

The delegation of power : Neo-Assyrian bureau seals

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Summary

Bureau seals are an innovation of the Assyrian administration to cope with the delegation of power that running a world empire demanded. By placing some bureau seals in their historical context we find indications that these seal types were introduced not at once but at various points in Neo-Assyrian history, reflecting changes in the balance of power.

1 Introduction

Among the most durable and influential legacies of Mesopotamian civilization are surely its administrative technologies or, to use Carl Lamberg-Karlovsky's term, its "technologies of social control" (Lamberg-Karlovsky 1996 : 93). It seemed therefore appropriate for a conference focussing on some of the richest materials illustrating the Achaemenid imperial administration, the Persepolis Fortification Archive, to draw attention to the administrative technologies of the Neo-Assyrian empire, a predecessor of the Achaemenid empire as the predominant force controlling the 'world', as it was perceived at the time.

The Assyrian Empire was the first large empire to exercise hegemony over the central world-system core, affecting the fate of regions far beyond its boundaries. But how did Assyria, and the succeeding ancient empires, cohere? Mitchell Allen, in a contribution to a volume exploring the historical evolution of pre-modern world-systems, has recently emphasized, and

¹ This study was prepared for the Paris conference but I also had the opportunity to present parts of its content in lectures delivered in Oxford (November 2006), Cambridge (February 2007) and Verona (April 2007); my paper has profited from the discussion at all occasions. Dominique Collon very kindly read a first draft of the paper and inspected some sealings with me; I have greatly benefitted from her expertise. Suzanne Herbordt generously provided information on the sealings discussed in §3.2 [B.1-2] and §3.3 [2-3], Lamia al-Gailani Werr kindly made Ahmed Kamil's unpublished copy of a queen's seal from the Nimrud Tombs available to me, and Mario Fales drew my attention to a relevant passage in the *Abiqar Novel* — I am grateful to all of them as well as to Wouter Henkelman and Pierre Briant for the kind invitation to Paris. My sincere thanks go to Dick Hodges who at very short notice made time to produce the photographs (or more accurately, object scans) illustrating this article. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to Simo Parpola for allowing me to use the electronic Corpus of Neo-Assyrian Texts and to the Trustees of the British Museum for access to the rich materials it houses.

rightly so in my opinion, that Assyria's success and stability owes much to "innovations in administrative technology, the kind that allowed a world-empire to act like a world-economy" (Allen 2005 : 76) and afforded the control of a vast geographical horizon : "Limitations in administrative technology limit the size of empires, as happened in the first three millennia of the Central Core system. It took administrative innovation to break that ceiling" (Allen 2005 : 76-77). We must bear this in mind when studying the Neo-Assyrian administration and its strategies for communication, data management and the control of tangible and intangible assets, keeping our eyes open for changes and adaptations of the traditional Near Eastern administrative technologies. In turn, strategies that had proven useful in controlling and stabilizing the Assyrian empire are likely to have been adopted or adapted by the succeeding states, the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid empires and their heirs respectively.

This paper focuses on one aspect of the wide spectrum of attested administrative technologies, namely the role of seals, sealings and sealing. As the finds from Persepolis (Garrison & Root 1998 ; 2002) and elsewhere (most importantly Daskyleion in Hellenistic Phrygia : Kaptan 2002) illustrate, the seal was used as an important instrument of administrative technology throughout the Achaemenid period. By investigating the role of seals in the Neo-Assyrian imperial administration, I want to address a key question concerning our understanding of ancient empires : how was power delegated from the king to the local authorities ? I propose that bureau seals played an important role in this.

2 Seals as a an administrative tool

Together with clay tablets and the cuneiform script, seals were originally developed as instruments of the administration. Over time, they became omnipresent in the urban sphere, having gained secondary purposes in legal procedures, in long-distance communications and as talismans, to name some of the more prominent usages, all well attested in the Neo-Assyrian period : to Herodotus, the seal is the Mesopotamian's indispensable accessory (*Hist.* I.195). Yet we will ignore the private use of seals and focus on their first and original function as tools of the state administration.

The material basis for our investigation is good : (1) administrative documents bearing seals, from the palaces of 8th and 7th century Kalhu and Nineveh ; (2) clay sealings² from the palaces of Kalhu, Dūr-Šarrukīn and Nineveh, with and without additional inscriptions, the attested chronological span reaching from Shalmaneser III (858-824 BCE) to the end of the empire ; (3) references to seals and sealing in the palace correspondence of the 8th and 7th century.

Of these materials, the most numerous are the clay sealings found in the Assyrian palaces. A considerable number of these sealings can be identified as having once been fixed to writing boards, securing the string used to tie them shut (Herbordt 1992 : 60). The inscriptions applied to certain of these sealings (§3.1 [A.1-2], §3.1 [B.1]) offer summaries of

² Note that the term 'sealing' refers, throughout this paper, to lumps of clay onto which a seal has been impressed ; these lumps of clay may in addition bear a short label in cuneiform script which accompanies the sealing.

the textual contents of the writing boards and allow some insight into just how much of the administrative output of the palace bureaucracy has been lost. But securing the knotted string is certainly not the sealings' sole purpose. I would argue that the seal impression while obviously preventing unauthorised consultation of the text — which would require removing sealing and string — also identified the issuing administrative unit.

This notion is supported by a sealed clay tablet dating to the reign of Sargon II (721-705 BCE) but found at Nineveh (K 1995 = *SAA* 11 123; **fig. 1, a-b**). Its contents give us some idea of what to expect in the case of the now lost lists of “reviewed troops of the king” from Nimrud (§3.1 [A.2.1-2]). The tablet is not preserved in its entirety, but enough survives to describe its format and content matter : it is a vertical tablet with two columns of text on the obverse and reverse, listing horse grooms (*susānu* = LÚ.GIŠ.GIGIR) and their superiors. While the columns on the obverse are fully used for entries, the layout of the columns on the reverse is more generous and leaves some space between blocks of text; the empty space in the last column³ was used to impress a stamp seal, showing a griffin facing left⁴. In the case of this list it is obvious that the seal was not applied to protect its contents but to add additional information. It is a vexing characteristic of the Neo-Assyrian administrative material that headings or other indications of the context of the texts are extremely sparsely used. If we assume that seal impressions allowed identification of the administrative unit responsible for such lists then this would compensate for the lack of references in the texts themselves. Several other examples of sealed lists of personnel are also known from Assur, albeit from private archives⁵.



Fig. 1, a-b : K 1995.

- 3** According to the usual practices used for multi-columned texts throughout the cuneiform documentation, the right-hand column on the reverse would be the first and the left-hand column the last column of that side of the tablet. The edition in *SAA* 11 123 has to be corrected accordingly (reverse I = reverse II; reverse II = reverse I).
- 4** Not a winged disc (“geflügelte Sonne?”) as Herbordt 1992 : 247-248 Ninive 178 would have it (seal collation 18 September 2006). Note also the drawing of the seal in *SAA* 11, p. 208.
- 5** VAT 8652 = KAN 2 40; VAT 9502 = KAN 2 41; VAT 8656 = KAN 2 42. Edition : Radner 1999 : 152-156. The seals are published by E. Klengel in KAN 2, p. 107, 118 : seals 14-16.

In an administrative context, the use of the verb “to seal” (*kanāku*; very rarely *barāmu*) often implies the composition of an inventory of the items in question. When the commodity is not explicitly identified, as in a letter written by the crown prince Sennacherib to Sargon II, it is difficult to decide whether the items themselves were sealed or rather an inventory listing them : “The tribute of the ruler of Ashdod was brought to Kalhu. I have received and sealed it⁶.” But a sealed inventory is certainly the product of the proceedings described in another letter to Sargon, this time from one of his governors, who reports on taking stock of various storage facilities in Kalhu and Dūr-Šarrukīn, among them a palace treasury and storerooms under the authority of the cupbearer (*rab šāqê*), one of highest officials in the Assyrian administration. This involves the weighing of metals and the “sealing” of textiles : “In the remaining days, we can go to Dūr-Šarrukīn and seal the linen⁷.” The verb is used in the same way for sheep being delivered from the provinces to the Aššur temple, as related in a letter that states how a provincial governor’s agent “brings (the sheep) before [them] [i.e. the administrative officials in charge] and makes (them) pass by, and they seal (them) and bring (them) into Libbi-āli [i.e. the city of Assur]⁸.”

Physical evidence for the proceedings described in these letters survive in two different forms : firstly, sealings from writing boards that once listed the items summarized in the sealing’s inscription. Animals can be demonstrated to have been “sealed” in this way : on the sealing of a writing board from the reign of Sargon II (§3.1 [B.1.2]) some horse deliveries are briefly summed up and were undoubtedly listed in detail in the writing board’s account. And secondly, the so-called ‘textile docket’, sealed inventories of textiles that, with the help of string, were once attached to something, quite possibly the wrapped textiles themselves (§3.1 [B.6], §3.2 [A.4-1], [B.4-7]). The text inscribed onto these textile dockets — and onto similar items with other content matter, such as a wine docket from the Review Palace (“Fort Shalmaneser”) at Kalhu (ND 6211⁹; **fig. 2, a-b**) — is of equal importance as the seal impression, not secondary as in the case of the various other sealings. The shape of these items is very distinct and has, in the guise of the so-called ‘tongue-shaped tablets’, exact parallels in Persepolis and among other Achaemenid materials (Henkelman, Jones & Stolper 2004 : 7, 39-40); in this case, form certainly follows function and we can be confident that the use of the ‘dockets’ in the Assyrian and the Achaemenid administration was the same¹⁰.

6 SAA 1 29 rev. 22-23 : *ma-da-tú ša KUR.Sa-du-da-a-a a-na URU.Kal-ha na-šu-ú-ni a-ta-bar ak-ta-na-ak.*

7 SAA 5 206 rev. 5'-8' : *ina re-eb-ti 6' U₄-me-ni a-na URU.BĀD-MAN-GIN 7' ni-il-lak TÚG.GADA. MEŠ 8' am-ma-ti ni-kan-na-ak.*

8 SAA 13 17 : 6'-8' : *ú-ba-la ina pa-ni-[šú-nu] 7' ú-še-ta-qa i-ka-nu-[ku] 8' [a-n]a URU.ŠĀ-URU ú-ba-lu-ni.*

9 Wine docket with (unpublished) cylinder seal impression; now in British Museum, collated 21 September 2006 : ND 6211 = CTN 3 148 (copy : Kinnier Wilson 1972, pl. 44) : 17 ANŠE 4-BÁN [GEŠTIN.MEŠ] 2 [š]a URU.Ia-lu-na 3 ša 1dUTU-rém-ni 4 ITU.ŠE U₄-8-KÁM 5 [lim-mu 1x x x].

10 There are, however, far more open questions than answers, see most recently Henkelman, Jones, Stolper 2004 : 45-46.



Fig. 2, a-b : ND 6211.

Elsewhere, I have discussed in some detail the evidence for the refining, weighing and sealing of precious metals and argued that the sealings were applied to the metal ingots themselves (Radner 1999a : 134-137 ; 2002 : 49-51). The Nineveh sack sealings (§3.1 [B.3-4]) from the reigns of Sennacherib (704-681 BCE) and Assurbanipal (668-c. 630 BCE) are all that is left from such sealed silver ingots. Together with the source of the silver and a date, the inscriptions on these sealings give the weight of the metal : according to the available sealings, it is always one talent = c. 32 kg which matches the available depictions of Assyrian ingots that show them to be of substantial size and also weight, to judge from the way they are lifted in one scene (Radner 1999a : 135, 205 fig. 1-2). If we combine the evidence of the sealings with the information gained from contemporary letters and sculptures, we can reconstruct the following administrative routine for the handling of metals : metals were, if necessary, refined and brought into the form of round ingots of a standard size and weight. After confirming their weight by weighing, the ingots were wrapped up in sacking, sealed and stored. A close parallel for this is the sealing of wine after being measured and poured into standardized vessels (DUG.ŠAB = *šapputu*), as best attested in a private letter from Assur (VAT 8650 = KAN 2 53 ; Radner 1999 : 176-177) : here, the sealing would have been applied onto the string tying the wrapping used to secure the wine jar's mouth (Herbordt 1992 : 59-60 ; Fales & Postgate 1995 : XXI-XXII).

The material from the palaces of Kalhu and Nineveh contains a number of sealings that were originally applied to various containers, not only jars but also boxes (Herbordt 1992 : 63-64) and sacks (Herbordt 1992 : 59). Some of these vessels may have held the materials mentioned in the sealings' inscriptions, yet others can be demonstrated to have contained documents referring to these items. One such case is a pot whose sealing is inscribed with a note mentioning "completed accounts" : the jar must have held the texts giving the details of these accounts (§3.1 [B.7.1]).

For our purposes, it is crucial to note that for the vast majority of the available administrative sealings stamp seals were used, with the same motifs appearing again and again. In the following, I will focus on four such motifs, but there is a whole range of other motifs attested and analysing the nature of the Nineveh and Kalhu sealings in

conjunction with the seals used would certainly further our understanding of the workings of the Assyrian administration, especially if the seals could be attributed to various administrative offices or units.

2.1 'Bureau seals' : a definition

It is useful to distinguish between personal seals, which belong to one individual and are meant to be unique, and what I would like to call 'bureau seals'. I will reserve the latter term for seals that are associated with a particular administrative department — a 'bureau' — rather than a specific person and that exist in a number of copies.

In Assyria, the use of such bureau seals is an innovation of the Neo-Assyrian period, attested from the 9th century onwards and, as I would suggest, coinciding with Assyria's transformation from kingdom to empire. While personal seals of high officials could, despite the increasing popularity of stamp seals throughout the Neo-Assyrian period, frequently take the shape of cylinder seals, the bureau seals employed by the palace administration were always stamp seals.

I had initially chosen to call these bureau seals 'office seals' but decided against it in order to avoid confusion with the term "office seal", well established in Ancient Near Eastern literature including Achaemenid studies (e.g., Root 1999 : 166) to designate specific and unique seals which are used by subsequent holders of the same office, sometimes over generations. A Neo-Assyrian example is the ancient cylinder seal which was still utilized in the 7th century by the city administration of the city of Assur; passed down from its original owner to several successive generations of officials holding the title of city overseer (*ša muhhi āli*) of Assur, it is used to certify the city's consent to the transfer of property rights of houses within Assur (Klengel-Brandt & Radner 1997). As a passage in the Middle Assyrian Laws (MAL B §6; Roth 1997 : 177-178) proves, this goes back to a tradition that was already well established when these laws were written down around 1100 BCE and probably dates back to much earlier in the second millennium. When the members of the municipal administration used the one unique seal inherited from a previous office holder to perform this ancient legal act in the 7th century, using this seal clearly strengthened both the authority of the sealing and of those who used the seal. There was no need to delegate power; indeed, it is key to the legal act that only the city administration held the power to perform it. And while the members of the municipal government were certainly appointed by the king by the 7th century, they were always chosen from the local population, unlike e.g., the provincial governors who were dispatched from the king's circle to the seat of their new office. Whereas the latter represent the king, the former do not; they act as the present embodiment of an ancient office that does not owe its existence to the king's need to delegate power but is the fossilized relic of the old self-administration of the city of Assur.

When we discuss in the following a number of bureau seal types, namely those of the king, the queen, the crown prince and the governor of Kalhu, we will see that all these seal types are stamp seals, and often of a simple design. Emphasizing authority by using antique heirlooms was clearly not a concern here, and neither was uniqueness of design of the individual seal — quite on the contrary, the seals of a certain type were meant to closely resemble each other, as testified by contemporary voices (*SAA* 15 125, see §3.1). The royal seal type is attested in at least 104 known examples, and textual evidence (*SAA* 18

163, see §3.1) demonstrates that it was common knowledge that many such seals were in use simultaneously. The bearer of the seal acted as a representative of he who had issued the seal to him; it identifies him as a part of a particular administrative unit, and when a royal official impresses a seal of the royal seal type he acts for the king and as the king, and not as the current holder of the office of, say, royal wine master or tax inspector. This is, in my view, the most important characteristic of the Neo-Assyrian bureau seal.

3 Bureau seals - four case studies

3.1 The seal of the king's bureau : the lion-killer

The so called 'Assyrian royal seal type', showing the king stabbing a rearing lion with his sword (e.g., BM 84672; **fig. 3**), is by far the best known and also best attested bureau seal (Sachs 1953; Millard 1967; Millard 1978; Herbordt 1992 : 123-136; Maul 1995). Suzanne Herbordt (1992 : 124-127¹¹) was able to collect a minimum of 104 individual seals which were in use over a span of roughly two centuries, the earliest dated by the cuneiform label inscribed on the clay sealing to the reign of Shalmaneser III (858-824 BCE)¹². The motif could also be used for a king's personal cylinder seal, as illustrated by the seal of Esarhaddon (680-669 BCE) which can be identified by its inscription and is known from a sealing from the Review Palace of Nimrud (CTN 3 26; Watanabe 1993 : 110-111 : no. 2.2).



Fig. 3 : BM 84672.

11 This list only includes the "standard seal type", not its variants (§3.2 [B.1], [B.2]; §3.3 [2], [3]).

12 Note that a remarkably similar motif, a man slaying a lion with a sword, is attested for five stamp seals known from sealings from Assur (first published by Klengel-Brandt 1994). Herbordt 1996 : 414-415 suggested that they may represent an earlier version of the Assyrian king's (bureau) seal, to be dated to the reign of Assurnasirpal II (883-859 BCE). While this is certainly a possibility, especially for stylistic reasons and also due to the close parallel in the royal seal of Ugarit, we should not ignore that this seal type may also stand for another administrative unit; note that the find context of the sealings would indicate a dating to the 7th century BCE rather than the 9th (Herbordt 1996 : 412).

No original seal has survived, but from references in the textual record it is clear that these objects, which are always called “signet ring” (*unqu*) rather than “seal” (*kunukku*) or “neck seal” (*kišādu*), were made of gold¹³. In the shape of a golden seal from Tomb III at Nimrud, attributed to Hamâ queen of Shalmaneser IV (784-773 BCE) by its inscription (IM 115644; photo : Hussein, Suleiman 1999/2000 : 399), we may have a model enabling us to visualize these objects : Hamâ’s seal is a signet ring, attached to a pendant which could be fastened to a chain in order to be worn around the neck as a locket or attached to a fibula, as attested in the case of the “Nimrud Jewel” (ND 785; Mallowan 1966 : 114-115 with fig. 58; Curtis, Maxwell-Hyslop 1971 : 102-105, pls. XXXe-f, XXXIIa-b). Plainer versions lacking the pendant may have been worn on a finger. To seal with rings rather than cylinder seals is a custom that had a long tradition in the west : already in the Late Bronze Age, centuries before signet rings were adopted for the Assyrian administration, their use is very well attested in Assyria’s western neighbours such as the kingdom of Aštata with its capital Emar (Beyer 2001).

At least during the reign of Esarhaddon we can prove that rather than an object of its own, the *unqu* could also be part of a cylinder seal, more specifically of a so-called ‘stamp-cylinder’ which combines a cylinder seal and a stamp seal : its lower base — or rather the metal cap into which it was fitted — was decorated and could be used as a stamp seal. A sealing from the Review Palace of Kalhu (“Fort Shalmaneser”) bears several impressions of apparently three different royal seals, namely two round stamp seals with the lion-killer motif (of different size) and a cylinder seal bearing the same design and an inscription of Esarhaddon (CTN 3 26 = ND 7080. Photo : CTN 3 pl. 48; Collon 1987 : 79 no. 359; Herboldt 1992, pl. 31 : no. 3). Yet, as a close look at the impressions makes clear, one of the ‘stamp seals’ is not an object of its own but rather the decorated metal cap fitted around the lower base of the cylinder seal (Collon 1987 : 80, 111¹⁴).

The motif of the royal bureau seal was known throughout the empire and closely identified with the king himself. A letter from the Sargon correspondence records the reaction of an official who received a letter order authenticated with a seal impression that he refused to accept as the genuine thing : “The signet ring (impression on the letter) which he delivered is not made like the signet rings of the king, my lord. I have a thousand signet ring(-sealed letter)s of the king, my lord, with me and I have compared it with them — it is not made like the signet ring of the king, my lord! I am herewith sending the signet ring(-sealed letter) to the king, my lord. If it is genuine, let them write a copy of the signet ring(-sealed letter) which I am sending and I will place it with him, so that he may go where the king, my lord, sent him to” (SAA 15 125 : 2'-rev. 5). The claim to be the recipient of a thousand royal letters may be overstated but the official certainly knew what the royal signet ring’s impression looked like and was not prepared to follow instructions that could not be verified as being authorized by the king. We cannot know, however, whether

13 SAA 15 224 : 5 : [*un-qu*] KÙ.GI LUGAL (Sargon II); SAA 18 146 rev. 3 : *un-qu* KÙ.GI šá LUGAL (Esarhaddon).

14 An original cylinder seal in a gold setting, the lower base of which bears a design and can be used as a stamp seal, was found in a burial at Neirab (AO 2063), see Collon 1987 : 84-85 no. 391. The metal caps could also be imitated in stone (Collon 1987 : 111 and cf. Collon 2001, pl. VII no. 82, pl. X no. 134, pl. XIII no. 169).

this is a case of bold forgery, like the counterfeit copy reported for the royal seal of Ugarit (RS 16.249; Nougayrol 1955 : 96-98), or false alarm, possibly raised with the intention of buying time before having to comply with an unpopular order : Sargon's official is clearly aware of the fact that there is more than one royal seal in circulation. That such seals were handed out to those that represented the king in the provinces is explicitly mentioned in a letter to Esarhaddon : **"**(Concerning) the message which the king, the lord, sent and the golden signet rings which they gave to me, saying : 'Send them to Babylon!' One signet ring I have already given to Mušēzib-Marduk but the signet ring for Šuma-iddin, the prelate of Dēr, is still with me**"** (SAA 18 163, p. 9-16). Equipped with the royal bureau seal, the king's officials were able to issue commands in the king's stead and on the king's behalf.

A document bearing the royal seal impression was as good as a direct command of the king and forced his subjects to act accordingly. This is made very clear by the way a provincial governor makes his excuses to Sargon II for being late for the muster of troops — it is fulfilling the king's orders which prevents his departure : **"**The cohort commander Išme-ilī is bringing us a (document sealed with the) golden signet ring of the king and continues to delay us, saying : 'Transport barley to Mazamūa!'**"** (SAA 5 234 : 4'-rev. 1). Whether the text in question is a specific letter or an administrative document confirming a general tax obligation ¹⁵, being authorized with the royal seal it could not possibly be ignored unless the king said otherwise, and the mention of the fact that the royal signet ring is golden seems to serve no other purpose than to emphasize this. A similar excuse is used by a Babylonian subject of Esarhaddon, who failed to show up for an oath ceremony : **"**I was not present (because of) the (order sealed with the) signet ring of the king, my lord, which Aššur-rā'im-šarri delivered to me : As my brothers and I had to go with him to Araši to keep the watch (at the Elamite border) I missed the appointment of the oath of Babylon**"** (SAA 18 162 : 7-17).

In turn, orders that were not backed up by the royal bureau seal or its impression were easily refused, as one of Esarhaddon's officials in Babylonia had to experience : **"**Concerning the fugitive scholars, eunuchs and soldiers of Šamaš-ibni [the leader of Bīt-Dakkūri, an enemy of Assyria], who are (now) with Nabû-ušallim, about whom the king, my lord, wrote to me : When I spoke to him, he refused to give them to me, saying : 'I will not give them to you in the absence of a (document sealed with the) signet ring of the king and a member of the royal entourage!'**"** (SAA 18 56 : 8-13).

Without a bureau seal, the authority of the king's administrators suffered and was infringed, as we learn from a letter to Esarhaddon that raises accusations against various staff members of the governor of Guzāna, including two corrupt scribes who are charged with non-compliance and the facilitation of tax evasion : **"**Kutī and Tutī's first crime is that my son ordered them : 'Bring me the horses so that I can bring (them) to the king!' but they refused. Their other crime (happened already during the reign of) the father of

15 Royal grants which usually included clauses regarding tax obligations were sealed with the royal seal; impressions are preserved on SAA 12 6, 10, 12, 13 (Adad-nērārī III); 20, 21 (Sennacherib); 29 (Assurbanipal); 35, 36, 44 (Aššur-etel-ilāni); 45, 46, 47, 78, 79 (name of king not preserved). Note especially a grant of Sargon II from 713 BCE that mentions how Adad-nērārī III had previously imposed a quota of barley for temple offerings and sealed a tablet : SAA 12 19 : 26' : *ú-kin-nu-ma ib-ri-[i]m-šu-nu ka-an-[ku]*.

the king, my lord. They wrote the work assignment of the shepherds onto Assyrian and Aramaic documents and sealed the silver sum with the neck seals of the treasurer Nabû-qātē-šabat, (his) village manager and (his) scribe — with their neck seals and the ‘signet ring’. (The documents read) : ‘If they don’t pay this year, they will die’. But when a bribe was made, they detached the ‘signet rings’ from their [i.e., the officials’] neck seals and threw (them) away ¹⁶.” The documents in question are obligations recording the shepherds’ work assignment, i.e. the number of sheep they are to produce to the authorities. The texts are stated to be written in Assyrian (cuneiform) and Aramaic (alphabet script), which fits the fact that the use of both systems side by side is well attested for obligation records from Guzāna and other sites in the western part of the Assyrian empire (Fales 2000). Their supposed content — “If they don’t pay this year, they will die” — is clearly a somewhat exaggerated paraphrase of the usual obligation formulary with its penalty clauses. The texts are said to be sealed by two distinct sets of seals, namely the “neck seals” (i.e., personal seals) of various administrative officials and the “signet ring” (*unqu*); whether this is the king’s bureau seal or rather another seal type, for example the bureau seal of the governor of Guzāna, is not specified, but it is clearly the *unqu* that ultimately gives authority to the documents. The scribes’ offence is described as separating the “signet rings” from the “neck seals” and following a suggestion of Dominique Collon (3 October 2006), I would like to understand this passage literally, as referring to the seals themselves and not to the impressions of the seals (as generally assumed in previous translations and discussions of the passage; see the most recent edition *SAA* 16 63). Based on the shape of the already mentioned “stamp-cylinder” of Esarhaddon and similar seals belonging to the governors of Kalhu (§3.4), we may visualize the *kišādu* seals as cylinder seals fitted into metal caps, with the lower base serving as a stamp seal, described as *unqu* “signet ring”, and decorated with a bureau seal design : by removing the gold caps with the bureau seal from the officials’ personal cylinder seals the two scribes sabotaged their authority to act as members of the state administration.

In the following I have grouped the known sealings with impressions of the royal signet ring and short cuneiform inscription labels according to their archaeological context (if known), dates (if given), function and contents. For the time being, inscribed examples are only attested from Nineveh, Kalhu and Dūr-Šarrukīn but already from this limited collection of data it emerges that the royal bureau seals were used in a wide range of administrative contexts : they were impressed on sealings protecting writing tablets, on sealings securing the contents of sacks, boxes and jars and on clay tags (Herbordt 1992 : 55-56) that were originally attached to an object by means of a loosely hanging string. Despite their brevity, the labels inscribed onto the clay sealings allow some insight into the

16 *SAA* 16 63 : 9-19 : ša¹ Ku-ti-i ša¹ Tu-ti-i¹⁰ 1-en hi-iṭ-ṭa-šú-nu ša DUMU-a-a iq-ba-āš-šá-nu-u-ni ma-a

¹¹ ANŠE.KUR.RA.MEŠ bi-la-a-ni ina ir-ti LUGAL lu-bil¹² la i-ma-ga-ru-u-ni šá-ni-ú hi-ṭa-šú-nu AD-šú ša MAN¹³ EN-ia KÙ.BABBAR ÉŠ.QAR ša LÚ*.SIPA.MEŠ ina ŠĀ-bi ni-ib-zi aš-šur-a-a¹⁴ ina ŠĀ-bi ni-ib-zi ára-ma-a-a i-sa-ṭa-ru ina ŠĀ-bi UZU.GÚ¹⁵ šá^{1d} PA-ŠU₂-šabat LÚ*.AGRIG ša LÚ*.GAL-URU.MEŠ-te ša LÚ*.A.BA¹⁶ ni-bu ša KÙ.BABBAR ina ŠĀ-bi UZU.GÚ-šú-nu ina ŠĀ-bi un-qi¹⁷ ik-ta-an-ku ma-a šum-ma MU.AN.NA an-ni-tú la i-di-nu¹⁸ ma-a i-mu-tú ki-i ṭa-a-tú ta-né-pi-šu-u-ni¹⁹ [un-q]a-a-te TA* UZU.GÚ-šú-nu ub-ta-ti-qu ik-ter-ru.

various administrative agencies involved. Hence, we note the transfer of goods between the king and his magnates and provincial governors ([A.1.1], [B.1.3], [B.1.4]), the receipt of deliveries from independent states such as Ekron, Judah and Kummē ([B.3.1], [B.3.5], [B.3.6]) and institutions within Assyria ([B.3.2], [B.3.3], [B.4.1]) and the accounting for people — troops ([A.2.1], [A.2.2]) and deportees ([B.1.4]) — and goods — luxury furniture ([B.1.1]), luxury textiles ([B.6.1], [B.8.2]), wine ([B.8.1]) and horses to be slaughtered ([B.1.2]).

■ *Materials* – Inscribed sealings bearing the royal bureau seal

- [A]** Inscribed sealings from Kalhu, with impressions of various versions of the royal seal
- [A.1]** Sealing of a writing board from the reign of Shalmaneser III, found at the ziqqurat terrace, probably listing the individual tax contributions of the magnates mentioned in the inscription.
- [A.1.1]** ND 3413 = Ash. 1954.739¹⁷ : *il-ku ša* [x.ME]Š LÀL DUH.LÀL.MEŠ² *ku-zi-p-pe*.MEŠ³ ša UGU LÚ*.GAL.MEŠ³ ša¹ DI-man-nu-MAŠ⁴ DUMU¹ Aš-šur-PAP-A⁵ MAN KUR. Aš-šur.
- [A.2]** Group of three sealings from writing boards from the Review Palace (‘Fort Shalmaneser’), probably listing the troops and the contents of the “old tablets” mentioned in the inscription.
- [A.2.1]** CTN 3 21 = ND 7032 : ÉRIN.MEŠ MAN *áš-ru-te*² ŠU.₂¹⁵-BÀD LÚ*.GAR-*ni*.
- [A.2.2]** CTN 3 22 = ND 7033 : ÉRIN.MEŠ MAN *áš-ru-te*² ŠU.₂¹⁴PA-*še-zib-ni*.
- [A.2.3]** CTN 3 23 = ND 7034 : [DU]ʾB⁷.MEŠ *la-bi-[ra-te ...]* “Old tablets”.
- [A.3]** Group of five box sealings from the ‘Burnt Palace’, probably containing documents or other items connected to the men mentioned in the inscription.
- [A.3.1]** CTN 2 233 = ND 1117 : ¹*Sam-si-im-me*² ŠU^{1d}*A-a-ra-me*.
- [A.3.2]** CTN 2 234 = ND 1118 : ¹ARAD-*a-a*² ŠU^{1d}*Sa-a-MAŠ*.
- [A.3.3]** CTN 2 235 = ND 1119 : ^{1d}10-DÛG.G[A]² ŠU.₂¹[...].
- [A.3.4]** CTN 2 236 = ND 1124 : ¹K[*u-...*]² ŠU¹[...].
- [A.3.5]** CTN 2 237 = ND 1125c : ¹DINGIR-*da-na-ni* ŠU.₂¹[...].
- [A.4]** Two sealings from writing tablets from the ‘Burnt Palace’, possibly concerning taxes if the reading ÉŠ.GÀR = *iškāru* in [4.2] is correct.
- [A.4.1]** CTN 2 238 = ND 1125a : ^{1d}EN.LÍL-x[...] ²[...] KA DU [...].
- [A.4.2]** CTN 2 239 = ND 1125b : [É]Š[?].GÀR¹ZÁLAG-^dEN.[LÍL]²[...] KU MÍ MU LA [...].
- [B]** Inscribed sealings from Nineveh (and Dūr-Šarrukīn), with impressions of various versions of the royal seal
- [B.1]** Sealings of writing boards on various subject matter from the reign of Sargon II, probably listing the items summarized in the inscriptions.

¹⁷ Photo : Sachs 1953, pl. XVIII : 1; copy : Wiseman 1953, pl. XI (MEŠ missing in LÚ*.GAL.MEŠ);
edition : Postgate 1972 : 70.

- [B.1.1] SAA 11 65 = K 3781a : [ur]-su-tú GIŠ.MES-kan-ni ša GÌR.₂.MEŠ-ša KÙ₁-en GIŠ.NÁ EN GIŠ.DA-šá GÌR.₂.MEŠ-šá² GIŠ.[NÁ] EN GIŠ.DA-šá GIŠ.BANŠUR MES-kan-nu TUR KAŠ.LUL⁵ GIŠ.GU.ZA ina¹ Ba-a-a-i³ ITU.GU₄ U₄-10-KAM⁴ lim-me¹ MAN-GIN (719 BCE). Furniture.
- [B.1.2] SAA 11 68 = 81-2-4, 349 : 1 MÍ.KUR ša^{1d} ŠÚ-DÛ-PAP.MEŠ LÚ.qur-bu-tú na-ša-ni² KUR ša KUR.Man-na-a-a ina É LÚ.AGRIG³ KUR ša¹ Pa-ru²-u-u ina URU.Bir-ti⁴ PAP¹⁴ KUR a-na UZU.MEŠ⁵ ITU.GAN U₄-[x-KAM]² lim-me¹ DÛG-I[M-Aš-šur] (717 BCE). Horses “for meat”.
- [B.1.3] SAA 11 49 = Sm 2276 (photo : Sachs 1953, pl. XVIII : 4; Herbordt 1992, pl. 36 : no. 5; SAA 11, p. 49 fig. 7) : il-ku ša¹ MAN-GI.NA MAN KUR.A[š-šur] a-na LÚ.EN.NAM i-ri-mu-u-ni ITU.AB U₄-25-KAM² lim-mu¹ Tak-lak-a-na-EN (715 BCE). Tax redemption.
- [B.1.4] SAA 11 69 = K 391 (fig. 4) : [...] ÉRIN ZI URU.Pa-pa-ma-a-a ša LÚ*.GAL.MEŠ na-š[un-ⁿⁱ]² [ITU.x U₄]-14-KAM lim-mu¹ Aš-šur-ba-ni (713 BCE). Deportees.
- [B.1.5] SAA 11 70 = BM 84874 (fig. 5, a-b)¹⁸ : [...] ša¹ [...] ú-bi-lu-ni a-na¹ Aš-šu[r-...] ša⁴ Aš-šur-MAN-PAP iš-pur-an-[ni]⁵ lim-me^{1d} PA-[de[?]-ni[?]-DÛ[?]] (704 BCE??). Note that the seal shows the king without beard.



Fig. 4 : K 391.

¹⁸ Published photo : Herbordt 1992 : 35 : no. 14.



Fig. 5, a-b : BM 84874.

- [B.2]** Sealed tags found in Dūr-Šarrukīn and Nineveh, from the reign of Sargon II.
- [B.2.1]** SAA 11 63 = N 8293 (photo : Sachs 1953, pl. XIX : 5) : URU.Na-šibi-na. From Dūr-Šarrukīn.
- [B.2.2]** SAA 11 64 = BibNat 5924 (photo : Delaporte 1910, pl. B) : URU.Na-šibi-na. From Dūr-Šarrukīn.
- [B.2.3]** SAA 11 61 = N 8294 (photo : Sachs 1953, pl. XIX : 6) : [URU].Arrap-ha. From Dūr-Šarrukīn.
- [B.2.4]** SAA 11 62 = BibNat 5924 (photo : Delaporte 1910, pl. B) : [URU].Arrap-ha. From Dūr-Šarrukīn.
- [B.2.5]** SAA 11 60 = BM 140575 (copy : SAA 11, pl. 203) : Arrap-ha. From Nineveh.
- [B.2.6]** SAA 11 59 = BM 84568 (copy : SAA 11, pl. 203) : KUR.Qu-e. From Nineveh.
- [B.3]** Sack sealings from Nineveh from the reign of Sennacherib.
- [B.3.1]** SAA 11 50 = BM 98548 (photo : Sachs 1953, pl. XIX : 1; copy : Millard 1967 : 16 no. 21) : 1 GÚ ina QĀL-si ša MAN ¹Pi-di-i ²KUR.An-qar-u-na-a-a ITU.APIN U₄-23 ³lim-me ¹EN-MAN-a-ni (699 BCE).
- [B.3.2]** SAA 11 51 = BM 98552 (photo : Sachs 1953, pl. XIX : 2; copy : Millard 1967 : 16 no. 22) : 1 GÚ ša GIŠ.KIRI₆ URU.Arba-il ²ITU.AB U₄-4-KAM ³lim-mu ¹Aš-šur-U-PAP (695 BCE).
- [B.3.3]** SAA 11 53 = BM 84900 (copy : SAA 11, p. 203) : 1 GÚ KÙ.BABBAR ša ¹DÙ-dPA ²LÚ*. SAG-M[AN] ³[lim-me ¹Aš]-šur-U-PAP ⁴[...] A (695 BCE).
- [B.3.4]** SAA 11 54 = BM 89982 (copy : SAA 11, p. 203) : 1 GÚ KÙ.[BABBAR ša] ²[U]RU.Ha-su-tu [1...] ³[G]AL-KAŠ.LUL it-ta-har ⁴[lim]-me ¹Aš-šur-U-PAP (695 BCE).
- [B.3.5]** SAA 11 57 = BM 50776 (copy : Millard 1967 : 16 no. 41) : [1] GÚ KÙ.BABBAR ša KUR. Ia-[ú-da-a-a].
- [B.3.6]** SAA 11 58 = BM 50794 (copy : Millard 1967 : 16 no. 43) : [1 GÚ KÙ.BABBAR š]á URU. Ku-ma-a-a.
- [B.4]** Sack sealing from Nineveh from the reign of Assurbanipal.
- [B.4.1]** SAA 11 52 = 81-2-4, 350 (copy : Millard 1967 : 16 no. 35) : 1 GÚ [KÙ.BABBAR šá] ² ¹dPA-MAN-P[AP] ³GAL-GĚŠTIN ⁴ITU.ZÍZ U₄-10 [lim-me ¹...] ⁵GAL-SAG (658 BCE or later).

- [B.5]** Box sealing from Nineveh of unknown date.
- [B.5.1]** *SAA* 11 56 = 82-3-23, 1772 : 1 GÚ KÙ.BABBAR ša ^{1d}PA-gab-bi-ZU.
- [B.6]** Sealed ‘textile docket’ from Nineveh, possibly from the reign of Esarhaddon or Assurbanipal.
- [B.6.1]** *SAA* 7 101 = K 1598 : 33 TÚ[G ...] ^{2'} 20 TÚG.u[r-nat ...] ^{3'} 77 T[ÚG ...] ^{4'} 2 T[ÚG ...] ^{5'} 10 [...] ^{rev. 1} PAP 3-ME [...]; no date preserved. Note that two closely related texts are dated in the reigns of Esarhaddon (681 BCE) and Assurbanipal (658 BCE), both sealed with seals showing the scorpion (§3.2 [A.4.1]; §3.2 [B.41]).
- [B.7]** Jar sealings from Nineveh; the vessels probably contained documents the contents of which are referred to in the inscriptions on the sealings. The storage of clay tablets in pots is well attested in the Ancient Near East, and also for the Neo-Assyrian period (Radner 2004 : 51-52).
- [B.7.1]** *SAA* 11 72 = BM 89972 = 51-9-2, 398 (copy : *SAA* 11, p. 204) : [... NÍG].ŠID ep-šú “Completed accounts¹⁹”. One seal impression preserved.
- [B.7.2]** *SAA* 11 55²⁰ = BM 89938 = 51-9-2, 316 (copy : *SAA* 11, p. 203) : 1 GÚ 2 MA [...]. Three seal impressions preserved.
- [B.8]** Sealings from boxes or writing boards from Nineveh.
- [B.8.1]** *SAA* 11 66 = BM 84876+ = 51-9-2, 446+ (copy : *SAA* 11, p. 204) : DUG.ŠAB.M[EŠ ... LÚ]. GAL-[...] ²TA* ŠÀ GEŠ[TIN? ...] ú-še-[...] ³ša 3 MU.MEŠ. Wine vessels.
- [B.8.2]** *SAA* 11 67 = BM 84908 (copy : *SAA* 11, p. 204) : ku-zi-p-p[e ...] ši-pir-a-ti ²ša TA ¹Man-nu-ki-^dIM LÚ.GAL-É.GA[L ...]. Textiles.
- [B.8.3]** *SAA* 11 73 = BM 84875 = 51-9-2, 444 (copy : *SAA* 11, p. 204) : Four fragmentary lines of uncertain content.

3.2 The seal of the queen’s bureau : the scorpion

Julian Reade (1987 : 144-145) was the first to discuss the close connection between the queen (Assyrian *issi ekalli* > *sēgallu* = MÍ.É.GAL; literally “woman of the palace”) and several seals (BM 84671, BM 84789, BM 84802) displaying, inter alia, the symbol of the scorpion, yet with remarking on this particular feature. Instead, he based his identification on the fact that they show a woman wearing the mural crown, the headdress reserved for the queen (and the king’s mother). It was Suzanne Herbordt (1992 : 136-138) who subsequently drew attention to the presence of the scorpion on these seals and, following a suggestion previously voiced by Barbara Parker (1955 : 111-112²¹) and Max Mallowan (1966 : 114) that the scorpion was the symbol of the Assyrian queen, assumed a common context for these and

19 Compare the inscription on a sealing from Kalhu : CTN 2 256 = ND 806 : [x]-ME 40 UDU.NÍTA. MEŠ MÁŠ.MEŠ ²[x]x NÍG.KA₉.MEŠ *la ep-šu*. Photo : CTN 2 pl. 97f. Seal : Herbordt 1992 : 200 Nimrud 113 (also attested on CTN 2 258 = ND 809).

20 Note that the object is erroneously described as a “bag sealing” in *SAA* 11 55.

21 Based on the sealing ND 807 from the North-West Palace at Nimrud and other objects bearing the symbol of the scorpion from Nimrud and Assur (*KAH* I 50).

a number of other scorpion seals : “We would like to suggest that the scorpion symbolized the administration of the queen within the palaces” (Herbordt 1997 : 282).

This view is certainly correct and has found wide acceptance²², especially in light of the fact that the grave goods from the recently discovered queens’ tombs in the North-West Palace of Nimrud yielded further evidence for the intimate association of the scorpion with the queen and her household²³. One find from Tomb III especially establishes the identification of the scorpion seals as belonging to the queen’s sphere of influence beyond reasonable doubt : the symbol is engraved on a gold stamp seal whose owner is identified in its inscription as the hitherto unknown queen Hamâ, wife of Shalmaneser IV ([A.1]). Note that also another scorpion seal bears a cuneiform inscription ; yet, in contrast to the inscription on Hamâ’s seal this text was visible on the sealing [B.3 ; **fig. 19**]. Unfortunately, the original is not known and the only available source is the shallow impression found on a fragmentary sealing that shows only about two-fifths of the seal, too little to allow its reading or an identification of the owner.

Why would the scorpion be chosen as the symbol of the Assyrian queen ? The scorpion mother fiercely guards and defends her young which she carries on her back, and may well have been seen as the ideal mother. Moreover, as Christopher Walker (*apud* Collon 1995 : 73 n. 6) noted, both the nurse who raises children and the scorpion’s characteristic tail which the animal raises to strike are called *tārītu* in Akkadian (derived from the verb *tarû* “to raise”). In Assyria, there is a clear connection between the title of queen and of crown prince : while the king had several consorts, the queen — literally the “woman of the palace” — was always the mother of the son who was chosen as crown prince, and the very active role in promoting their sons’ interests is well known for those queens whose memory has survived even the fall of Assyria, Sammu-ramat (‘Semiramis’) and Naqi’a (‘Nitokris’).

On the basis of a survey of the Nineveh material kept in the British Museum, Suzanne Herbordt identified 65 sealings from Nineveh with impressions of simple scorpion seals, round and oval ones, and was able to distinguish a minimum of sixteen different seals²⁴ ; the examples chosen here illustrate both the garland border (BM 84559 = **fig. 6**) and the guilloche and dot border (BM 84550 = **fig. 7** ; BM 90962 = **fig. 8**, a box sealing²⁵).

22 Collon 1995 : 73-74 (referring also to objects found during Iraqi excavations in the 1980s) ; Melville 2004 : 50-51.

23 A gold bowl (IM 105695) and an electron mirror (IM 115468) with inscriptions of Atalia, queen of Sargon II ; see Damerji 1999 : 18 no. 5 and no. 7. The scorpion embossed on the inner rim of the bowl is visible on the photo in Damerji 1999, pl. 32. The scorpion embossed on the handle of the mirror is visible on the photo in Hussein, Suleiman 1999/2000 : 246.

24 Twelve different seals show the scorpion inside a guilloche and dot border (Herbordt 1992 : 136, pl. 33 : no. 1, 3-4, 6-7) and a further four different seals show the scorpion inside a garland border (Herbordt 1992 : 137, pl. 33 : no. 2, 5).

25 For photographs of the sealings BM 84550 and BM 84559 see also Collon 1995, pl. 12e. Further impressions of scorpion seals are attested e.g., on BM 84539, BM 84847 and BM 89943.



Fig. 6 : BM 84559.



Fig. 7 : BM 84550.

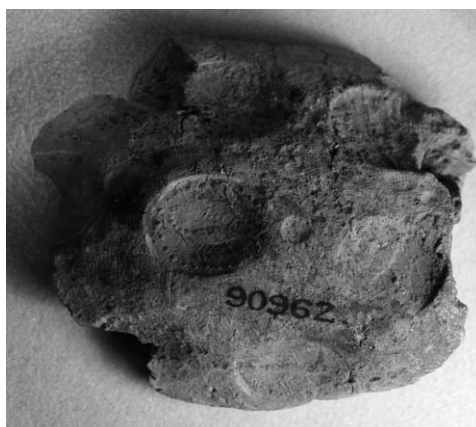


Fig. 8 : BM 90962.

The following list contains [A] personal seals (and their impressions) with elaborate designs that include the scorpion and [B] impressions of simple scorpion seals impressed on 'textile docket', i.e. triangular clay tablets formed around a string and inscribed with a list of textiles. Only the latter are bureau seals, but due to recent additions to the material it will be useful to assemble the currently known examples of seals with the scorpion motif that can be linked to the queen, supporting and confirming Herbordt's original argument.

■ *Materials* – Queens' seals and the seal of the queen's bureau

[A] Queens' seals : the scorpion as a filler-motif.

[A.1] Gold seal from Tomb III in the North-West Palace at Kalhu (IM 115644; photo : Hussein, Suleiman 1999/2000 : 399), in the shape of a finger ring worn as a pendant, with a convex base showing, inside a guilloche and dot border ; the queen approaching a goddess, seated

on a straight-backed throne supported by a dog²⁶, with the scorpion as a filler-motif behind the goddess; around the base runs a cuneiform inscription which identifies the seal as that of Hamâ, queen of Shalmaneser IV (784-773 BCE), daughter-in-law of Adad-nērārī III (810-783 BCE)²⁷.

- [A.2]** Box sealings from the North-West Palace at Kalhu with impressions of a stamp seal²⁸ showing the king and the queen approaching a god and a goddess, standing on a bull and a lion respectively, with the scorpion²⁹ as filler-motif above the scene; the seal was used in the reign of Sargon II.
- [A.2.1]** CTN 2 257 = ND 807 (photo : Parker 1955, pl. XXII : 5³⁰) : [x-ME] 35 UDU.MEŠ *šib-ti* 2 [*ina* IGI] LÚ*.SIPA.MEŠ *ša* 1^dPA-BÀD-EN-*ia* 3 ITU.BARAG U₄-16-KÁM 4 *lim-mu* 1^{DÜG-*si*-É.ŠÁR} (716 BCE). Sheep. Box sealing.
- [A.2.2]** CTN 2 260 = ND 1106a : ITU.ŠU *li*[*m-mu* 1...]; beginning of text may be missing. Box sealing.
- [A.2.3]** CTN 2 261 = ND 1106b : ITU.ŠU [*im*]-*mu* 1MAN-GIN (719 BCE); beginning of text may be missing. Box sealing.
- [A.2.4]** CTN 2 262 = ND 1106c : [...] 2 [... URU.*Ka*]*l-ha* *ša* UGU LÚ*.KÁ.DINGIR.MEŠ. Box sealing.
- [A.3]** Sealings from Nineveh with impressions of a stamp seal showing the king and the queen approaching a goddess standing on a lion, with the scorpion as a filler-motif above the scene.
- [A.3.1]** BM 84789 (**fig. 9**)³¹ : no text inscribed on sealing. Sack sealing.
- [A.3.2]** BM 84802 (**fig. 10**)³² : no text inscribed on sealing. Tag.
- [A.3.3]** BM 50781 (**fig. 11**) : no text inscribed on sealing. Sack sealing.

26 Rather than a lion; the goddess must therefore be identified as Gula, see Collon 2001 : 122 on the iconography of the goddess in Neo-Assyrian seals.

27 Lamia al-Gailani Werr kindly shared Ahmed Kamil's unpublished copy of the inscription with me; the published photographs only document the first half of the inscription : *ša* MÍ.*Ha-ma-a* MÍ.É.GAL *ša* 1^{Šul-man}-MAŠ MAN KUR.AŠ *kal-lat* 1¹⁰-ERÍN.TAH. Note that Tomb III contains dated materials from as late as the reign of Tiglath-pileser III (744-727 BCE).

28 Herbordt 1992 : 200-201 Nimrud 114 = Nimrud 116. In my opinion, there can be no doubt that this is the same seal.

29 The scorpion is best visible on the photo of ND 1106b on CTN 2, pl. 97; see the remarks of Postgate 1973 : 252 and Herbordt 1992 : 201 Nimrud 116.

30 With wrong excavation number, ND 808.

31 Published photo : Reade 1987 : 144 fig. 5 = Herbordt 1992, pl. 32 : no. 5.

32 Published photo : Reade 1987 : 145 fig. 6 = Herbordt 1992, pl. 32 : no. 4.



Fig. 9 : BM 84789.



Fig. 10 : BM 84802.



Fig. 11 : BM 50781.

[A.4] Stamp seal showing, inside a guilloche and dot border, the king and queen approaching a goddess, seated on a straight-backed throne supported by a lion, with the scorpion as a filler-motif above the scene. The original seal was recently acquired by the British Museum (2002-05-15, 1; **fig. 12, a-b**)³³. It is a dome-shaped white chalcedony seal with a convex base, a diameter of 1.5 cm and a height of 1.85 cm; it is horizontally perforated and today fixed to a gold wire hoop. The sealing preserved on BM 84671, however, shows that the seal was originally mounted into a setting. The date on *SAA* 7 94 proves that the seal was used very late in the reign of Sennacherib. This is one of the exceedingly rare instances where the original seal and its antique impression is known to us³⁴; as far as I am currently aware this is so far the only example from the Neo-Assyrian period.

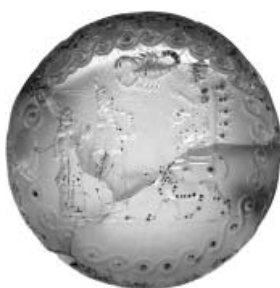


Fig. 12, a-b : 2002-5-15, 1.

33 Bought at Christie's London sale 9382 on 15 May 2002, lot 288. I am grateful to Dominique Collon for checking the seal against the impressions on K. 348+ and BM 84671. In her view, BM 84671 is certainly an impression produced with this seal, and this is also likely in the case of K. 348+, although the poor quality of the two impressions on that docket make it impossible to be absolutely certain.

34 Hallo 2001 mentions a confirmed case each for the Old Babylonian (p. 252) and Kassite period (p. 251 note 43) and a possible case each for the Ur III period (p. 247) and the Old Assyrian period (p. 246-247).

- [A.4.1]** SAA 7 94 = K. 348+Ki. 1904-10-9, 246 (**fig. 13, a-b**) : textile docket from Nineveh with two impressions, one on each obverse and reverse, of this seal³⁵. TÚG.KI.TA.MEŠ BABBAR. MEŠ² TÚG.gal-IGI.² TÚG.qir-mu⁴ TÚG.ma-qa-ti bé-te ZAG SA,⁵ TÚG.ur-nat ZAG KUR^{rev. 1} ITU.GAN *lim-me*^{1d} PA-PAP-KAM-eš (681 BCE).
- [A.4.2]** BM 84671 (**fig. 14**)³⁶ : no text inscribed on sealing. Tag from Nineveh with one impression of this seal.
- [A.4.3]** BM 84553 (**fig. 15**) : no text inscribed on sealing. Tag from Nineveh with one impression of this seal.



Fig. 13, a-b : K 348.



Fig. 14 : BM 84671.

Fig. 15 : BM 84553.

- [A.5]** Sealing from the North-West Palace at Kalhu with three impressions of a stamp seal³⁷ showing a woman praying and a scorpion; the find context suggests that the seal was used in the reign of Sargon II.
- [A.5.1]** CTN 2 263 = ND 808 (**fig. 16**) : No text inscribed on sealing. Sack sealing.

³⁵ The description and drawing of Herbordt 1992 : 252 Ninive 203 (with pl. 14 : no. 13) need to be amended accordingly; Herbordt's "Kugelpfeiler" are really the legs of the seated goddess.

³⁶ Published photo : Reade 1987 : 145 fig. 7 = Herbordt 1992, pl. 32 : no. 3.

³⁷ Herbordt 1992 : 200-201 Nimrud 115; only published as a drawing : Parker 1955 : 111 text fig. 2 = Herbordt 1992, pl. 20 : 4.

[B] Seals with the scorpion as the main motif (alone and combined with other motifs)

[B.1] Scorpion and lion-killer : sealing from Nineveh with three impressions of a stamp seal showing the lion-killer motif within three circles and in between three images of the scorpion.

[B.1.1] BM 84791 (**fig. 17, a-b**)³⁸ : no text inscribed on sealing. Sack sealing.



Fig. 16 : ND 808.

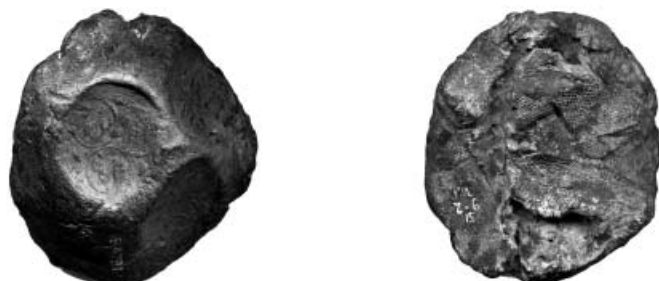


Fig. 17, a-b : BM 84791.

[B.2] Scorpion, lion-killer and Y-shape : sealing from Nineveh with impression of a stamp seal showing the lion-killer motif together with the scorpion and a Y-shape.

[B.2.1] BM 84751 = 51-9-2, 270 (**fig. 18**)³⁹ : no text inscribed on sealing. Sealing originally applied to a folded papyrus document — the only such sealing known so far from Nineveh (Herbordt 1992 : 68, 133).

[B.3] Fragmentary sealing from Nineveh with an impression of a stamp seal showing the scorpion, surrounded by a cuneiform inscription (illegible).

[B.3.1] BM 84806 (**fig. 19**) : no text inscribed on sealing. Tag.

38 Published photo : Collon 1995, pl. 12d = Maul 1995, pl. 33c = *SAA* 14, p. 10 fig. 3.

39 Published photo : Herbordt 1992, pl. 35 : 7.



Fig. 18 : BM 84751.



Fig. 19 : BM 84806.

- [B.4]** Sealed docket from Nineveh with impression of a stamp seal (Herbordt 1992 : 252 Ninive 199) showing, inside a guilloche and dot border, a scorpion and a rosette; the seal was used during the reign of Assurbanipal.
- [B.4.1]** *SAA* 7 93 = 82-5-22, 40 (**fig. 20, a-b**) : 2 TÚG. *ma-qa-tí bé-te* ZAG SA₅ KAR TA IGI ¹*I-bi-ia ina É-a-ni ŠU* ¹*Aš-šur-kil-la-ni* ITU.GU₄ U₄-2-KÁM *lim-me* ¹*Šá-PA-šú-u*. Textile docket, dated 658 BCE.
- [B.5]** Sealed docket from Nineveh with a partially preserved impression of a stamp seal (Herbordt 1992 : 252 Ninive 200) showing, inside a guilloche and dot border, the scorpion.
- [B.5.1]** *SAA* 7 102 = 83-1-18, 567 (**fig. 21**) : Six fragmentary lines of text listing quantities of various garments; no date preserved. Textile docket.
- [B.6]** Sealed docket from Nineveh with a partially preserved impression of a stamp seal (Herbordt 1992 : 252 Ninive 201) showing, inside a guilloche and dot border, the scorpion.
- [B.6.1]** *SAA* 7 98 = K 1483 (**fig. 22**) : fourteen fragmentary lines of text listing quantities of various garments; no date preserved. Textile docket.
- [B.7]** Sealed docket from Nineveh with partially preserved impression of a stamp seal (Herbordt 1992 : 252 Ninive 202) showing, inside a dotted border, the scorpion.
- [B.7.1]** *SAA* 7 100 = 83-1-18, 764 : seven fragmentary lines of text listing quantities of various garments; no date preserved. Textile docket.

As four textile dockets from Nineveh are sealed with scorpion seals, such a seal may well have been used to seal yet another example of this text genre (*SAA* 7 99 = K 10816⁴⁰), but we can only state that a round stamp seal, of whose decoration nothing shows on the surviving fragment, was impressed twice. It must be noted, however, that the scorpion seal type is not the only one to be used on the textile dockets. One such text is sealed with a stamp seal showing the standard of the moon god (*SAA* 7 95 = 83-1-18, 346⁴¹) and another with the royal seal type (*SAA* 7 101 = K 1598; §3.1 [B.6]).

40 Collated 19 September 2006; due to its fragmentary nature the sealing is not included in Herbordt 1992.

41 For the seal see Herbordt 1992 : 250 Ninive 190.



Fig. 20, a-b : 85-2-22, 40.



Fig. 21 : 83-1-18, 567.



Fig. 22 : K 1483.

3.3 The seal of the crown prince's bureau : the Y-shaped cross (*ispillurtu*)

According to three letters from the 7th century palace correspondence of Nineveh, the *ispillurtu* was, at least at that time, the symbol of the Assyrian crown prince. The deeper meaning of the term is discussed in a scholarly letters to Assurbanipal : "The *is-píl-ur-tú* is the emblem (*ki-zi-ir-tú*) of the god Nabû. The king, my lord, knows this. Because of this, the *is-píl-ur-tú* is the symbol (*si-im-tú*) of the crown prince" (SAA 10 30).

Crucially for our present context, the crown prince Assurbanipal and his entourage used a seal called *ispillurtu* according to a letter addressed to Esarhaddon ; in the situation described in the letter this item is to authenticate a document from the crown prince's bureau, containing sensitive information that may be decisive for Assyria's future dealings with its north-eastern enemies. "Concerning the guards appointed (to watch) over the fortresses of Urartû, of the Mannéans, of the Medes and of Hubuškia about whom the king, my lord, wrote to me : 'Give them orders and show them quite plainly that they must not neglect their guard duty! They are to focus on deserters in their vicinity. In the event of a deserter defecting to them from the Mannéans, the Medes or from Hubuškia you will put him at once in the custody of your messenger and send him to the crown prince. If he has something to say, you will tell it precisely to the crown prince. The report of yours better be good! One scribe only, who can guard ..., shall take his dictation. (Then) they shall

seal (the report) with the NA₄.*is-pi-lu-ur-te*⁴² and Ahu-dūr-enši, the crown prince's cohort commander, shall at once bring it to me, using express delivery.' Now then, two deserters of the Mannans have defected, a eunuch and an interpreter (*ša lišāni*). I have sent them to the crown prince as they have something say" (SAA 16 148 : 9-l. h. e. 2). To find the crown prince Assurbanipal concerned with the watch over Assyria's north-eastern borders reminds us of the fact that the surviving correspondence of crown princes Ululāyu, the later Shalmaneser V (Radner 2003/04 : 98-102), and Sennacherib (SAA 1 29-40, SAA 5 282) also shows them especially involved in affairs dealing with Assyria's northern frontier.

The *ispillurtu* is again associated with the crown prince in a letter written to Assurbanipal shortly after his accession to the throne. As construction of the palace at Tarbišu (mod. Sherif Khan), which Assurbanipal had already initiated as crown prince, continues the letter's author suggests that royal building inscriptions should now be installed to reflect the changed situation; the new king is also reminded that the *ispillurtu* symbol had been put on certain building parts while he was still crown prince : "In the days when he [i.e., the king] was crown prince, Nabû-šarrāni brought them [i.e., the building parts] into the Rear Palace [i.e., the crown prince's residence at Nineveh], before the (present) king [i.e., Assurbanipal], and the *is-pi-lu-rat* were placed onto them" (SAA 16 143 rev. 4'-8'). Although excavations have been conducted at Tarbišu at various occasions over the last one and a half centuries, first by Austen Henry Layard in 1850 and later by the University of Mosul, the results remain largely unpublished and at present I am not aware of any finds that might be identified with the *ispillurtu*-decorated building parts of Assurbanipal's palace⁴³.

So what is an *ispillurtu*? The term *ispillurtu* is neither Sumerian nor Akkadian in origin and of unknown etymology. The dictionaries translate it as "cross"; the logographic writing with the sign BAR, i.e., a vertical and a horizontal wedge crossing each other, and a Neo-Assyrian letter in which the term clearly has the meaning "road crossing" (SAA 5 227 r. 6⁴⁴) strengthen this interpretation. *ispillurtu* is well attested as describing celestial phenomena and markings on the liver (CAD I/J, p. 253 s.v. *išpalurtu* 1.b.-c), but these references give little indication on how to visualize the object. More evocative is possibly an omen of the series *Šumma izbu* where two lambs are said to be born linked in the shape of *ispillurtu* (CT 27 25 : 2 and *passim*).

42 The use of the stone determinative may imply that the *ispillurtu* in question is indeed fashioned from stone; this would be in contrast to the royal *unqu* which is made from gold. Yet it is equally possible that the stone determinative is used because the term is here employed for a seal, usually written NA₄.KIŠIB in Neo-Assyrian texts, regardless of its material.

43 See Curtis & Grayson 1982 for the publication of some inscribed objects from Tarbišu, excavated by Layard and now in the British Museum. Preliminary results of the Mosul University excavations were published by Suleiman 1971 (in Arabic), and recently the subject of the lecture "Mosul University excavations at Tarbišu (Sharif Khan)" presented by Farouk al-Rawi on 11 July 2003 at the Rencontre Assyriologique in London (*Iraq* 66, 2004 : xix). Dr. al-Rawi informs me that he is not aware of any specific shape or pattern recurring among the Tarbišu material.

44 In Assurbanipal's inscription from the Ištar temple at Nineveh, *is-pil-lu-ur-ti* / *is-pal-lu-ur-ti* (Fuchs 1996 : 269 : IIT 38) is mentioned in fragmentary context in conjunction with an outer gate; it is likely that the reference is also to a road crossing.

Simo Parpola (1970 : 330-331) took *isfillurtu* to refer specifically to an equilateral cross (known also as ‘Greek cross’), citing the pendant worn by Šamši-Adad V on his statue at the Nabû temple of Kalhu as an example — Nabû being the deity with whom the *isfillurtu* is connected in the learned letter to Assurbanipal. Parpola (1970 : 330) argued that the “cross undoubtedly symbolized the four points of compass”⁴⁵ and theorized that it may have represented Nabû because of his occasional epithet “supervisor of the world” (*pāqid kiššati*). The equilateral cross is generally well known from Neo-Assyrian art, including as a seal motif, and due to its prominence in the Kassite period it is often referred to today as the ‘Kassite cross’. The possible connection with Nabû and the Assyrian crown prince has not come to the attention of those scholars who have tried to attribute the symbol to a specific deity, but it is important that nobody has independently suggested an association with Nabû, while Šamaš (Calmeyer 1984⁴⁶) and Marduk (Ehrenberg 2002) have been advocated instead. It is noteworthy that at present not a single clay sealing bearing the ‘Kassite cross’ is known from any Assyrian palace administration context, in stark contrast to the frequency in which the royal seal and the queen’s seal occur in this environment. Nevertheless, the four Neo-Assyrian seal impressions found on private legal documents chosen to illustrate the recent edition of the letter mentioning the *isfillurtu* seal (*SAA* 16 148) show simple round stamp seals bearing equilateral crosses, described authoritatively as “impressions of the cross-formed stamp seal of the crown prince” (caption for *SAA* 16, p. 129 fig. 25). It must be noted, however, that these seals were used to seal private legal documents from Assur and Kalhu that have no connection whatsoever to the crown prince⁴⁷. To sum up, while *isfillurtu* is without doubt a cross, it is by no means established that it is the equilateral cross.

Yet already in 1997 Suzanne Herbordt (1997 : 282⁴⁸) briefly suggested an alternative view to Parpola’s, namely that the Y-shaped symbol on certain sealings from Nineveh should be interpreted as *isfillurtu*. I agree with this idea and would therefore argue that the term *isfillurtu* with the basic meaning “cross, crossing” refers specifically to the Y-shape — also called the ‘Forked cross’ — when associated with the crown prince.

45 While this is certainly true for the Greek cross of early Christianity which, unlike the Latin cross that signified the cross of the crucifixion, was a symbol for the four points of compass (representing the spread of the gospel) it should be stressed that there is at present no reason to see this as the only valid interpretation of the equilateral cross in Mesopotamia.

46 Cf. Collon 2001 : 13 : “It [i.e. the Kassite Cross] is probably a solar symbol.” Note also the cross-shaped pendant with an dedicatory inscription for Kusarikku, the son of Šamaš, see Jendritzki, Marzahn 2003 : 86-89.

47 The four seal impressions are found on : BM 103396 = *CT* 33 15 = Herbordt 1992 : 164 Assur 6 ; ND 2094 = Parker 1955 : 123 with text fig. 25 = Herbordt 1992 : 173 Nimrud 5 ; ND 2327 = Parker 1954 : 42 = Herbordt 1992 : 176 Nimrud 19 ; ND 3434 = Parker 1955 : 123, pl. xxix : no. 3 = Herbordt 1992 : 185 Nimrud 52.

48 “The Y-shaped symbol ..., perhaps, can be interpreted as an *isfillurtu*, a cross-shaped seal or seal design associated with the crown prince in the letter ABL 434.” Note that before she had advocated a connection between the crown prince and a seal showing a horse, the king and a beardless figure (Herbordt 1992 : 139 with pl. 33 : no. 9-10).

This Y-shape is found on seals known from sealings discovered at Nineveh both as a sole seal motif and together with the lion-killer motif of the king and the scorpion of the queen; it is the only motif that is attested in this way: one example of the royal seal, attested on one sealing from Nineveh, shows the lion-killer together with the scorpion and the Y-shape. Another example displays the lion-killer scene three times in a circle, with three Y-shapes in the margins⁴⁹. As we have already discussed, a closely comparable example of the royal seal, attested also at Nineveh, combines the three lion-killer scenes with three images of the scorpion⁵⁰. It is evident from the textual record, that the Assyrian administrative hierarchy was headed by the trinity of king, queen and crown prince⁵¹, each heads of their own households (or bureaus). Because of the close association of the Y-shape with the emblems of king and queen it seems virtually certain that the symbol must be identified as the sign of the crown prince and hence equated with the *ispillurtu* known from the textual record.

■ *Materials* — The seal of the crown prince's bureau

- [1] Y-shape as sole motif: Sealing from Nineveh with an impression of a stamp seal showing the Y-shape.
- [1.1] Campbell Thompson / Hamilton 1932: pl. LXIII: 4⁵²: no text inscribed on sealing. Tag.
- [2] Y-shape and lion-killer: Nine sealings from Nineveh with an impression of a stamp seal showing within three circles the lion-killer motif and, in between these, three Y-shapes (Herbordt 1992: 128⁵³).
- [2.1] BM 84551 = 51-9-2, 69 (fig. 23)⁵⁴: no text inscribed on sealing. Tag.
- [2.2] BM 84579 = 51-9-2, 98 (fig. 24): no text inscribed on sealing. Tag.
- [2.3] BM 84617 = 51-9-2, 136 (fig. 25): no text inscribed on sealing. Tag.
- [2.4] BM 84618 = 51-9-2, 137 (fig. 26): no text inscribed on sealing. Tag.
- [2.5] BM 84687 = 51-9-2, 206 (fig. 27): no text inscribed on sealing. Tag.

⁴⁹ Mentioned by Maul 1995: 400, without further discussion.

⁵⁰ The seal is attested on the sealing BM 84791 (Herbordt 1992: 128 n. 7; photo: Maul 1995, pl. 33c).

⁵¹ A good example for this is the letter *SAA* 1 34, written by the crown prince Sennacherib to king Sargon II. It is concerned with the distribution of tribute and audience gifts, and lists the recipients of the various items for both categories in the following order: the palace = king, the queen and the crown prince, followed by the highest magnates. The same sequence is attested in a letter to Esarhaddon, *SAA* 16 63 rev. 20: ARAD.MEŠ ša MÍ.É.GAL ša DUMU-MAN ša É LÚ*.GAL.MEŠ, "The servants of the queen, of the crown prince and of the households of the magnates."

⁵² The sealing (mentioned by Herbordt 1992: 137) is only published as a drawing and its present whereabouts are unknown.

⁵³ The museum numbers are not mentioned in the publication, and I am therefore very grateful to Suzanne Herbordt for sharing this information with me. Collated in the British Museum, 21 September 2006.

⁵⁴ Published photo: Herbordt 1992, pl. 35: 8 = Maul 1995, pl. 33b = Collon 1995, pl. 12c.



Fig. 23 : BM 84551.



Fig. 24 : BM 84579.



Fig. 25 : BM 84551.



Fig. 26 : BM 84579.



Fig. 27 : BM 84687.

- [2.6]** BM 89947 = 51-9-2, 326 (**fig. 28**) : no inscribed text. Sack sealing with two preserved impressions.
- [2.7]** BM 89971 = 51-9-2, 397 (**fig. 29**) : no inscribed text. Sack sealing with two preserved impressions.
- [2.8]** BM 89992 : no inscribed text. Fragmentary box sealing with two partially preserved and very faint impressions (not photographed).
- [2.9]** BM 89998 (**fig. 30**) : no inscribed text. Fragmentary sack sealing with two partially preserved impressions.

- [3]** Y-shape, lion-killer and scorpion : Sealing from Nineveh with impression of a stamp seal showing the lion-killer motif together with the scorpion and the Y-shaped cross.
- [3.1]** BM 84751 : No text inscribed on sealing. Sealing of a writing tablet or box (= above, 2.[B.2.1; **fig. 18**]).



Fig. 28 : BM 89947.



Fig. 29 : BM 89971.



Fig. 30 : BM 89998.

3.4 The seal of the bureau of the governor of Kalhu : the mace

A number of sealings from the Governor's Palace at Nimrud bear the impressions of cylinder seals that, thanks to their inscriptions, can be identified as belonging to two governors of Kalhu : Bēl-tarši-ilumma (Herbordt 1992 : 193 Nimrud 88⁵⁵), who held the office under Adad-nērārī III, and Šarru-dūri (Herbordt 1992 : 198 Nimrud 108⁵⁶), who served as governor during the reign of Tiglath-pileser III. The personal seals of the two officials were used together with round stamp seals showing a mace. As J. N. Postgate (1973 : 249) first observed, despite bearing the same design, the stamp seals used in conjunction with the personal seals of the two governors are not identical, and two different seals can be distinguished (no. 1 = Herbordt 1992 : 194 Nimrud 89; no. 2 = Herbordt 1992 : 199 Nimrud 111).

This seal type would seem to represent the seal of the bureau of the governors of Kalhu; the mace, as a sign of rank and high social standing, is certainly an appropriate symbol for a provincial governor. A comparable combined use of official stamp seal and personal cylinder seal is attested also for Esarhaddon, in the shape of the already mentioned sealing (CTN 3 26, §3.1) from the Review Palace of Kalhu ('Fort Shalmaneser') with several impressions of what seem at first to be three different royal seals. Yet the impressions were the product of only two objects : one stamp seal and a 'stamp-cylinder' that combines a cylinder seal, bearing the lion-killer design and an inscription of Esarhaddon, with a lion-killer motif 'stamp seal' — actually the decorated metal socket fitted around the cylinder's lower base. Judging from the available impressions, it seems very likely that also the impressions of the mace seal type were not created by using separate stamp seals but rather the decorated bases of the cylinder seals of the two governors of Kalhu.

■ *Materials* – The seal of the bureau of the governor of Kalhu

- [1] Sealings from the Governor's Palace at Nimrud, impressed with the mace seal no. 1 and the cylinder seal of Bēl-tarši-ilumma, governor of Kalhu, during the reign of Adad-nērārī III.
- [1.1] CTN 2 170 = ND 252k (photo : CTN 2, pl. 95c) : [ITU.x U₄]-4-KÁM [l]im-me^{1d}MAŠ. M[AŠ]-DINGIR-a-[a] (817 or 808 BCE). Reminders of several seal impressions of a stamp seal bearing the mace [no. 1] and of the cylinder seal of Bēl-tarši-ilumma. Probably box sealing (not clear from published data).
- [1.2] CTN 2 171 = ND 240b (photo : CTN 2, pl. 95a-b) : [ITU.x U₄]-13-KÁM [lim-me^{1...}]. Reminders of several seal impressions of a stamp seal bearing the mace [no. 1] and of the cylinder seal of Bēl-tarši-ilumma. Box sealing.
- [2] Sealings from the Governor's Palace at Nimrud, impressed with the mace seal no. 2 and the cylinder seal of Šarru-dūri, governor of Kalhu, during the reign of Tiglath-pileser III.

55 Inscription : Watanabe 1993 : 112-113 no. 5.2 : KIŠIB¹EN-LAL-DINGIR-ma² šá-SAG šá¹⁰-ERIM.TÁH³MAN ŠÁR GAR.KUR URU.Kal-bi⁴ KUR.[Ha-me-d]i KUR.Te-me-ni⁵ [KUR.l]a-lu-na⁶ at-kal-ka⁷ a-[a-ba]-áš^dPA.

56 Note also Herbordt 1992 : 199 n. 136; inscription : Watanabe 1993 : 113 no. 5.3 : [šá]¹M[A]N-BÀ[D]²[LÚ*].GAR.KUR³[URU].Kal-bi.

- [2.1] CTN 2 132 = ND 494 (photo : CTN 2, pl. 95c-d, f) : UDU.U₈.MEŠ² ša IGI¹ Ba-ni-i LÚ*.SI[PA] ³ ša URU.Sa-me- [...]. Reminders of three seal impressions, one of a stamp seal bearing the mace [no. 2], one of the cylinder seal of Šarru-dūri and one of the cylinder seal of another governor of Kalhu (Herbordt 1992 : 199 Nimrud 110⁵⁷). Box sealing.
- [2.2] CTN 2 133 = ND unnumbered : [UD]U.NÍTA.MEŠ² á[š-ru-te] ² [š]a ina IGI [...] ³ ša ina IGI [...]. Fragmentary impression of a stamp seal with a mace [no. 2]. Box sealing.
- [2.3] CTN 2 172 = ND 275a (photo : CTN 2, pl. 96e) : no text survives. Reminders of an impression of the cylinder seal of Šarru-dūri. Sealing of writing board or box.
- [2.4] CTN 2 173 = ND 275k (photo : CTN 2, pl. 96a-b) : traces of cuneiform text. Reminders of an impression of the cylinder seal of Šarru-dūri. Sealing of writing board or box.

4 The introduction of bureau seals in historical context

The first securely dated bureau seal, of the royal seal type (§3.1 [A.1]), is attested in the reign of Shalmaneser III (858-824 BCE). It seems likely that it is not pure coincidence that we find our earliest evidence for such a seal in the 9th century when Assyria became an empire. The phenomenon of the Neo-Assyrian bureau seal is, in my opinion, one of the administrative technologies developed to run the newly created empire and is closely connected to the necessity to delegate power from the king to his officials, including local authorities, while at the same time underlining that whoever applied the seal did so not on his own personal authority but instead due to the power invested in him by the king; we have already quoted explicit evidence for this when discussing the royal seal type. This Assyrian administrative practice may also be reflected in the Aramaic *Aḫiqar Novel* (Cowley 1923 : 204-248; Lindenberger 1985 : 494-507) where the sage Aḫiqar is said to be the “bearer of the signet ring” (*šbyt ’zqh*) of the kings Sennacherib and Esarhaddon (col. I ll. 3, 7, col. II l. 26, col. IV l. 60), a function later held also by his nephew and adopted son Nadin (col. II ll. 19, 21). The designation “bearer of the signet ring” is not attested as a title in the contemporary Neo-Assyrian documentation and has therefore long puzzled scholars (Greenfield 1962 : 292-293, 297-299). I would suggest to interpret this term not as an official title designating the one keeper of the one personal seal of the king (as it is commonly understood) but instead as a far less specific epithet indicating that the two men were equipped with their own copy of the king’s bureau seal and therefore were among those persons that held trusted and influential positions in the king’s retinue.

The use of the royal bureau seal indicated that the transaction in question was ultimately authorized by the Assyrian king and to undo it, the same royal authorization was necessary. This is especially clear from a report to Assurbanipal (669-c. 630), dating to the period shortly before the war for the control of Babylonia erupted between this king of Assyria and his brother Šamaš-šumu-ukīn, king of Babylon following their father Esarhaddon’s succession arrangements. The letter relates recent activities of certain high-

⁵⁷ Inscription : Watanabe 1993 : 114 no. 5.7 : [š]á¹[...] ² [L]Ú.G[AR.KUR] ³ [U]RU.Kal-[hi].

ranking individuals in Babylonia, apparently with the intention to show that they are loyal to Šamaš-šumu-ukīn rather than Assurbanipal; one of these men is the temple prelate of the Babylonian city of Dūr-Šarrukkū who grants a messenger sent by Šamaš-šumu-ukīn unrestricted access to the treasury of the temple of the god Humhum and its resources. “He [i.e., the prelate] opened the sealed house of Humhum, which Kitrušu had sealed with (the previous king) Esarhaddon’s signet ring, and, in the care of the messenger, sent one talent and twenty minas of gold and one talent of gold alloy to the king of Babylon [i.e., Šamaš-šumu-ukīn] ⁵⁸.” In a time of rising tensions between the two royal brothers and their supporters, it is clearly important to the author to stress that Šamaš-šumu-ukīn helped himself to gold which previously had been claimed by an Assyrian king, as shown by the fact that the building which held it had been sealed with the Assyrian royal bureau seal used under Esarhaddon’s rule also in Babylonia; it is implied that the prelate, from a pro-Assyrian point of view, should have refused Šamaš-šumu-ukīn, as the king of Babylon, access to the temple and reserved it for the king of Assyria, now Assurbanipal.

By the reign of Adad-nērārī III (810-783 BCE), the use of bureau seals was no longer restricted to representing the king anymore, and other heads of administrative units employed this tool as well. The bureau seal of the governors of Kalhu is attested from the reign of that king onwards (§3.4 [1]) and had certainly parallels in the households of all other provincial governors whose administrative archives have not, however, been unearthed. It is of course tempting to link the first known attestation of a gubernatorial bureau seal to the newly found self-esteem that the governors display at the same time, when some founded and named cities in the fashion of the king and others erected monuments fashioned after the royal temple (Blocher 2001), and take this as yet another instance of the governors’ emulation of privileges hitherto reserved for the king. Yet we must bear in mind that the documentation for the period before the reign of Adad-nērārī III is, in general, very slim and that we would be arguing *ex silentio*. Also, and more importantly, the tool of the bureau seal, once established for the royal seal type, had obvious practical advantages for the running of all large administrative units, and its adaptation by the heads of such units need not, therefore, imply the usurpation of royal privileges.

The bureau seal of the queen shows the scorpion, a motif closely associated with the queen, and elaborate and certainly unique designs including the symbol are attested already in the early 8th century : these typically show the king and queen in front of a goddess standing or seated on a lion. One such seal is known in the original and inscribed with the name and title of Hamâ, queen of Shalmaneser IV (§3.2 [A.1]) — albeit in such a way that it would not be part of the sealing; it was, moreover, found with one of the queens’ burials (her own?) at Nimrud, as part of the grave goods. This would seem to indicate to me that this seal and its close parallels were linked to the queen personally, and not necessarily to the office of the queen. Note that one such seal (§3.2 [A.2]) is attested in the North-West Palace at Nimrud for administrative purposes : it was applied during the reign of Sargon II (721-705 BCE) on several sealings, the inscriptions of which demonstrate a connection with sheep. The sealings are therefore likely to have been placed in the context

58 SAA 18 152 : 11'-r. 1 : É NA₄ KIŠIB ¹² šá^d Hum-hum šá ina ŠA-bi ¹³ un-qu šá ^{1d} Aš-šur-ŠEŠ-MU
¹⁴ 1K[i]t-ri-šú i-ka-ku ¹⁵ ip-te-ti-[ma] 1* GÚ.UN ¹⁶ 20 MA.NA KÙ.GI 1* GÚ.UN ¹⁷ sa-a-du
 ina ŠU.2 LÚ.A-¹KIN ¹⁸ a-na ¹LUGAL¹ TIN.TIR.K[I] ^{r.1} ul-te-bi-la.

of the palace's textile production, the traditional domain of the queen as well attested e.g., in Old Babylonian Mari and Tell Rimah (Dalley 1984 : 51-54; Barber 1994 : 175-180).

Yet the 7th century 'textile' docketts from Nineveh (§3.2 [B.4-7]), which certainly stem from the same administrative context, mostly bear impressions of simple stamp seals that mirror the royal seal type. That we lack earlier attestations for this simple design may be due to archaeological chance and could be put down to pure coincidence; however, it is striking that neither the excavations in Nimrud nor those in Dūr-Šarrukīn should have yielded a single example when, at the same time, many impressions of the royal seal type have come to light. Hence it may be more appropriate to see the simple scorpion seals as a new development : the symbol of the queen which had hitherto been used as a filler-motif in the personal seals of individual queens was now employed for the creation of a bureau seal type of the queen's household. There are other, independent arguments for this : while the role of the queen had always been an important one⁵⁹, the household of the queen was invested with more and wider-reaching administrative authority than ever before at the beginning of the 7th century, and the same is true for the crown prince. Also the bureau seal of the crown prince, showing a Y-shape, is attested only in the 7th century.

The textual record suggests that by the time of Sennacherib the nature and responsibilities of both the office of crown prince and of queen had undergone a deep change : most importantly, both queen and crown prince now commanded their own standing army⁶⁰, a strategy that seems to have been inspired by the king's desire to shift power away from the magnates to the members of his immediate family. If this change was engineered by Sennacherib and continued by Esarhaddon — and for the time being this seems to be what the textual documentation suggests — then Sennacherib's murder and the failed conspiracy against Esarhaddon in 670 BCE, both of which seem to have enjoyed the magnates' support as the ensuing mass executions among them suggest (Radner 2003 : 167, 174-5), might be directly linked to the displeasure of the high officials at seeing their powers reduced.

In this paper, we have only been able to concentrate on four bureau seal types but there are certainly many others. Note, for example, some sealings from Nineveh with the impression of a stamp seal showing a sword (BM 84538 and BM 84814; photo : Herbordt 1992, pl. 33 : no. 8) that has, as already noted by Suzanne Herbordt (1992 : 141), its exact parallel on stamps impressed onto bricks found at Dūr-Šarrukīn (Loud, Altman 1938, pl. 65p). These stamps show, among other things, a bull (Loud, Altman 1938, pl. 65d), an omega (Loud, Altman 1938, pl. 65i, 65o), a palmette (Loud, Altman 1938, pl. 65ic), a

59 Note e.g., *SAA* 1 34, a letter from the reign of Sargon II concerned with the distribution of tribute and audience gifts from abroad : the share of the queen is listed immediately after the palace's share and before the crown prince's share; the high officials follow.

60 Some army personnel of the queen : *SAA* 6 164 rev. 4-5, 11-12 : LÚ*.GAL-*ki-šir ša* MÍ.É.GAL; LÚ*.GAL-*ki-šir* KI.MIN; LÚ*.3-*šú ša* MÍ.É.GAL (reign of Sennacherib : 686 BCE); *SAA* 14 7 rev. 7-8 : LÚ*.GAL-*ki-šir ša* LÚ*.A-SIG *ša* MÍ.É.GAL (reign of Assurbanipal : c. 668-666 BCE); *SAA* 6 329 rev. 13 : LÚ.DIB-KUŠ.PA.MEŠ *ša* MÍ.É.GAL (reign of Assurbanipal : 660 BCE); O 3691 rev. 4 : LÚ*.3-*šú* MÍ.É.GAL (reign of Sin-šarru-iškun : eponymate of Daddi; unpublished text from Ma'allanāte). For the army of the crown prince see Kwasman, Parpola 1991 : XXVIII.

half-moon (Loud, Altman 1938, pl. 65k) or the shape of an amulet (Loud, Altman 1938, pl. 65m). As we know that the provincial governors and other high officials had to supply building materials and labour for the construction of Sargon's new residence and city⁶¹, it is likely that the symbols used here to mark bricks should be the same symbols that decorated the bureau seals linked to various high officials. Connecting motifs attested on administrative sealings with other evidence is bound to produce further identifications of bureau seal types and therefore further information on how power was delegated and ceded in the Assyrian empire.

61 For the work allocated to the governors see especially the letter *SAA* 1 64 and in general Parpola 1995. Specifically regarding the production of bricks note the letter *SAA* 5 296 rev. 4'-6' : *i-na* UGU *dul-li ša* URU.BĀD-MAN-GIN 5' [U]RU.MEŠ-*ni ša* UN.MEŠ KUR 6' *nu-se-ši* SIG₄ *ú-qar-ru-bu*, "Concerning the work for Dūr-Šarrukīn. We have brought out (work contingents of) the cities of the people of the (entire) country and they produce bricks."

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