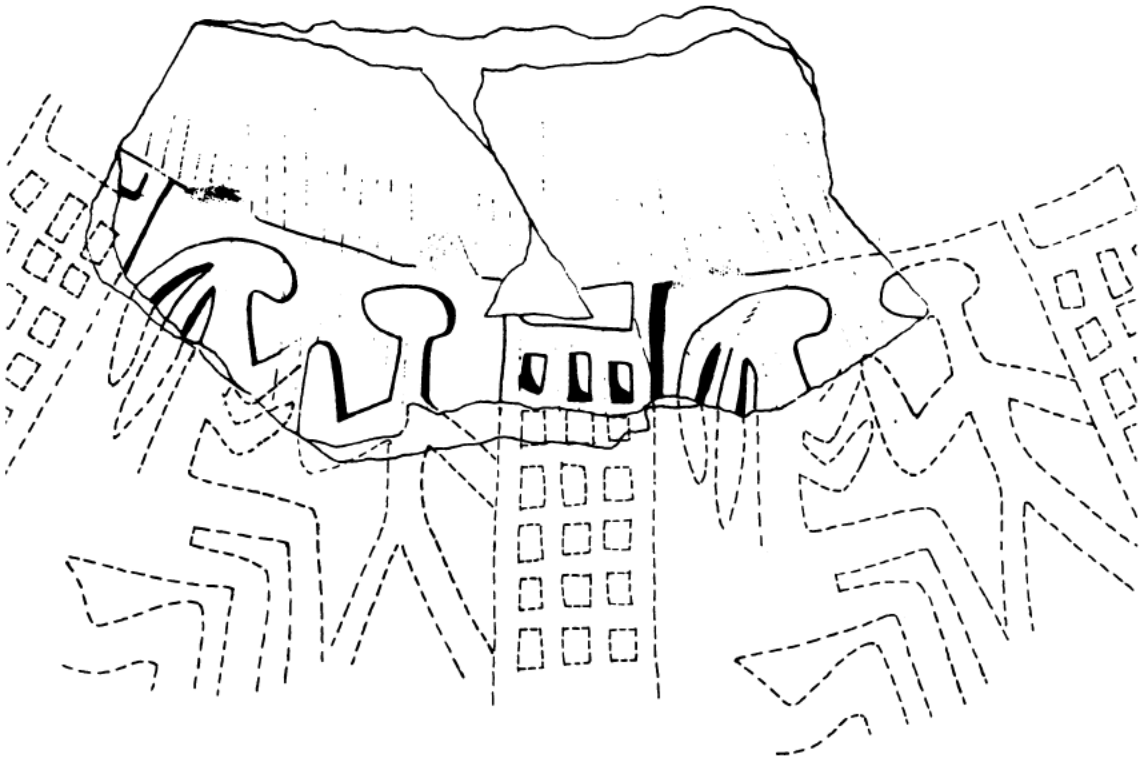
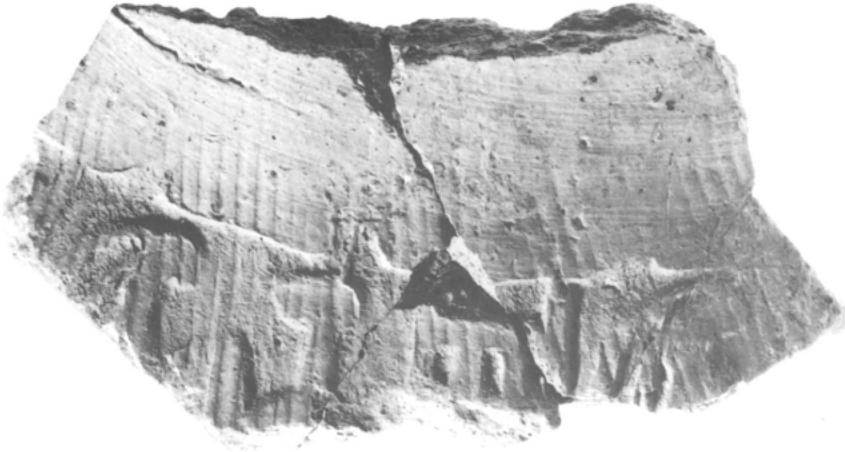


Fig. 5. Cylinder seal impression from Tel Dan.

The main difference between the Tel Dan impression and the others discussed here is their dimensions: the one from Tel Dan is larger by about one third than the other four, which are all approximately 4 cm. in height. Artistically, however, it belongs to the same family: the structure depicted has three rows of windows and two vertical extensions at the sides of the roof; the human figure has an oval head, similar to the human on the Tel Qashish impression (Fig. 1); its right arm (on the viewer's left) is raised; the left arm must have pointed downwards, because had it been pointing upwards, it would have been visible on the preserved section of the impression. The human dressed as an animal (or the animal sitting in a human pose) resembles the others in all respects.

There are several differences between the Tel Dan impression and the others. While on the Tel Qashish, Giv'at Rabi and Beth Yerah impressions, the seated figure faces left and the human looks to the right, they face the opposite directions in the Tel Dan impression. In addition, the extended arm on the Tel Dan impression is raised and is not holding anything (see below).

The above descriptions show that these five seal impressions belong to the same family. It is true that the larger size, reversed orientation and different arm positions of the Tel Dan impression make it a variant in the group. It should perhaps be inferred that the seal from which this impression was made was a local imitation of seals, whose centre of production must have been located somewhere in the Jezreel Valley or its environs.

Table 1. Distribution of motifs

	Qashish (1)	Qashish (2)	Giv'at Rabi	Beth Yerah	Tel Dan
Structure: three rows of windows	+	+	—	—	—
Roof extensions	+	+	?	—	+
Human head: oval	+	?	—	—	+
Human head: round	—		+	+	—
Human right arms upwards	—	?	+	—	+
Human arms downwards	+		—	+	—
Human with 'plant-like' arm	+	?	+	+	—
Elliptical object	—	?	+	+	—
Size of impression: standard (4 cm.)	+	+	+	+	—
Size of impression: large	—	—	—	—	+
Seated figure facing left	+	+	+	+	—
Seated figure facing right	—	—	—	—	+



As outlined in Table 1, there are features common to all the impressions in this group. Each scene is composed of a structure, a human standing next to it and relating in one way or another to a seated figure, whose arms (forelegs?) are extended upwards in order to receive a plant-like object from the human (see below). The seated figure is either a human dressed up as an animal with long horns or an animal sitting in a human posture. To date we know of five such seal impressions. All seals except the one from Dan were most probably made in the Jezreel Valley and surrounding region; all seem to date from the Early Bronze Age III.<sup>23</sup>

Explaining the meaning and significance of this scene requires one to leave the safe ground of description and to enter the uncertainties of interpretation and hypothesis. The virtual certainty, however, that these representations are in some way connected with cult practices — a void in our knowledge of Early Bronze Age Palestine — makes grappling with this problem very attractive.

The scene on our group of five impressions has no parallels anywhere, in or outside of Palestine. Each of its three components, however — a building (probably a temple), a man and a horned animal (or a human masquerading as an animal) — have parallels: in the early glyptic art of Elam, Mesopotamia, Syria and perhaps even Egypt.<sup>24</sup>

The class of impressions which interests us has as its theme the sacred flock or herd, and, in particular, 'the feeding of the sacred flock'<sup>25</sup> — an issue of prime importance in fertility cult. To quote Goff: 'The feeding of the herd is not only a ritualistic act, it is basically the means by which the herd was made to prosper. Thus the fertility of the herd and coincidentally the prosperity of the community were indicated by such scenes.'<sup>26</sup> Frankfort writes: '...the animals and plants which played

23 Two other impressions may belong to this group, but their damaged condition makes this uncertain. Both are from the Lawieh Enclosure on the Golan Heights and were first published by Claire Epstein: *Early Bronze Age Seal Impressions from the Golan*, *IEJ* 22 (1972), p. 212, Fig. 2:4, Pl. 51:D; p. 210, Fig. 2:2, Pl. 51:B.

The argument for including the first one in this group is the location of the human figure next to the building, and not behind it as was customary in the other type of cultic seals (see above, n. 4). Supporting the inclusion of the second impression is the mode of portraying the head of the animal (or costumed human?) with the long horns. Epstein leans towards an EB II dating (*ibid.*, pp. 216–217) because of the absence of Khirbet Kerak ware from the survey of the enclosure; this date, however, was rejected soon after being proposed (see Ben-Tor [above, n. 3, *Cylinder Seals*], p. 90, who prefers an EB III date). Recent excavations at the Lawieh Enclosure have uncovered EB III pottery, including Khirbet Kerak ware. See M. Kochavi: *The Land of Geshur Project: Regional Archaeology of the Southern Golan (1987–1988 Seasons)*, *IEJ* 39 (1989), pp. 4–6.

24 Ben-Tor (above, n. 3, *Cylinder Seals*), pp. 79–87; *idem* (above, n. 2, *Seal Impressions*).

25 Much has been written about this topic. See, for example, Amiet (above, n. 8), pp. 75, 82; H. Frankfort: *Cylinder Seals*, London, 1939, pp. 20–21; B.L. Goff: *Symbols of Prehistoric Mesopotamia*, New Haven, 1963, pp. 61–62.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

a part in this ritual also possessed symbolical significance, and the representation of this cult-act can therefore assume a much more stylised form than sacrifices and other ritual performances... On other seals actuality is transformed into symbolism by a reduction of the number of animals... The food tendered to the herd varies in the same manner; in the more realistic versions it is barley, but elsewhere it is the rosette-shaped flower which appears to symbolise vegetable life in general...', while the figure feeding the animals represents either a 'local ruler' or a 'priest'.<sup>27</sup>

Frankfort's description of the 'feeding the sacred herd' motif as portrayed in ancient Mesopotamia can be applied to the discussion of the impressions from Palestine. A human feeds the sacred herd on a fourth millennium B.C.E. seal (Fig. 6),<sup>28</sup> while on a contemporary seal from Khafaje a horned animal in a human posture does the feeding (Fig. 7).<sup>29</sup> The temple is depicted on the Khafaje seal as a multiple-storeyed structure with roof protrusions, much like the depiction of the temples on Palestinian impressions. Similar buildings appear on a number of impressions from Uruk (Fig. 8).<sup>30</sup>

Just as an animal may replace the human who generally feeds the herd, a human dressed up as an animal may substitute the receiver of the sustenance, as is clearly seen on two Early Dynastic seals from Khafaje and Tell Asmar of the Diyala region (Figs. 9, 10).<sup>31</sup> There is a great deal of similarity between the latter seal (Fig. 10) and those from Palestine: a gate-like object on the left represents the entire temple façade, including the two extensions on the roof, a concession to the increasing symbolism and stylization in art.<sup>32</sup> A human figure dressed as a horned animal sits with his back to the building, holding in his raised hand an object that looks like a plant and closely resembles the plant-like arm on the impressions from Palestine. So strong was the movement for symbolism in art that the arm and the flower became interchangeable with time.

A comparison of the two seals from the Diyala region with the seal impressions from Palestine under discussion indicates that the artists did not go to any great lengths to stress the distinction between the hand holding the object and the object itself. The cup(?) in the left hand of the figure from Khafaje (Fig. 9) is not

27 Frankfort (above, n. 25), pp. 21–22.

28 Amiet (above, n. 8), pp. 82–85, Pl. 44:640.

29 *Loc cit.*, Pl. 44:641.

30 *Ibid.*, Fig. 13bis:A, D, J.

31 *Ibid.*, pp. 164–166, Pl. 101:1337, 1344. The fertility cult has two aspects: the one discussed in this article relates to the fertility of animals, in this case flocks and herds; the other concerns the fertility of the land, specifically vegetation. Participants in cult scenes treating the fertility of herds may on occasion be portrayed dressed up as a horned animal, while those appearing in cult ceremonies dealing with the fertility of vegetation may similarly be shown as a plant. See Ruth Amiran: A Cult Stele from Arad, *IEJ* 22 (1972), pp. 86–88.

32 Amiet (above, n. 8), pp. 164–165.

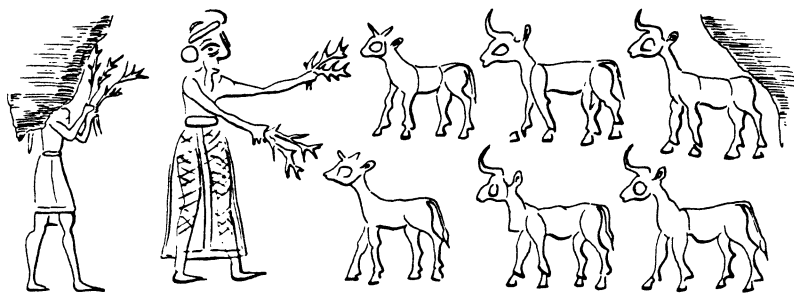


Fig. 6. Cylinder seal impression from Uruk (?). Drawing from P. Amiet (above, n. 8), Pl. 44:640.



Fig. 7. Cylinder seal impression from Khafaje. Drawing from P. Amiet (above, n. 8), Pl. 44:641.



Fig. 8. A number of impressions from Uruk.  
Drawing from P. Amiet (above, n. 8), Pl. 13bis:A, D, J.



Fig. 9. An Early Dynastic seal from Khafaje.  
Drawing from P. Amiet (above, n. 8),  
Pl. 101:1344.



Fig. 10. An Early Dynastic seal from  
Tell Asmar. Drawing from P. Amiet  
(above, n. 8), Pl. 101:1337.

an extension of the arm; the same holds true for the plant in the hand of the figure from Tell Asmar (Fig. 10) and for the 'plants' held by the figures in the impressions from Canaan.<sup>33</sup> The human facing the seated figure in the Tell Asmar impression holds an object (a plant?) which closely resembles the left hand of the human in the impression from Tell Qashish (Fig. 1).

The geographical and chronological distance between the impressions from Palestine and those from the Diyala region are not too great to be bridged; one can expect the discovery of further examples of this genre, which will help to narrow the gap.<sup>34</sup> The common theme connecting the Mesopotamian and Palestinian impressions is the depiction of cultic scenes related in some way to the fertility of the herds.

Although the theme was certainly common to the entire ancient Near East, the artistic composition is unique to Palestine.<sup>35</sup> This concept continued long after the Early Bronze Age in the plastic arts as well as in religious literature. The female figure feeding the horned animals on an ivory from Ugarit<sup>36</sup> and the image of the god-ruler as a 'good shepherd' expresses a cultic religious attitude which closely resembles, and indeed, may be identical to, that depicted on the Early Bronze Age seal impressions.

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33 A third millennium B.C.E. impression from Tell Judeideh in the 'Amuq Valley shows a human whose fingers are abnormally long. It is likely that the artist was trying to convey the image of hands holding onto plants. See R.J. Braidwood and Linda S. Braidwood: *Excavations in the Plain of Antioch*, Chicago, 1960, pp. 492, 494, Fig. 382:4.

34 At the Kabri excavations in 1990 a cylinder seal impression was discovered on a sherd securely dated to the Early Bronze Age I (registration No. 4626). Unfortunately, not all the impression is preserved, but enough is left to identify a building with rows of windows and a protrusion from its roof, and a man with raised arms standing next to it. The stumps emerging from his head suggest that the artist intended to portray a person dressed up as either a plant or an animal. This figure is reminiscent of the human on the el-Karm (Jezreel Valley) impression, which belongs in the cultic category. See Ben-Tor (above, n. 3, *Cylinder Seals*), impression No. IIIC-5, p. 12, Fig. 10:69, Pl. 10:69.

The importance of this impression for our purposes is that, together with those from the Diyala and the 'Amuq and the 'Dumuzi stele' from Arad, it helps to narrow the chronological, geographic and thematic gap between the Mesopotamian impressions and those from EB III Palestine discussed above. I thank Kabri excavator Dr. Aharon Kempinski of Tel Aviv University for permission to mention this impression prior to its publication.

35 Other contemporary impressions from Palestine, either the geometric class or the cultic type showing a row of people behind a building, are part of the same phenomenon: they belong to the artistic milieu of the ancient Near East, yet develop their own original artistic school. See Ben-Tor (above, n. 3, *Cylinder Seals*), pp. 93–109.

36 C.F. Schaeffer: Les fouilles de Minet el-Beida et de Ras Shamra, *Syria* 10 (1929), pp. 292–293, Pl. LVI.