

A New Lion-Human Stamp Seal Impression from Tappeh Sofalin, Central Iranian Plateau

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Introduction

Stamp seals as well as their impressions in a mass of clay are known from several locations in Southwest Asia as early as the 7th millennium BCE (Rashad 1990; von Wickede 1990). Over time and with accumulated experience of human societies, a new way of sealing was invented: at the beginning of the shift to urban life, a move from old stamp seals to cylinder seals happened. Important features of the cylinder seal are a larger surface for imagery, and comfort and speed in the practice of sealing (see Pollock 2017). The invention of cylindrical seals, both in Mesopotamia and ancient Iran, is dated to the time of proto-writing around the middle of the 4th millennium BCE (Pittman 1995).

During the Proto-Elamite period, cylinder and stamp seals were used over a very large geographical area in Iran as emblems of authority (Dittmann 1987). The 2006–2016 excavation seasons at Tappeh Sofalin on the Central Iranian Plateau, focusing on the emergence of urban societies, produced a significant corpus of administrative materials that provides evidence for the use of two systems of sealing during the Susa 2 and Susa 3 horizon (Hessari 2011; 2018). The new ¹⁴C dates from Tappeh Sofalin date the site back to 3450 BCE and thus to the oldest known stage of the Proto Elamite period (Hessari et al. forthcoming). In this paper, a new proto-Elamite stamp seal impression

from Tappeh Sofalin is presented to Professor Susan Pollock for her life-long career and her promotion of Middle Eastern archaeology and especially her influential research on the archaeology of Iran.

Tappeh Sofalin

The site of Tappeh Sofalin is located south-east of Tehran in the Varamin-Pishva Plain of the North-Central Iranian Plateau, at Lat. 51° 44' 06 N, Long. 35° 18' 58 E, at a general elevation of about 966 m asl (Fig. 1).

The glyptic art of Tappeh Sofalin

One important class of administrative materials found at Tappeh Sofalin are clay sealings used to close or mark a variety of containers as well as door and window locks. Clay tablets were also found, impressed with a variety of cylinder seals and a limited number of stamp seals. The iconography of the Proto-Elamite seals found at Tappeh Sofalin can be divided into 10 major groups such as simple and complex geometrical motifs, full figured humans, semi-human demons or monstrous creatures. Each class is further subdivided into sub-classes according to details of iconography and secondary elements. I discuss here a Proto-Elamite stamp seal impression with one famous Proto-Elamite motif. The Proto-Elamite administrative system was used over a very large geographical area in Iran. Recent

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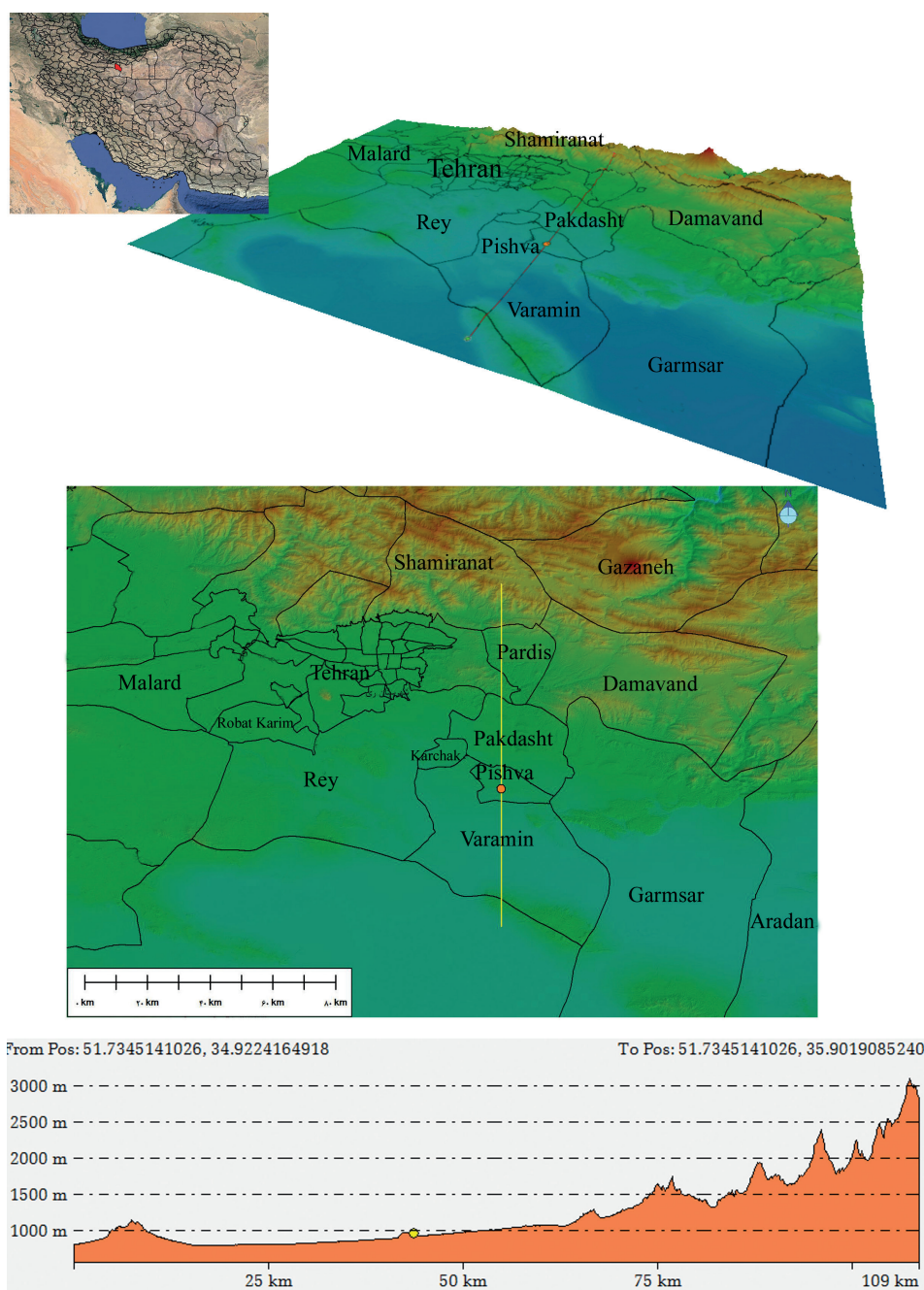


Fig. 1. Location of the Tappeh Sofalin and Varamin-Pishva plain, Globalmapper/wms, SRTM worldwide elevation data, 3-arc-second resolution. Graph: M. Hessari.

research interest in its developmental has focused on a set of manifestations that can be loosely lumped together and referred to as the Proto-Elamite phenomenon (Hessari 2018). Archaeologists have variously used the term Proto-Elamite to mean a people, a script, a material culture and a time period; in addition, the term has been used to carry inherent geographic implications (Alden 1982; Dittmann 1986; Pittman 1997).

A stamp seal impression with a lion-human motif

This article examines a stamp seal impression from the Proto-Elamite period. What makes this stamp seal impression different from others is its motif, which until now has only been identified on cylinder seals. This stamp seal impression was found in Trench 2, 2008 campaign (find no. 2446)



Fig. 2. Seal impression. Photo: M. Hessari.

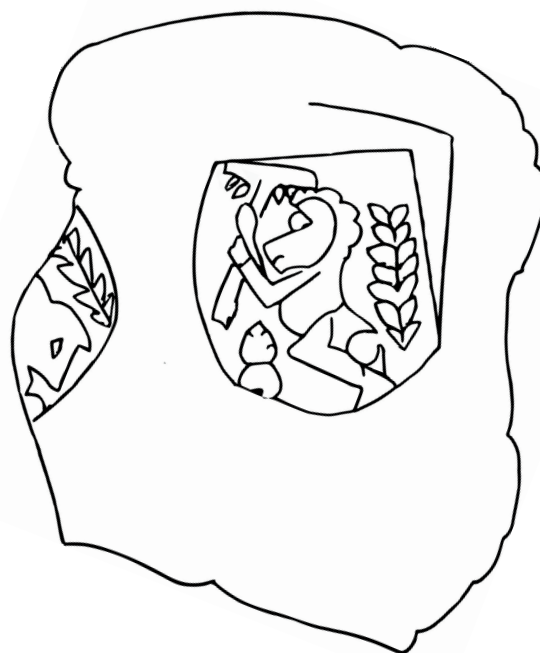


Fig. 3. Seal impression. Drawing: M. Hessari.

and the motif is repeated on the broken part on the sealing's left side. Its image is rather difficult to reconstruct. The lower and left sides of the sealing are smoothed by a human finger. The stamp seal impression is delimited by a square area. On this surface is a human-animal *Mischwesen*, a lion in a human posture. The main figure of the seal is a lion-human. The head is that of a lion with the mane spread to the back of the head. The lion-human holds a standard. The face is shown in profile and turned towards the left. The human body is in a sitting state. The leg is pulled back from the knee and the body weighs on it. The thigh muscles are beautifully displayed. There is an approximately triangular vase in front of the bent knee part of the lion-human with a wide leaf emerging from it. Behind the lion-human is a palm-like stem (Fig. 2–3).

Discussion

This seal impression represents a special kind for the Proto-Elamite society. Susa's glyptic material with the best-known Proto-Elamite collection was divided into two archaic and Proto-Elamite groups (Amiet

1972; 1980). In his analysis, Pierre Amiet proposed an iconographic interpretation in terms characteristic of this style, which also addressed the material of the "Proto-Elamites", especially the animals depicted in human poses, "*les animaux en attitudes humaines*" (Amiet 1980, 107–10). These motifs can be articulated with a "classic Proto-Elamite" style. Proto-Elamite seal styles were studied by Pittman and classified into five groups: the classic style, the glazed steatite style, the wheel-cut style, the incised and the stamp seal style (Pittman 1994; 1997, 139–40; 2006–2008, 26–32). Pittman's "Proto-Elamite stamp seal style" is obviously dependent on seal shape and is not iconographically defined. Some of the stylistic suggestions put forward by Pittman can therefore run counter to her classification, such as the seal impression presented here which combines a classic Proto-Elamite stylistic elaboration of the imagery with the unusual form of a stamp seal.

The great work in the Tappeh Sofalin collection are cylinder seal impressions. However, there is also a stamp seal impression whose seal design appears in an elaborately cut

relief style. Therefore, the image of this seal impression – the lion-human – took on a special significance. Iconographically, this stamp seal impression belongs to the typical Proto-Elamite culture. To understand the meaning of this seal impression, we turn to parallels on other seals. Such motifs were found at Proto-Elamite sites such as Susa, Tappeh Yahya and Malyan (Amiet 1980; Dittmann 1987; Pittman 2001; 2006–2008, 28–29, Fig. 2). The seal impression from Tappeh Sofalin can be compared to seals and sealings in the classic Proto-Elamite style, although this one is in the form of a stamp seal. Accordingly, the lion-human was an important symbol in the Proto-Elamite period with strong associations in the religious and social symbolic universe of the period. The pattern of the lion-body and the upper part of the flag or standard are similar to examples of sealings from Susa (Pittman 2006–2008, 28, Fig. 2).

In summary, it seems that the lion-human is a powerful aspect within a social hierarchy. If we assume that the motif of the lion-human – or of the lion-human with a flag/standard – is an indicator of political and social power (Dittmann 2013, 35–36), we can interpret this motif as an indication of its roots in times before the full development of Proto-Elamite times, or what can be called the Susa II-horizon. Social power of an urban society shifted from the Susa II to the Susa III-horizon. This would be suggested by the specific find of a stamp seal (an older seal type) with the typically Proto-Elamite style at Tappeh Sofalin. Administrative tools in general were adjusted better to local needs in combination with objects such as bullae and tablets. Also, I would suggest that the motif of the stamp seal impression was part of the early stage of the main styles of Proto-Elamite cylinder seals.

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