

CHAPTER 7

REPORT ON THE SEALS AND SEALINGS FOUND AT TELL ATCHANA (ALALAKH) DURING THE 2003 SEASON OF EXCAVATION¹

DOMINIQUE COLLON

SUMMARY OF THE RESULTS

Stamp seals Nos 1-2 (A03-R1009 with a cross and grid design and A03-R1247 with a cross and Vs) are difficult to date, but they may go back to the seventh to fifth millennia BC. Stamp seal No. 3 (A03-R1554) must be much later, and so, probably, is No. 4 (A03-1679), an unperforated hematite object that may have nothing to do with sealing, but I have been unable to find parallels for either object, although hematite would imply a date in the second millennium BC. No. 5 (A03-R1421) may have been a cylinder seal blank. On the other hand No. 6 (A03-R1207) belongs to a well-attested and provenanced group from Turkey and the Levant, and can be closely dated to the mid-18th century BC (Middle Chronology).² It is a very small stud-like faience seal with, exceptionally, the design in relief. Provenanced impressions of this type of design of the same date include No. 7 (A03-R1115), and surprisingly they are in relief on the impression, implying a matrix in intaglio.

Cylinder seals and impressions were also found. No. 8 (A03-R1050) is fragmentary and unperforated, with a rudimentary design on the base; parallels from Anatolia would indicate a second millennium date. Nos 9-10 (A03-R1159 and A03-R1200) are impressions of Mitannian Common Style seals, respectively on a jar- or door-sealing, and on a strip of clay ("visiting card"); No. 11 (A03-R1431) is a bulla with an impression that may well also belong to the Mitannian Common Style, but its grid design is as undiagnostic as it was for the stamp seals referred to above, although the fact that it was carved on a cylinder implies a date no earlier than the late fourth millennium BC. No. 12 (A03-R1418) is part of a blue faience Mitannian Common Style cylinder seal but it is too worn and fragmentary for the design to be identified. Finally No. 13 (A03-R1326) was probably made of glass but is broken vertically and only half remains; this is unfortunate, as it was an elite seal, combining elements from the Mitannian Elaborate and Middle Assyrian styles, and it was inscribed, although only a few signs remain.

1 The designs are all described as seen on the impression. Dimensions are in centimetres with height (H), base (B), diameter (D), length (L), width (W), thickness (T), and diameter of the perforation of cylinder seals (DP).

2 According to the Middle Chronology, Hammurabi of Babylon reigned from 1792 to 1750 BC. Higher and lower chronologies have been proposed, and a lower chronology is probably preferable. However, new dates will affect not only Mesopotamia, Iran, Anatolia, Syria and the Levant, but synchronisms with Egypt and the Aegean, many of which are based on the Middle Chronology. For a summary of the present state of affairs as it affects Mesopotamian chronology, see C.B.F. Walker in Collon 1995: 230-238; the most important addition relates to the discovery and publication of new lists of *limu* officials of the beginning of the second millennium BC providing dates for kings 33-39 on p. 231 (cf. Veenhof 2003: especially p. 57); and the reigns of Kassite kings need to be lowered by five years on pp. 235-236. In the not too distant future it may be possible to achieve absolute dates based, for instance, on datable observations of eclipses (as opposed to legendary attributions), dendrochronology or ice cores. Until then, it is essential that writers clearly define the chronology they are using. On no account should new chronologies be adopted piecemeal and unilaterally.

EARLY STAMP SEALS

1. A03-R1009 (fig. 7.1.1)

Area 2, Square 44.69, *Locus 03-2001*, Pail 1; *Surface*.

Stamp seal of micaceous clay or soft stone (H 1.9; B 3.8 x 2.75 cm). The seal is shaped like an uneven pitched roof rising from a rectangular lobed base. The ridged upper part is perforated, and has a groove around it level with the perforation. One side and lobe are chipped.

The design on the base consists of a deeply incised cross defining the lobed quarters, with an overall diagonal grid of shallower lines.

Unfortunately, the design is not diagnostic. Open-ended grooves were easily executed using a flint, or a string dipped in water or oil and then in an abrasive, such as fine sand, and running it backwards and forwards across a soft stone or piece of clay to form a series of grooves. The earliest seals and amulets from the sixth millennium BC onwards were cut by such methods (von Wickede 1990, *passim*), which continued to be used whenever greater technological expertise was lacking. The four-lobed shape is attested at Boğazköy, the Hittite capital in central Turkey, in early Hittite levels, but with completely different handles and designs (Boehmer and Güterbock 1987, Nos. 103-104). However, there is an unfinished grid on a steatite gable-shaped seal from Ras Shamra/Ugarit, near the north Syrian coast, dated to Level VC (Late Pre-Pottery Neolithic B, ca. 6500 BC). A lobed parallel with a grid, also in steatite, dated to the Ubaid period (second half of the fifth millennium BC), from Değirmentepe near Malatya, in eastern Turkey, lacks the knob on the back (see, respectively, von Wickede 1990, Nos. 3 and 540). The combination of the grid design with a related shape may, therefore, indicate an early date for this seal.

2. A03-R1247 (fig. 7.1.2)

Area 2, Square 44.69, *Locus 03-2010*, Pail 16; *Surface / Phase 1*, mixed deposit.

An irregular cone of black stone (H 1.55; BD 1-1.2 cm) with a diagonal groove running round the upper part; just above the groove, the top of the cone has broken off at the level of a perforation. There is a design on the base consisting of double Vs between the arms of a cross.

See A03-1009 for a similar linear design and a discussion of its method of manufacture, although it should be noted that here the Vs are not open-ended incisions. The bases are different shapes, but the way both rise into a grooved gable or cone is similar and a seventh- to fifth-millennium date is therefore possible for both.

UNCLASSIFIED SEALS

3. A03-R1554 (fig. 7.2.1)

Area 2, Square 44.69, *Locus 03-2010*, Pail 34; *Surface / Phase 1*, mixed deposit.

Small roughly hemispheroid stamp seal (H 0.75; BD 1.65 cm) of black stone with a greenish tinge (probably serpentine or chlorite); slight damage to the sealing surface; perforated.

The design consists of two signs that resemble stylised birds: one standing with its head and body forming a horizontal line, and the other flying above it. I have been unable to find a parallel for the design.

4. A03-1679 (fig. 7.2.2)

Area 3, Square 45.71, *Locus 03-3005*, Pail 200; *Phase 2*, Kitchen/workshop.

An unperforated, uneven hematite hemispheroid (H 1.35; BD 1.7-1.85 cm). There are two shallow, round-ended, roughly parallel hollows carved into the flat base. It is unlikely that this was a seal, but the purpose of the object is not clear.

5. A03-R1421 (fig. 7.2.3)

Area 2, Square 44.68, *Locus 03-2042*, Pail 66; *Phase 1*, Courtyard.

An unperforated cylinder (H 2.2-2.3; D 1.25 cm), probably of goethite, with scratches on the surface, perhaps intended as a cylinder-seal blank.

MIDDLE BRONZE AGE GLYPTIC

6. A03-R1115 (fig. 7.3.1)

Area 2, Square 44.55, *Locus 03-2002*, Pail 15; *Phase 1*, occupation deposit southeast of stone foundation.

Small bulla of brown clay (1.75 x 2.0 x 0.8 cm), stamped with a circular, convex-sided stamp seal on one face (D ca. 1.9 cm), leaving a concave depression (see Collon 2008: 96, fig. 6; Collon forthcoming).

An “Omega” above a subdivided “bow-shape” formed by a continuous line looping back to form the two halves of the “bow”. To the right (on the impression) is a small, vertical cross, and below the “bow” there are four vertical lines running into the edge of the impression.

The design is similar to that on stamp seal A03-R 1209, where it is fully discussed, but unlike it, the seal that made the present impression was carved in intaglio so that the design is in relief on the impression, and the “bow-shape” is differently constructed.

7. A03-R1207 (fig. 7.3.2)

Area 2, Square 44.69, *Locus 03-2010*, Pail 15; *Surface / Phase 1*, mixed deposit.

A small oval stamp seal of brownish-cream faience (H 0.81; B 1.15 x 1.04 cm). The shape of the seal is basically a low, pointed cone, with a broad groove round it level with the perforation (see Collon 2008: 96, fig. 5; Collon forthcoming).

As shown in the photograph of the base, the design on the seal is in relief, with an “Omega” sign above a bow-shape with the straight side uppermost, divided into two by a vertical line.

This is one of a particularly interesting group of distinctive small faience seals with similar designs, which, most unusually, are in relief. Most are provenanced and many can probably or certainly be dated to the later “Colony Period” (ca. 1800-1750 BC). They have been collected and discussed by Boehmer and by Keel (Boehmer and Güterbock 1987: 40-42, fig. 27; Keel 1989: 38-87, with distribution map p. 42 but note that the correct Karahöyük is just south of Konya and west of Acemhöyük; see also Keel 1986). The Boehmer and Keel lists concord for the most part. The examples from Turkey come from Kültepe (5 seals), Karahöyük (2 seals; 2 impressions, probably from a single seal), Acemhöyük (2 seals and 1 impression), Alişar and, Gordion. There is a further example from Hammam et-Turkman in north Syria, on a string of beads in child’s grave, and an unprovenanced example in Aleppo Museum. The shapes of this northern group are closely

related to the Atchana example. A closely similar design was used on a small piece of clay (A03-R1115, see above); however, it differs from A03-R1207 in that the design is in relief on the impression, so it must have been carved in intaglio on the seal. Interestingly, the same seems to be true (judging from the published photographs) of the sealings from Karahöyük (Alp 1968: Tf. 235/714, Abb. 164) and Acemhöyük (Özgüç 1986a: Pl. 45, Ill. 20b).

There is a southern group from Palestine, almost all scarabs or scaraboids and also very small, from Tell Fara North (1 seal), Tel Gerisa (1 seal), Jericho (2 seals), and Keel adds an unprovenanced example purchased in Jerusalem. Boehmer adds a further example from a multi-period and -occupancy grave at Kale Nisar in Luristan (Keel 1989: fig. 27p, since republished in Vanden Berghe and Tourovets 1994: 39-42, fig. 8). An example from Ras Shamra/Ugarit, near the north Syrian coast can now be added (Matoïan 2000). It was probably part of a string of faience amulets (as at Hammam et-Turkman), but there are no details as to the context in which it was found. Many of the examples are from graves, and the Gordion and Hamman et-Turkman examples are specifically stated to be from the graves of children. The full details of the Gordion child's burial in a late Middle Bronze Age cooking-pot have most recently been given by Dusing (2005: 14-15, fig. 13; No. 3), but she is wrong in thinking that the seal was much earlier than its context. It seems likely that the seals originated in the Levant, with the northern examples spreading into Anatolia with the Assyrian trade.

There has been much discussion as to the meaning of the "Omega" motif, duly summarised by Boehmer and Keel. Some have linked the "Omega" motif with the Egyptian goddess Hathor's hairstyle, and some with the uterus or swaddling bands associated with the Mesopotamian goddess Ninhursag/Nintu, goddess of childbirth (see Keel 1989: 58-59, figs. 31-32 for illustrations). In view of the distribution of the seals, which are unattested in Mesopotamia or Egypt, it seems likely that a connection with a Syrian counterpart of Ninhursag/Nintu is most likely, with the same symbol being related to fertility and childbirth in both cultures (Matoïan 2000: 82 cites a Late Bronze Age Ugaritic mother-goddess Rahmay). Indeed, Urs Winter has suggested links between the Middle Bronze Age Mesopotamian so-called "Ninhursag motif" and distantly-related parallels in the Syrian Late Bronze Age (Winter 1983: 374-385, cf. figs 390 and 393). The connection with Hathor may indeed be relevant, as she was known in Syria and Palestine in the 18th century BC (Teissier 1996: 157), but again it is likely that this merely reinforced local symbolism. The lower symbol looks like a pubic triangle and is probably just that. A gold amulet found in a Late Bronze Age context at Minet el Beida, on the north Syrian coast, combines the Hathor head and the pubic triangle (Winter 1983: fig. 322). The beads found with the Hammam et-Turkman example were probably tied round the wrist of a child (Boehmer and Güterbock 1987: fig. 27g). The small size of the seals may indicate that they were amulets tied to the wrists of children for their protection. Unfortunately, the Atchana example was not found *in situ*.

8. A03-R1050 (fig. 7.3.3)

Area 2, Square 44.55, *Locus 03-2001*, Pail 5; *Surface*.

Broken unperforated cylinder (Max. H 1.9; BD 2.3 cm) of pale- to pinkish-brown clay with fine dark grits and some white grits.

The base is partly missing. There are remains of some roughly radiating lines within an incised circle.

The design could perhaps be interpreted as the legs and head of a quadruped, facing right on the actual seal, within a line border. However, the design is more likely to be the remains of a pattern of irregular radiating lines such as is depicted on a seal purchased near Boğazköy, which has tentatively been dated to the "Colony Period" (19th – 18th c. BC), but the design is also known in the Late Bronze Age (Boehmer and Güterbock 1987: No. 102 and cf. Nos. 6-15); the shapes are, however, different.

LATE BRONZE AGE GLYPTIC

9. A03-R1159 (fig. 7.4.1)

Area 2, Square 44.45, *Locus 03-2001*, Pail 15; *Surface*.

Curved jar(?) sealing of fine, brown, burnt clay (4.3 x 2.9 cm; outer diameter of sealing ca. 6 cm). It is covered by impressions of the hands that shaped it, and on one side there are multiple impressions of a cylinder seal.

It has been possible to make a composite drawing of the seal design from the various criss-crossing impressions (fig. 7.4.1b). Two robed figures, each with a necklace counterweight hanging down the back and with at least one hand raised, stand facing each other; the head of that on the left is preserved, with shoulder-length hair, possibly a cap, and perhaps a beard, although this is doubtful, and the presence of a necklace counterweight and the raised hands would favour an identification with the interceding personal goddess Lama. Between them there was probably a scene with a stylized tree flanked by two animals; only two buds of the tree, and the animal on the right are preserved. The animal stands facing the tree, with its head thrown back, with a goat's splayed horns seen from above. Behind the figures the scene is divided into two registers by a horizontal frond with buds; above the frond is a goat facing right (its back not preserved) with a small bird-griffin(?) sitting on its haunches behind; below the frond is the upper part of a standing or reclining roaring lion facing left, with its tail arching over its back.

The design belongs to the Mitannian Common Style and the seal was probably made of faience. There are no close Levantine parallels, and the scene seems to have been more popular on Mitannian seal impressions in the archives from Nuzi in north-central Iraq. Here, two similar figures, with hands raised and necklace counterweights, appear on either side of a simplified tree in the Tehip-tilla archive (Porada 1947: No. 316; behind them a griffin attacks a goat between a horizontal frond and a guilloche) and in the Šilwa-Teššup archive (Stein 1993: No. 693; behind them the frond appears above two goats). A similar lion appears below a goat (Stein 1993: No. 636), and above a goat and griffin (Stein 1993: Nos. 642 and 710). I have not been able to find a good parallel for the very careful and individualistic depiction of the long-horned goat in "Monarch of the Glen" pose.

10. A03-R1200 (fig. 7.4.2)

Area 2, Square 44.45, *Locus 03-2001*, Pail 16; *Surface*.

Sealing on a piece of creamy-brown, burnt clay (4.2 x 3.0 x 0.8 cm), covered in hand impressions on both sides, and with a cylinder seal rolled out twice on one side. The sealing was probably a relatively flat strip that narrows in the centre and is broken at both ends. These breaks have affected both the impressions of the seal.

The design can be reconstructed as consisting of two scenes. The first is well preserved and depicts two robed figures facing each other with both hands raised; between them in the lower field is a vertical row of five dots. A second scene probably consisted of two animals reclining back to back and looking back over their shoulders at each other, with a stylised tree between them. However, there only survives the very top of the tree and most of the reclining animal on the right, which has tall vertical horns that curve over at the top. There are line borders top and bottom. The design belongs to the Mitannian Common Style and the seal was probably made of faience. There are no close Levantine parallels, and the scene seems to have been more popular on Mitannian seal impressions in the archives from Nuzi in north-central Iraq. For the two figures without necklace counterweights, for the row of dots between the figures, and for similar long-horned animals see Stein 1993: Nos. 633, 622 and 782 respectively. The object between the animals may be a tree similar to Porada 1947: Nos. 21b and 25-29, or a bird (e.g. Porada 1947: No. 700) or the upper part of a standard or winged disc (Stein 1993: fig. XXII).

Sealings on flat pieces of clay, sometimes referred to as “visiting-cards”, could have been trial sealings made as a record for the seal-cutter or his customer, or they could have been kept in a central office as a means of identifying the seal of a particular official or correspondent (Collon 1987: 119, Nos. 394 and 498). In the latter case one would expect the name of the owner of the seal to be inscribed on the clay, but I know of no inscribed examples, and nor have groups of these “visiting cards” been found in an administrative context. One would certainly expect the seal impression to be clear, and the design identifiable; however, the present example would have been completely useless in this respect. At Tell Bia (ancient Tuttul) in northern Syria, dozens of domed jar sealings were found to which sealed strips of clay were applied; they are dated to the first quarter of the 18th century BC (Middle Chronology). Otto (1995) has suggested this was the original purpose of “Langetten”, and this may indeed have been the case for many examples, but probably not for the present sealing which is a thick, with an inappropriate profile quite unlike the Tell Bia examples. The purpose served by most of these objects, which occur sporadically throughout the millennia, therefore remains unresolved.

11. A03-R1431 (fig. 7.4.3)

Area 1, Square 32.63, *Locus 03-1005*, Pail 17; *Phase 1*, detritus.

Fragmentary burnt clay bulla (2.8 x 3.2 x 1.8 cm) bearing the partial impression of a cylinder seal.

The seal design consists of a diagonal grid, with one line border surviving. Numerous stone and faience cylinders are decorated with this lattice design, but they may often have been beads rather than seals. Impressions are known from fourth- and third-millennia BC levels at Tell Brak, and from neighbouring sites in northern Syria (Matthews 1997: Nos. 438-450); there is also an impression from Kültepe in central Turkey, dated to the Middle Bronze Age (Garelli and Collon 1975: No. 51), and there are examples in the Mitannian archives from Nuzi in Iraq (Stein 1993: Nos. 109, 173, 178, 255, 471, 433, 629, and 704). Lattice-patterned seals are found at various periods but must have been particularly popular in the second half of the second millennium BC when faience examples, originally brightly glazed, are common. Examples from Palestine are illustrated by Parker (1949: Nos 188-189) who cites numerous parallels from Beth Shan, ‘Ajjul, Gezer, and earlier sealings from Ur and Susa. A faience example was excavated in Middle to Late Bronze deposits at Gordion, but was dated by Dusingberre “with a degree of scepticism” to the Early Bronze Age (Dusingberre 2005: 33, Cat. No. 1). Votive beads/seals with this design were dedicated in the 13th-century BC temple at Choga Zanbil near Susa (Porada 1970: Nos 153-156). It has been suggested that the design may represent a net since it often appears in conjunction with birds (e.g. Collon 1982: No. 33, a seal from Level IV at Atchana), and fish (e.g. Collon 1975: No. 232, an impression also from Level IV at Atchana).

12. A03-R1418 (fig. 7.4.4)

Area 2, Square 44.69, *Locus 03-2010*, Pail 26; *Surface / Phase 1*, mixed deposit.

A small section of an “Egyptian Blue” bead or seal (H 2.1 x W 0.85 x T 0.2 cm; D 0.9 cm; perforation uneven). There are the remains of two grooves round the preserved end of the seal, below which are traces of a possible chevron design.

The design is too fragmentary for any useful parallels to be drawn: it could have been geometric (see Porada 1970: No. 157) or, less likely, the lines could be parts of the horns or antlers of an animal.

A workshop which produced Egyptian Blue Common Style Mitannian seals of a similar light shade was excavated at Ras Shamra/Ugarit near the north Syrian coast (Schaeffer-Forrer 1983: 166). Other seals in this material have been found at Atchana (Collon 1982: Nos. 47, 76, and 86) and also during the present excavations: in 2006 (1 seal), 2007 (1 seal) and 2008 (2 seals).

13. A03-R1326 (fig. 7.4.5)

Area 1, Square 32.53, *Locus 03-1002*, Pail 17; *Surface*.

Fragment (Max. surviving H 2.7 cm) of a glass or white faience cylinder seal (D 1.33; DP 0.35 cm), broken in two, with both ends missing and some areas of the surface blistered and missing.

To the left, on the impression, there is part of a framed line of a cuneiform inscription (see Lauinger, this volume; it is not clear whether this is the only line or just the first. A horizontal line divides what remains of the design into two registers. In the smaller upper register a winged, bearded, human-headed bull, wearing a tiered headdress topped by a ball (probably representing a horned headdress), is pacing towards a stylised tree of which only a small part remains. Below, two ithyphallic bull-men face each other and grasp a tall, stylised tree between them with the hand closest to the viewer; the figure on the left seems to raise his hand, but that on the right may have grasped the stem of the tree, judging from the angle of his wrist, although the stem does not bulge to accommodate his hand; it may, therefore, also have been raised. The bull-men wear tall, conical headdresses decorated with rows of elongated dots and topped by a ball; they are bearded, and they probably wore their hair in identical styles, although whether this consisted of dots or was straight, or a combination of both, is not clear.

The composition and design of the seal are hard to parallel. The upper register probably consisted of a symmetrical arrangement with two human-headed, winged bulls (bull *lamassu*) flanking a small, stylized tree. Whereas there are some examples of sphinxes on Mitannian and Middle Assyrian seals, the bull *lamassu* is extremely rare before the 9th century BC (Danrey 2004). Probably the earliest example is on a stele from Ebla in central Syria, which depicts a composite *lamassu* with the legs of a man, a bull, a lion and perhaps an equid (Matthiae et al. 1995: No. 236), and there are possible Mitannian parallels: one from Level IV at Tell Atchana has feet that look more like paws than hooves (Collon 1982: No. 75 = Matthews 1990: No. 614), and another in Berlin (Matthews 1990: No. 612). The stylized tree is a smaller version of that in the lower register, with distinctive pendent buds. I have been unable to find close parallels, but there are related examples on the same seal from Tell Atchana and on other Mitannian and Middle Assyrian examples (Matthews 1990: Nos. 326, 585 [= Collon 1975: No. 213 from Tell Atchana], 596, 608, 614, 618 and 619). Bull-men holding a staff or tree supporting a disc or winged disc are depicted on seal impressions from Nuzi, in north central Iraq. The closest parallel, rolled out on a tablet from the time of Tehip-Tilla, was published by Edith Porada in her discussion of a Mitannian seal – one of a hoard of lapis-lazuli cylinder seals excavated at Thebes in Greece (Porada 1981: 37, No. 19, fig. 1). The bull-men on the Nuzi impression are in profile, but those on the Thebes seal are full-face. On both seals there are confronted winged griffins recalling the scene with the human-headed winged bull on the present seal; again the Nuzi seal is closest in that the griffins are in an upper register. There are several probably slightly later and less close parallels for the bull-men from the Nuzi archive of Šilwa-Teššup (Stein 1993: Nos 12, 404, 415, 432, 445, 583), all but one used by judges, and some also used by administrators and witnesses in period Š3 (probably ca. 1350-1340 BC; note that Porada's earlier dates for the Tehip-tilla archive have since been revised).

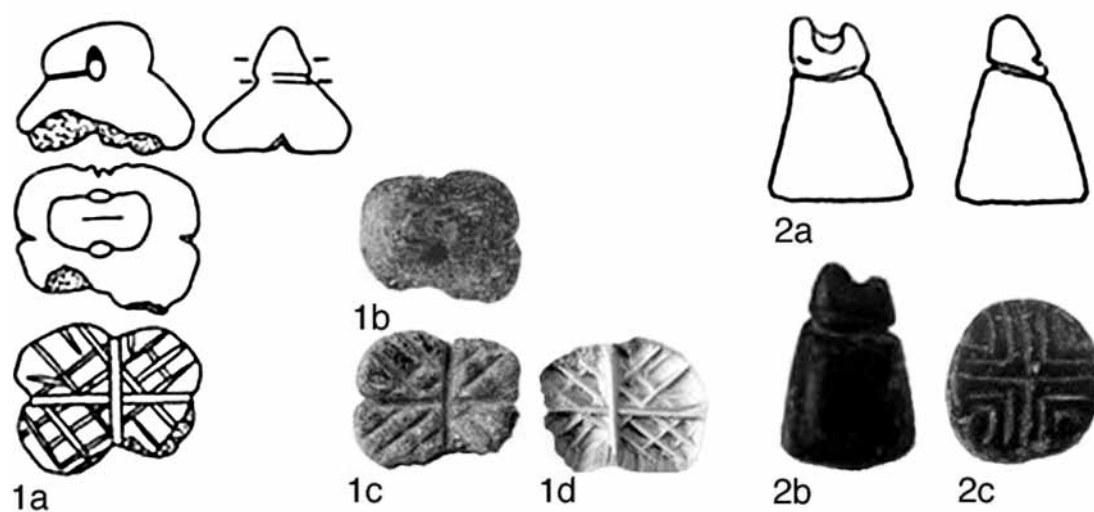


Figure 7.1. Early stamp seals. 1a-d. A03-R1009. 2a-c. A03-R1247.

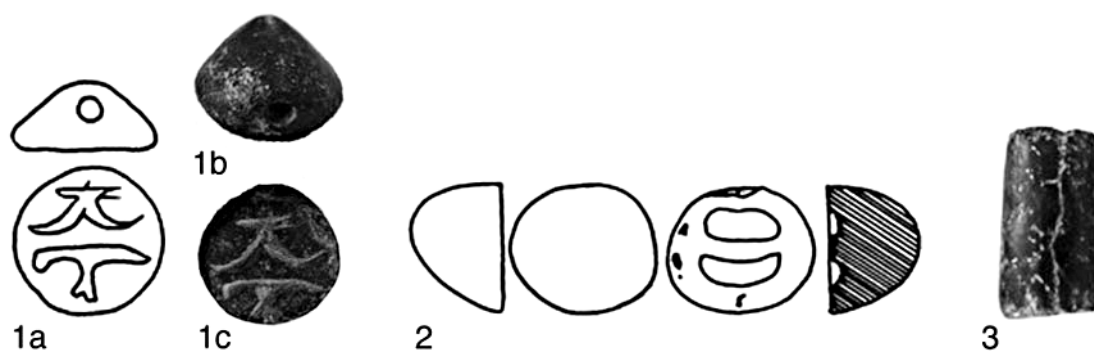


Figure 7.2. Unclassified seals. 1a-c. A03-R1554. 2. A03-R1679. 3. A03-R1421.

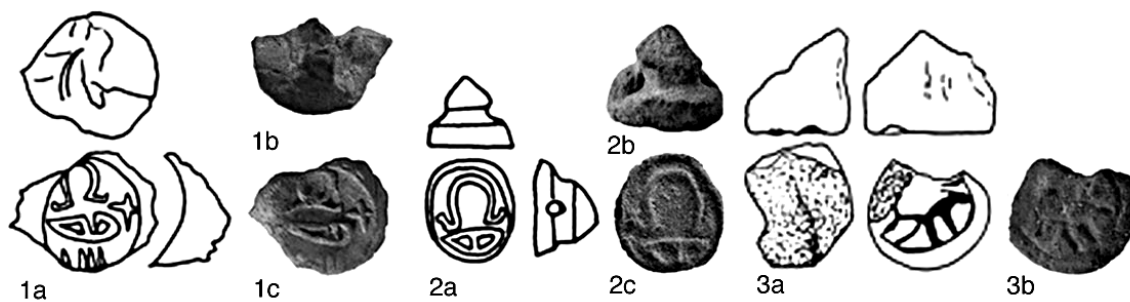


Figure 7.3. Middle Bronze Age glyptic. 1a-c. A03-R1115. 2a-c. A03-R1207. 3a-b. A03-R1050.



Figure 7.4. Late Bronze Age glyptic. **1a-d.** Seal impression A03-R1159. **2a-c.** Seal impression A03-R1200. **3a-c.** Seal impression A03-R1431. **4a-c.** Cylinder seal A03-R1418. **5a-e.** Cylinder seal A03-R1326.

