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A Local Imitation of a Neo-Babylonian Stamp Seal from a Burial Cave near Gelilot

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Salvage excavations conducted during October 1994 at Gelilot in the central coastal plain (map ref. NIG 1820/6740; OIG 1320/1740) uncovered a burial cave that was in use mainly during the second to fourth centuries CE. The burials were probably associated with the nearby Samaritan settlement at Gelilot (Ayash 1999:105*).[1]

The cave, uncovered on the northwestern side of a *kurkar* hill, still contained the northern part of the burial hall, two intact *kokhim* and the partial remains of two additional *kokhim* (Ayash 1999: Fig. 212). The cave's fill contained pottery fragments dating primarily to the second–fourth centuries CE. Poorly preserved human skeletal remains were recovered in the western *kokh*, L102, and only a single adult could be identified as probably a female of unknown age. The finds from this locus are typical of second to fourth-century burials, and included two kohl sticks and a glass anklet on the right ankle of the deceased, bone and carnelian beads, as well as a reused, local imitation of a Neo-Babylonian stamp seal, the subject of this short note.

The Neo-Babylonian Stamp Seal (Fig. 1)

Perforated conoid stamp seal, black serpentine. H 2.0 cm, D 1.5; IAA 96-3414.

The design, as observed from the impression (Fig. 1:c, d), shows a common, sixth–fifth-century BCE Neo-Babylonian theme of a worshipper in front of the symbols of the gods Marduk and Nabu.[2] The entire scene is highly schematized: the larger, upper drilling and the lower drilling represent the worshipper's head and presumably neck; two somewhat diagonal lines represent his torso and lower body; his feet are missing, as is common on Neo-Babylonian seals. The four horizontal lines between the diagonal lines may represent the worshipper's clothing. He is raising his right arm with palm open toward the divine emblems. The short,

Fig. 1. The stamp seal from Gelilot depicting a worshipper in front of the symbols of the gods Marduk and Nabu: (a) the seal; (b) the seal's base; (c) modern impression of the base (photographs courtesy of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem); (d) drawing of the impression (by Noga Ze'evi).

vertical, thin line behind the arm indicates the worshipper's beard. The emblem closest to the worshipper, depicted as a high pole with a small horizontal bar crossing it at the top, is a schematic rendering of the *marru*, the triangular-headed spade or hoe of Marduk, head of the Babylonian pantheon (Seidl 1989:117–121). The second emblem, rendered as two parallel vertical lines connected by three horizontal bars, stands for the double-edged writing stylus of Nabu, patron god of writing (Seidl 1989:121–125). The worshipper and the two divine symbols stand on a horizontal ground-line, below which are cross-hatched lines.

The popularity of the portrayal of a worshipper gesturing toward the *marru* and the stylus reflects the rise of the cult of the gods Marduk and his son Nabu in first-millennium BCE Babylonia, a religious development connected to the shift of Babylon from being a city-state to a capital of an empire (*DDD*: Col. 1017; *RlA* 6:272).[3] The choice of depicting the two deities in emblematic form, as seen on the seal, rather than in their anthropomorphic shape, accords well with a wider inclination attested in first-millennium Assyrian and Babylonian art (Ornan 1995; 2004; 2005).

Neo-Babylonian stamp seals depicting the veneration of the divine symbols of Marduk and Nabu have been found at Tell eṣ-Ṣafi (Fig. 2:1; Bliss and Macalister 1902:41, 153, Fig. 16:2), 'En Gedi (Fig. 2:2; Mazar and Dunayevsky 1967:139, Pl. 31:1), Samaria (Fig. 2:3; Reisner, Fisher and Lyon 1924:377B, No. 2, Pl. 57d:7)[4] and Ta'anakh (Fig. 2:4; Tushingham 1992), as well as in the assemblages of a tomb at Meqabelein, southwest of 'Amman (Fig. 2:5; Lankester Harding 1950:46, No. 33, Pls. 13:2; 15:9; Eggler and Keel 2006:190, No. 1) and the 'Adoni Nur' tomb (Fig. 2:6; Lankester Harding 1953: No. 4, Pls. 6:4; 7:4; Eggler and Keel 2006:10, No. 3). These octagonal-pyramid stamp seals are made of quartz, mainly chalcedony, and worked in Neo-Babylonian Late Drill Style, features that clearly designate them as Babylonian artifacts (Buchanan and Moorey 1988:56–57 with references therein) that were imported to the provinces of Israel and Jordan during the period of Neo-Babylonian rule. The star symbolizing Ishtar (Seidl 1989:100–101) is seen above the symbols of Marduk and Nabu on the examples found in Israel (Fig. 2:1–4), while the crescent of the moon god Sin is depicted on the examples from Jordan (Fig. 2:5, 6, possibly also 2:10). The worship of the divine symbols of Marduk and Nabu is also depicted on a *bulla* from Samaria (Fig. 2:7; Crowfoot, Crowfoot and Kenyon 1957:88, n. 41, without photograph) and another one from Tell Safut in Jordan (Fig. 2:8; Wimmer 1987:171, Fig. 9; Tushingham 1992:16–17; Eggler and Keel 2006:436, No. 5). An earlier, seventh-century Neo-Assyrian imported stamp seal, portraying a worshipper in front of these emblems, was found at Tel Kisan (Fig. 2:9; Keel 1980:279–280, No. 24, Pl. 89:24).

The seal from Gelilot differs from the above group in its highly schematized style, in the choice of black serpentine instead of a harder quartz stone, and in the lack of celestial symbols (a star or a crescent) in its upper part. These peculiarities hint at a local production of the seal. The worshipper's open palm held in front of the divine emblems, which is different than the usual Babylonian gesture, may also hint at the seal's locality. To these features one should add the cross-hatched lines seen below the ground-line, which resemble a net-like pattern depicted on a local imitation of a Neo-Babylonian stamp seal found at Tell eṣ-Ṣafi (Fig. 2:10; Bliss and Macalister 1902:41, 153, Fig. 16:1).[5] The net-like pattern on the Tell eṣ-Ṣafi seal and its version on the Gelilot seal may be connected to the Egyptianized *nb* sign (originally meaning 'lord' or 'all'), found mainly on later Phoenician seals (Rahmani 1976:110; Keel and Uehlinger 1998: Figs. 361b, 363a, 363d, 364, 366).[6]

In contrast to the Tell eṣ-Ṣafi seal, the seal from Gelilot was discovered in a context much later than its period of manufacture in the sixth–fifth century BCE. Thus, it was probably devoid of any religious significance when it was placed in the Roman tomb. Moreover, as it

Fig. 2. (1) Impression of a Neo-Babylonian pyramidal stamp seal, Tell eṣ-Ṣafi (reddish-brown stone; H 2.5 cm, W 0.8, L 1.8 cm; Bliss and Macalister 1902:41, Fig. 16:2); (2) Impression of a Neo-Babylonian pyramidal stamp seal, ‘En Gedi (chalcedony; H 3.0 cm, W 2.0 cm, L 3.2 cm; Stern 2007:256, Photograph 5.7.1 upper right); (3) Impression of a Neo-Babylonian pyramidal stamp seal, Samaria (translucent whitish quartz or chalcedony; H 1.6 cm, W 0.8 cm, L 1.3 cm; drawn by Noga Ze’evi after Reisner, Fisher and Lyon 1924: Pl. 57d:7); (4) Impression of a Neo-Babylonian pyramidal stamp seal, Ta‘anakh (dark chalcedony; H. 2.8 cm, W 1.4 cm, L 2.1 cm; drawn by Noga Ze’evi after Tushingham 1992: Fig. 1); (5) Impression of a Neo-Babylonian pyramidal stamp seal attached to bronze fibula, Meqabelein, ‘Amman (whitish chalcedony; H 2.4 cm, W 1.7 cm, L 2.1 cm; photo courtesy of IAA); (6) Impression of a Neo-Babylonian pyramidal stamp seal, Adoni Nur, ‘Amman (whitish chalcedony; W c. 1.4 cm, L 2.0 cm; drawn by Noga Ze’evi after Lankester Harding 1953: Pl. 6:4); (7) Impression on a *bulla*, Samaria (W 1.5 cm, L 1.7 cm; drawn by Noga Ze’evi from IAA photo); (8) Impression on a *bulla*, Tell Safut, Jordan (dimensions unknown; Wimmer 1987:171, Fig. 9); (9) Neo-Assyrian conical stamp seal, Tel Kisan (light brownish limestone; H 2.2 cm, W 1.7 cm, L 2.0 cm; Keel 1980: Pl. 89:24): (a, b) incised walls; (c) impression of base; (10) Impression of a local imitation of a Neo-Babylonian conical stamp seal, Tell eṣ-Ṣafi (reddish-brown stone; H 2.1 cm, D 1.9 cm; drawn by Noga Ze’evi after Bliss and Macalister 1902:41, Fig. 16:1).

was found together with second–fourth-century CE beads as part of a woman's anklet, it seems most probable that it was included in this later assemblage only because of its value as a bead, a kind of simple gem. Similar occurrences of Babylonian and Assyrian seals found in Hellenistic to Byzantine contexts and devoid of their ancient symbolism, are not unknown, e.g., an Assyrian cylinder seal from Be'er Sheva' found in a Hellenistic context (Beck 1973)[7] and two Neo-Assyrian cylinder seals from Roman strata at Bet She'an (James 1966: Fig. 117:5, 6). To these one may add an Assyro-Babylonian conoid stamp seal from Tarshiḥa (Iliffe 1934:11, No. 2, Pl. 8:9) and a Neo-Babylonian duck-shaped stamp seal from Shiqmona (Ornan 1997:258, 341, No. 116, without photograph), both found in Byzantine tombs.

NOTES

[1] The excavations were directed by Edna Ayash, on behalf of the Israel Antiquities Authority, with the participation of Maya Dagon, Mark Mullokandov, Orit Segal and Varda Shlomi, assisted by Stas I. Stark (surveying), Jacques Verdene (physical anthropology) and Tsila Sagiv (photography of finds).

[2] Figures 1:d; 2:3, 4, 6, 7, 10 were drawn by Noga Ze'evi.

[3] On the popularity of these symbols, which continued well into the Achaemenid period, see Buchanan and Moorey 1988:56 and references therein; Seidl 1989:119.

[4] Only a *marru* symbol and a small tree are depicted, see also Tushingham 1992:15.

[5] The seal was found together with the imported Neo-Babylonian stamp seal (Fig. 2:1), mentioned above.

[6] However, it was already depicted on a silver pendant from Tel Miqne/'Eqron, found in a late seventh-century BCE hoard (Ornan 2001:238, Fig. 9.7).

[7] The seal was found together with other items in *favissae* dug in the court of the probably late second-century BCE temple (Derfler 1981:98; Herzog 1993:172).

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