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Cylinder Seals From Tall Zar‘a as Indicators of Transparent Borders

In 2007, the largest assemblage of Late Bronze Age cylinder seals yet discovered in Jordan at a single location (and one of the largest in the southern Levant) was excavated at Tall Zar‘a. At that time, the find context was defined as the ‘floor of a very large building’ in Area I. In 2010 and 2011, the excavation Area I was extended to the north in order to expose the entire layout of the building and to gain an idea of its function. It turned out that it was a Late Bronze Age temple, an interpretation confirmed by architecture and finds.

This paper presents the cylinder seals in more detail and places the find context in a wider cultural setting.

The excavations at Tall Zar‘a are part of the Gadara Regional Project, which was initiated by Dieter Vieweger in 2001. Since 2004 it has been a joint project of the Biblical Archaeological Institute and the German Protestant Institute of Archaeology under the direction of Dieter Vieweger and Jutta Häser. Annual excavation seasons from 2003 to 2011 on Tall Zar‘a, the most prominent site in that region, brought to light an uninterrupted sequence of settlements from the Early Bronze Age to the Umayyad period (Häser and Vieweger in press; Vieweger and Häser 2008, 2010, 2013). Additionally, a survey of Wādī al-‘Arab and Wādī az-Zahār

was carried out during summer seasons between 2009 and 2011 (Leiverkus and Soennecken in press).

Tall Zar‘a is a large hill some 4.5 km southwest of the ancient Decapolis city of Gadara, the modern town of Umm Qays in northern Jordan. It is situated at the confluence of Wādī al-‘Arab and its tributary Wādī az-Zahār.

The *tall* rises about 25 m above the surrounding area; its highest point lies at an elevation of 17 m below sea level. The settlements were built on top of a natural limestone hill that has a diameter of about 240 m at its base. The plateau measures 160 m in diameter. The cultural layers are about 16 m thick. An artesian well is located in the centre of the hill, which used to provide water in abundance. The hill is protected by sheer rock faces on its east and north sides. The south flank of the *tall* offers the best opportunity to make the 22 - 25 m ascent, via a 150 m-long track that climbs from west to east.

In addition to the extraordinarily good water supply and surrounding land suitable for agriculture, another important factor should be pointed out, *viz.* the strategic position of Tall Zar‘a on an ancient and highly important trade route. The tremendous ascent from 290 m below sea level in the Jordan Valley to the Irbid

- Ramtha area and the hills west of Bayt Rās at respective elevations of *ca.* 560 m and 612 m above sea level can be made via Wādī al-‘Arab without steep or narrow passages. This makes the *wadi* an ideal route, connecting Mediterranean trade routes with Transjordan and, further to the north-east, Damascus and Mesopotamia via the Jordan valley. Just as important is the shortcut, used since the fifth millennium BC, via the Ḥauran to eastern and central Mesopotamia.

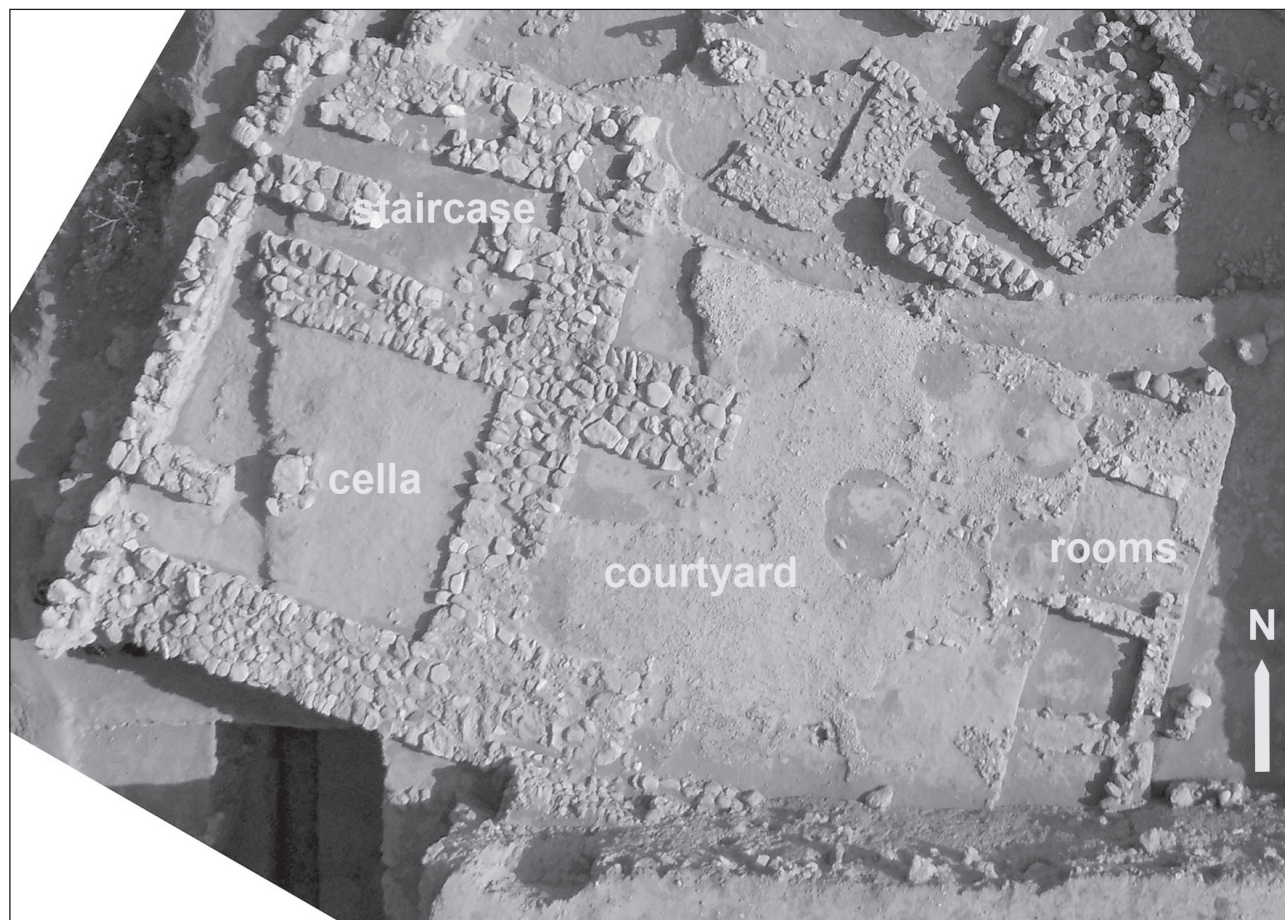
During 18 spring and summer seasons between 2003 and 2011, 25 strata dating from the Early Bronze Age to the Umayyad period were brought to light in Area I.

In the context of the cylinder seals, the latest phase of the Late Bronze Age settlement is especially noteworthy. It was found in all parts of Area I and gives an interesting insight into the layout and different architectural features of the settlement. The area was protected by a

massive casemate wall on the western slope, bounded to the south by a tower with a small sanctuary. The thick outer wall of a large house forms the continuation of this city wall in the southern part of Area I. In the northern part, the outer wall of a temple interrupts the casemate wall. Four large courtyard houses were excavated behind the wall and two more houses of different shape to the north of the temple.

The temple consists of a large, almost quadrangular *cella* with a base for a pillar in the middle (FIG. 1). The southern, eastern and northern walls were about 2.5 m thick. In contrast, the western wall was only 70 cm thick. Since the walls are so wide, it has to be assumed that the building had at least two storeys.

The entrance to the *cella* was situated in the east and protected by two almost 3 m wide *antae* protruding out on to a pebble-paved courtyard. At its eastern end, this courtyard was closed by four small rooms. The southern limit



1. Aerial view of the Late Bronze Age temple area in the northern part of Area I at Tall Zar‘a. (© DEI/BAI).

of the courtyard could not be excavated and the northern wall is only visible in the foundation trench of a now vanished wall. North of the *cella*, a building was excavated which had two narrow passages; these represent the remains of a staircase. This temple recalls a Syrian type of temple, which can also be found in Jordan (see below).

All of these features associated with the latest Late Bronze Age stratum (except the northern houses and small parts of the houses in the east - centre) were built on top of a massive fill at least 4.5 m deep, which was deposited after a dramatic landslide in the Late Bronze Age, probably in the 14th century BC. This landslide truncated earlier Late Bronze Age houses, as well as the Middle and Early Bronze Age occupation of this part of the site (*cf.* Vieweger *et al.* this volume).

The final Late Bronze Age occupation layer on Tall Zar‘a (Stratum 14) yielded a wide range of interesting finds. Among them are 24 cylinder seals of Mitannian glyptic; 14 more have been found in later strata at the settlement.

Looking at their distribution within the settlement, we can clearly recognize a concentration of seals. All 24 of these cylinder seals found in Late Bronze Age contexts are concentrated inside the temple or on the courtyard in front of it (TABLE 1: contexts 2145; 2764; 2777; 2780; 2783; 2796; 2830; 5212).

The cylinder seals uncovered in later contexts, such as Iron Age I, II A/B and II C, as well as in Roman and Byzantine strata, are distributed above or close to the Late Bronze Age temple (TABLE 1: contexts 4852; 4801; 4706; 3339; 4624; 4674; 3481; 4821; 2595; 3513; 3420). There are only two exceptions, further to the south (TABLE 1: contexts 2019; 2866).

Since the area of the Late Bronze Age temple and its surroundings were affected by

building activity and by large, very deep pits in later periods, it is probable that all these cylinder seals originally came from inside the Late Bronze Age temple and were subsequently scattered by construction work.

This hypothesis is supported by the appearance of the seals. All of them belong to the Mitannian glyptic and are of similar date and appearance. 35 were produced of quartz frit and were glazed in a blue - green color. Only two are of chlorite and one of calcite (TABLE 1).¹ However, these stone seals also bear depictions in the Mitanni-style and belong to the same groups as the quartz frit seals.

Along with the cylinder seals, other precious objects were found in the same context, *e.g.* a silver pendant with a depiction of a goddess (Vieweger and Häser 2008: fig. 18) and a scarab with the cartouche of Amenophis III (Vieweger and Häser 2008: fig. 19). Fayence rings (Vieweger and Häser 2008: fig. 26), many glass beads and Mycenaean pottery sherds were also found.

Radiocarbon samples from the Late Bronze Age find contexts in Stratum 14 give a date of 1,450 - 1,300 BC with 95 % probability. The scarab with the cartouche of Amenophis III restricts this range to the period after *ca.* 1,388 BC, depending on which system of chronology is used.

A closer look at the cylinder seals shows that they are carved with a limited repertoire of motifs. All of them belong to the Syro / Palestinian group of the Common Style of the Mitannian glyptic according to the groupings of Salje (1990: 89-94)². The quartz frit seals from Tall Zar‘a can be divided into eight motif groups:

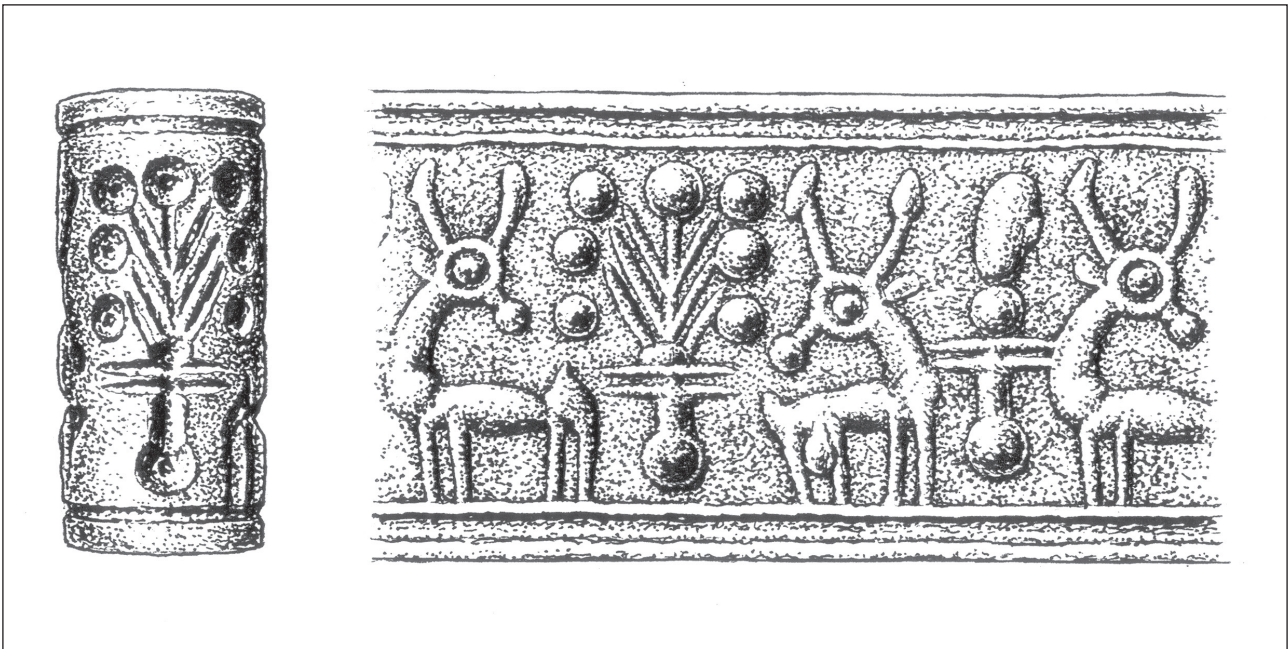
- 1) Stags or gazelle with a ‘bouquet-tree’ (FIG. 2) (TZ 008972-001, TZ 010105-001, TZ 010329-001, TZ 015305-001);
- 2) Couchant gazelle or stags side-on with bands or with vertical division (FIG. 3) (TZ

1. We thank Dr Wolfgang Auge, Biblical Archaeological Institute, Wuppertal, for identifying the material of the seals.

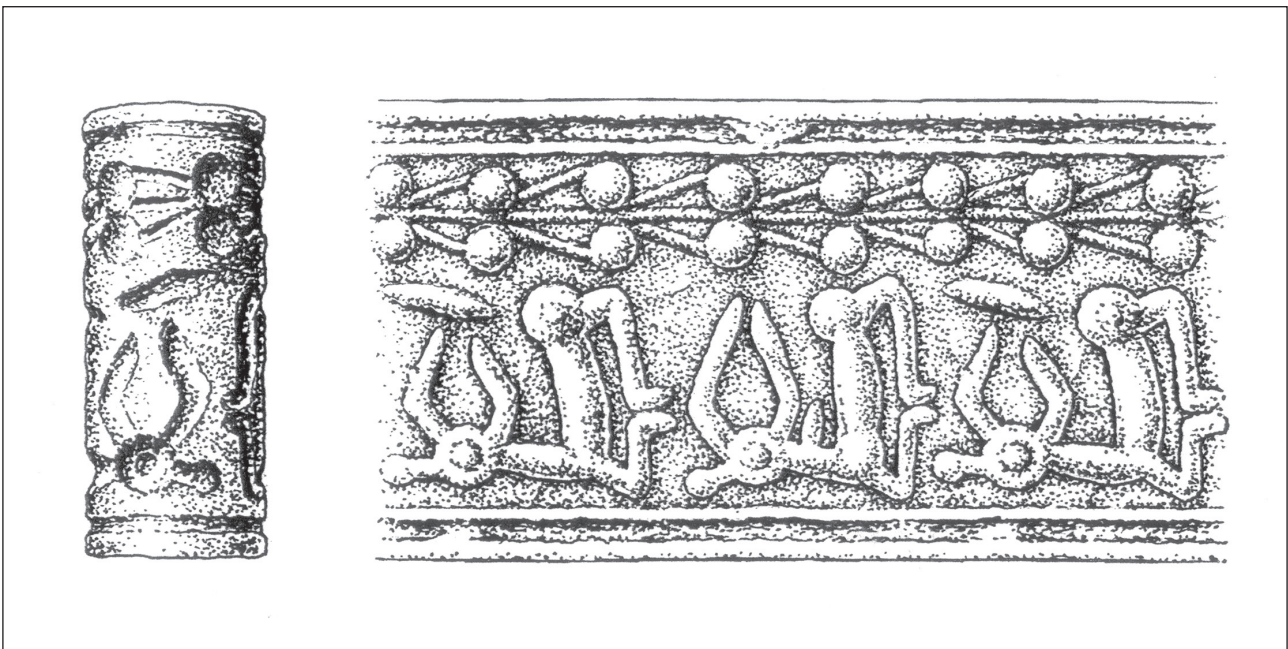
2. The authors would like to thank Prof. Dr Beate Salje for her help in identifying the different types of seals.

Table 1. Short description of motifs and cylinder seal find contexts at Tall Zar‘a.

find no.	square no.	context no. and description	dating of context	material	motif
TZ 008558-001	AN 119	2019 IA II A/B level	IA II A/B	quartzfrit	human figure, bovines, ‘bouquet-tree’, spiral band
TZ 008972-001	AP 119	2145 inside LB temple cella	LB	quartzfrit	flags, spiral band
TZ 009798-001	AQ 118	2595 level above LB temple cella	Byzantine	quartzfrit	net-pattern between two spiral bands
TZ 010059-001	AQ 118	2764 inside LB temple cella	LB	quartzfrit	stars with dotted circles
TZ 010101-001	AQ 118	2780 inside LB temple cella	LB	quartzfrit	row of human heads, row of fishes
TZ 010102-001	AQ 118	2780 inside LB temple cella	LB	quartzfrit	row of fishes, spiral band
TZ 010103-001	AQ 118	2780 inside LB temple cella	LB	quartzfrit	couchant flags sideways-on, spiral band
TZ 010104-001	AQ 118/119	2777 inside LB temple cella	LB	quartzfrit	human figure, gazelle, ‘bouquet-tree’, spiral band
TZ 010105-001	AQ 118	2780 inside LB temple cella	LB	quartzfrit	gazelle, ‘bouquet-tree’, standard
TZ 010106-001	AQ 118/119	2777 inside LB temple cella	LB	quartzfrit	human figure, flag, ‘bouquet-tree’, zigzag-band
TZ 010107-001	AQ 118/119	2777 inside LB temple cella	LB	chlorite	human figures, ‘bouquet-tree’?
TZ 010108-001	AQ 118/119	2777 inside LB temple cella	LB	quartzfrit	spiral band, net-pattern
TZ 010109-001	AQ 118	2780 inside LB temple cella	LB	quartzfrit	row of fishes, net-pattern
TZ 010326-001	AQ 118/119	2783 inside LB temple cella	LB	quartzfrit	row of fishes, gazelle, ibex
TZ 010327-001	AQ 118/119	2796 inside LB temple cella	LB	quartzfrit	rows of octopods, spiral band
TZ 010328-001	AQ 118/119	2796 inside LB temple cella	LB	quartzfrit	couchant caprids sideways-on, row of fishes
TZ 010329-001	AQ 118/119	2777 inside LB temple cella	LB	quartzfrit	flags, ‘bouquet-tree’
TZ 010330-001	AQ 118/119	2777 inside LB temple cella	LB	quartzfrit	chouchant gazelles sideways-on, spiral band
TZ 010331-001	AQ 118/119	2796 inside LB temple cella	LB	quartzfrit	three rows of fishes
TZ 010332-001	AQ 118/119	2777 inside LB temple cella	LB	quartzfrit	human figure, chouchant bovines, ‘bouquet-tree’, spiral band
TZ 010333-001	AQ 118/119	2777 inside LB temple cella	LB	quartzfrit	row of human figures
TZ 010334-001	AQ 118/119	2777 inside LB temple cella	LB	quartzfrit	fishes, chevron-pattern
TZ 010335-001	AQ 118/119	2777 inside LB temple cella	LB	quartzfrit	row of birds
TZ 010339-001	AQ 118/119	2777 inside LB temple cella	LB	quartzfrit	spiral band, net-pattern
TZ 010448-001	AI 117	2866 IA II A/B level	IA II A/B	chlorite	human figures, tree, goat, chevron-pattern
TZ 010449-001	AQ 118/119	2830 inside LB temple cella	LB	quartzfrit	human figures, gazelle, ‘bouquet-tree’
TZ 011531-001	AR 119	3339 level above temple staircase	IA II C	quartzfrit	row of fishes, spiral band
TZ 011778-001	AQ 119	3420 inside LB temple cella	debris	quartzfrit	billet?
TZ 012357-001	AR 120	3481 Roman pit in LB temple courtyard	Roman	calcite	human figure, tree, ?
TZ 012457-001	AR 118	3513 level above LB temple staircase	Byzantine	quartzfrit	row of human figures, gazelle
TZ 014467-001	AP 120	4624 level above LB temple courtyard	IA II C	quartzfrit	spiral band, net-pattern
TZ 014764-001	AP 121	4674 level above LB temple courtyard	IA II C	quartzfrit	human figure, two gazelles, ‘bouquet-tree’
TZ 015303-001	AP 120	4801 level above LB temple courtyard	IA I – II A/B	quartzfrit	human figure, animal, lion
TZ 015304-001	AQ 121	4706 level above LB temple courtyard	IA II A/B	quartzfrit	row of human figures, gazelle
TZ 015305-001	AP 120	4801 level above LB temple courtyard	IA I – II A/B	quartzfrit	gazelles, ‘bouquet-tree’
TZ 015306-001	AP 122	4821 level above LB temple courtyard	Roman	quartzfrit	couchant flags sideways-on, spiral band
TZ 015307-001	AQ 121	5212 temple courtyard	LB	quartzfrit	three rows of fishes, spiral band
TZ 015337-001	AP 120	4852 level above LB temple courtyard	IA I	quartzfrit	couchant flag sideways-on, vertical chevron-pattern



2. Cylinder seal with ‘bouquet-tree’ and gazelle (TZ 010105-001 original size) (© DEI/BAI drawing by E. Brückelmann).



3. Cylinder seal with chouchant gazelle side-on with spiral band (TZ 010330-001 original size) (© DEI/BAI drawing by E. Brückelmann).

010103-001, TZ 010328-001, TZ 010330-001, TZ 015306-001, TZ 015337-001);

3) Human figures, gazelle, stags or bovines, ‘bouquet-tree’ sometimes combined with bands or vertical divisions (FIG. 4) (TZ 008858-001, TZ 010104-001, TZ 010106-001, TZ 010332-001, TZ 010449-001, TZ 014764-001);

4) Rows of human figures (FIG. 5) (TZ 010101-001, TZ 010333-001);

5) Rows of animals (FIG. 6) (TZ 010326-001, TZ 010331-001, TZ 010335-001);

6) Different bands sometimes with rows of fish (FIG. 7) (TZ 009798-001, TZ 010059-001, TZ 010102-001, TZ 010108-001, TZ 010109-001, TZ 010327-001, TZ 010334-



4. Cylinder seal with stag, human figure and 'bouquet-tree' combined with vertical division (TZ 010106-001 original size) (© DEI/BAI drawing by E. Brückelmann).



5. Cylinder seal with row of human figures and fish (TZ 010101-001 original size) (© DEI/BAI drawing by E. Brückelmann).

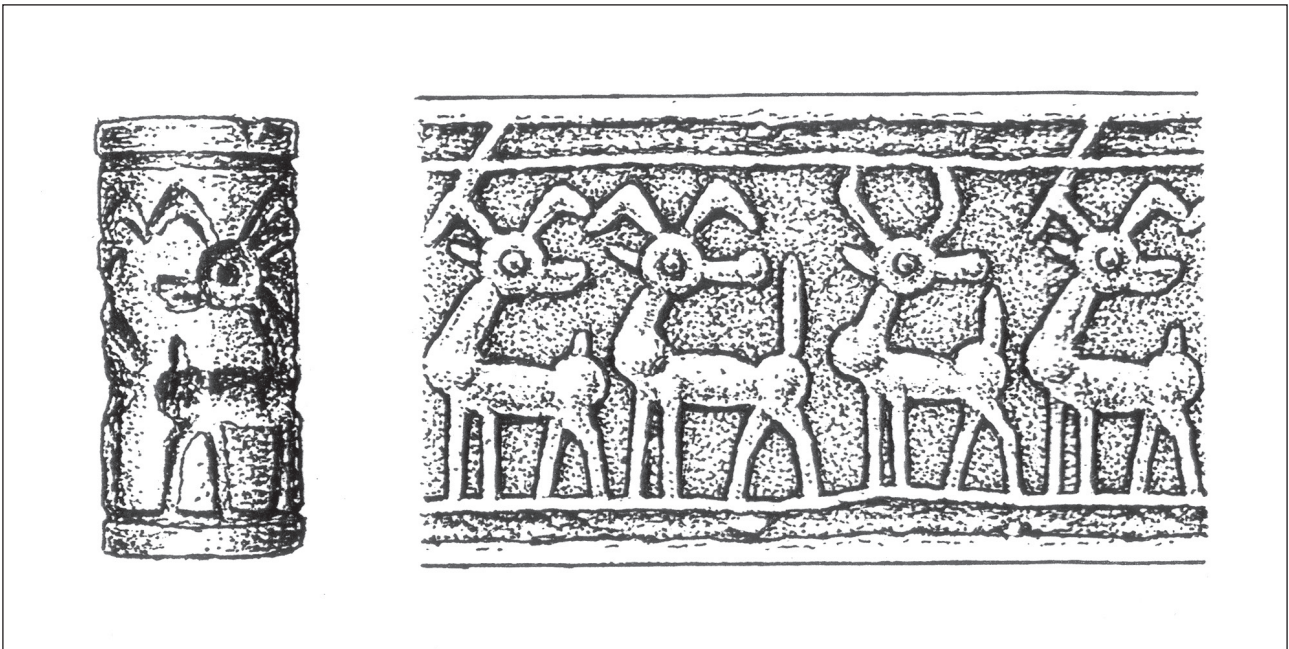
001, TZ 010339-001, TZ 011531-001, TZ 014467-001, TZ 015307-001);

7) A combat scene with a human figure, a lion and another unidentified animal (FIG. 8) (TZ 015303-001);

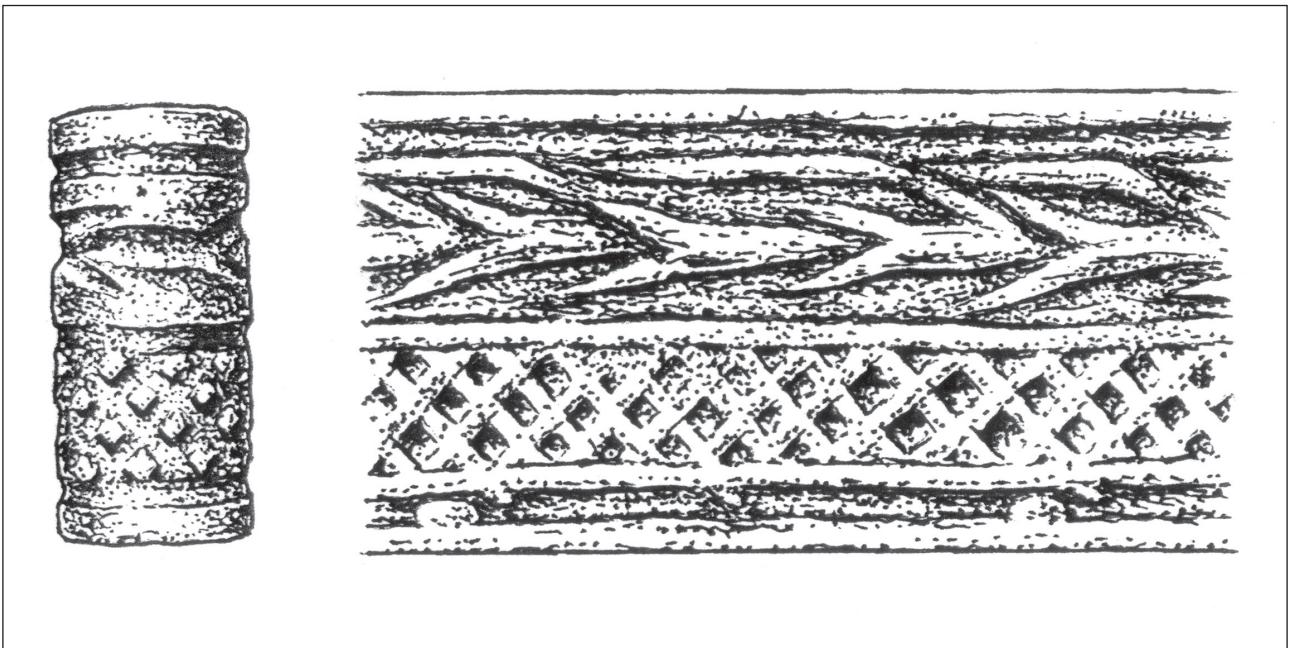
8) A row of human figures side-on and a gazelle (FIG. 9) (TZ 012457-001, TZ 015304-001).

The carvings of both chlorite seals (TZ 010107-001, TZ 010448-001) are very shallow and difficult to determine. However, it is clear that they also belong to a group with a tree and human figures.

There is one calcite seal (TZ 012357-001) with a very crude depiction of a human figure



6. Cylinder seal with row of gazelle and ibexes (TZ 010326-001 original size) (© DEI/BAI drawing by E. Brückelmann).



7. Cylinder seal with net-band and a row of fish (TZ 010109-001 original size) (© DEI/BAI drawing by E. Brückelmann).

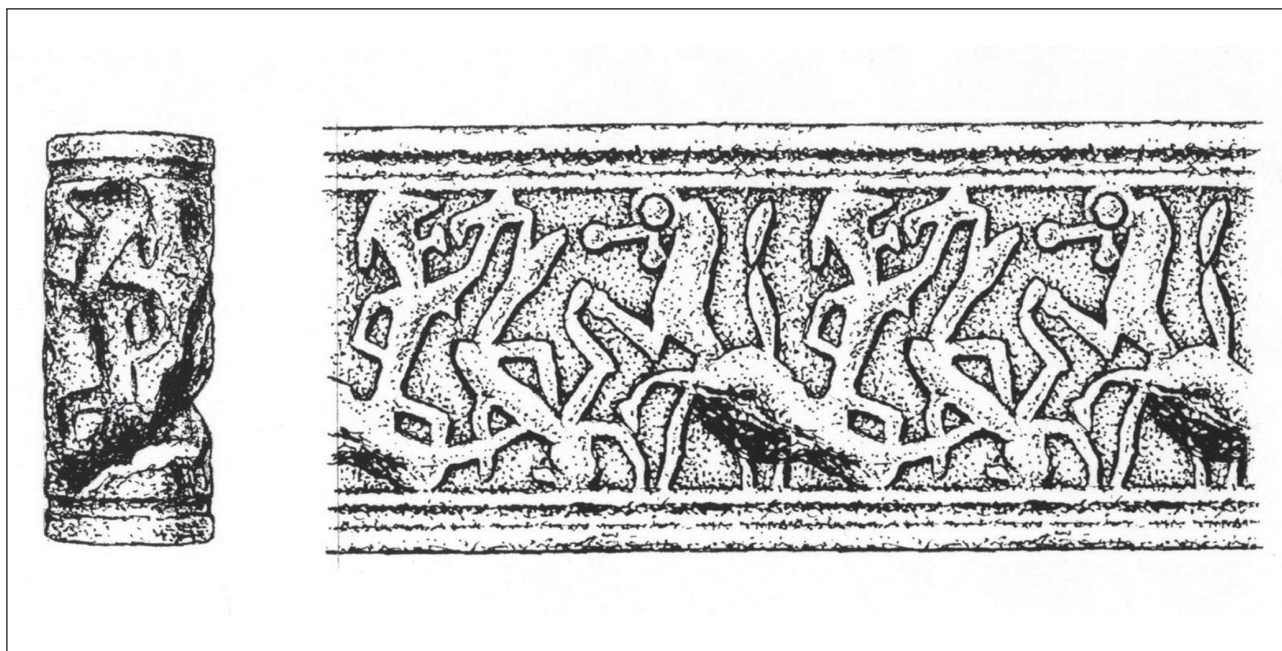
and a tree that is unique and does not fit into the Mitannian glyptic group at first glance. However, it is very similar to a seal from Nuzi (Salje 1990: taf. XX, 351).

One object made of quartz frit that looked like a seal without carving (TZ 011778-001) was also found inside the temple *cella*. However, it is very difficult to determine if this represents a

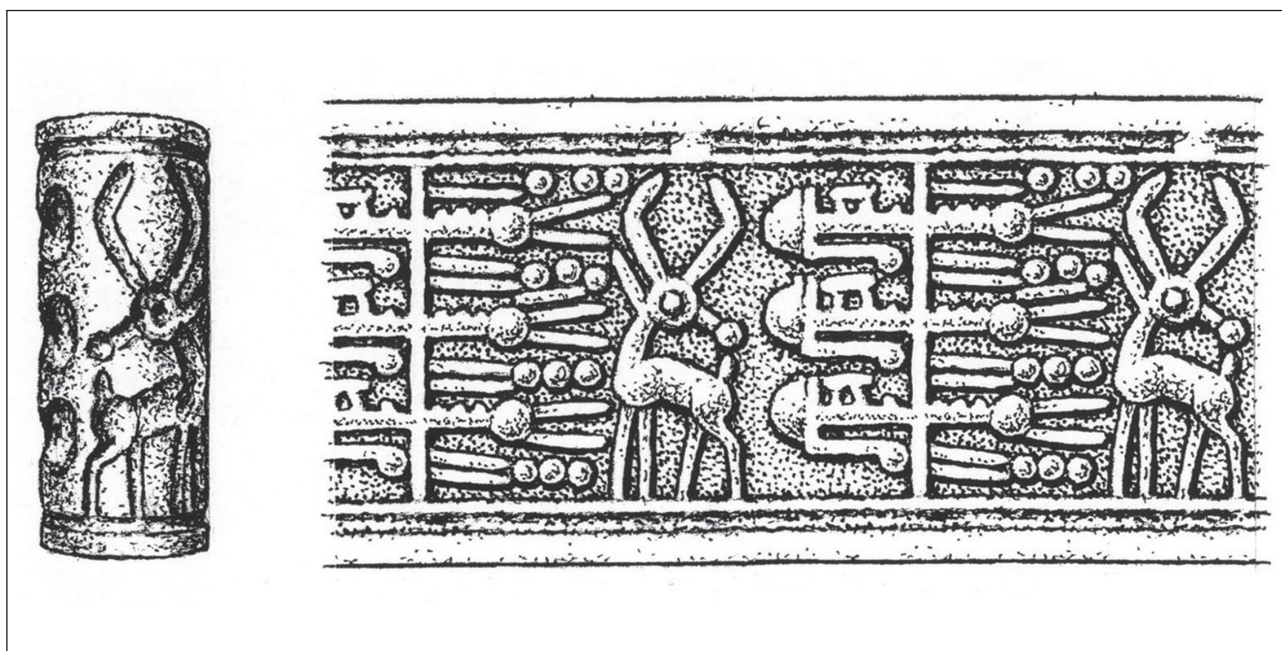
billet of a seal or an oblong bead.

As the name of the glyptic style implies, its origin is located in the area of the Mitanni kingdom of northern Mesopotamia and Syria. Since the seals of this type are not particularly attractive to the modern observer, they have been dubbed Common Style.

Seals of this style have been found at



8. Cylinder seal showing combat scene with a human figure, a lion and another unidentified animal (TZ 015303-001 original size) (© DEI/BAI drawing by E. Brückelmann).



9. Cylinder seal with row of human figures side-on and a gazelle (TZ 015304-001 original size) (© DEI/BAI drawing by E. Brückelmann).

various sites in Jordan. They are known from excavations at Pella, Ya‘mūn, Tall Dayr ‘Allā, Jabal Qusayr, Amman Citadel, Amman Airport and Khirbat adh-Dharīḥ (Eggler and Keel 2006). However, parallels for the Mitanni seals from Tall Zar‘a are not only known from Jordan, but also from Ugarit, Alalakh, Beth Shean,

Beth Shemesh, Gezer, Tall Ashdod and as far as Marlik in Iran (Salje 1990: taf. I-XV). In sum, the seals from Tall Zar‘a belong to the Syrian or Syro-Palestinian group of the Common Style of the Mitannian glyptic and are more closely connected with the Syro-Palestinian area of distribution than with the centers of the Mitanni

kingdom.

In contrast to the Mitannian glyptic region of origin, where almost all seals are known from impressions on cuneiform tablets, almost no imprints have been found in Jordan or in the southern Levant more widely. Although there is evidence for many of these seals having been used for sealing, in ancient times they were probably also valued for their bright colors and were exported and worn as jewelry and amulets (Salje 1990: 12). Collon (1987: 61) has already pointed out that they have often been discovered in graves.

If we look to the find contexts of seals at sites like Ugarit and Alalakh, where a high percentage of the Mitanni seals have been found, it is obvious that they were distributed all over the site and were concentrated in administrative buildings.

However, during recent years, it has become clear that these cylinder seals were often also used in cultic contexts. As noted above, the cylinder seals from Tall Zar‘a derive from the Late Bronze Age temple.

In Jordan, similar seals along with other precious objects were excavated either from graves or from temples, as at Tall Dayr ‘Allā, Amman Airport and Pella (Egglar and Keel 2006: 413-419, 77-81, 239-245).

At Tall Dayr ‘Allā the temple was built on an 8 m high platform. The *cella* was another metre above the other rooms of the temple. In its latest phase, this building belongs to the long-room type with non-axial or indirect entry (Strange 2001: 309). West of the *cella*, and separated from it by a brick wall, there was a complex of storerooms stacked with a workaday repertoire of large deep bowls, jugs and jars; east of the *cella* there was a small courtyard, and beyond that several rooms were dug. In one of the rooms there were 12 clay tablets, indicating a temple archive, while in others pottery, cylinder seals, scarabs, faience flasks, alabaster dishes, beads and Mycenaean imports were found. Because of a lack of space on the *tall* for ordinary houses,

the temple has been interpreted by Franken (1992: 23-103, 2008: 25-52) and van der Kooij (1993: 339-340) as a shrine for traders who frequented the spot.

At Amman Airport another temple was found, consisting of a central room with a number of corridor-like rooms around it along the outer wall. Inside this temple, dozens of Mycenaean pottery sherds, fragments of Egyptian stone vessels, weapons and seals were excavated. Most probably it belonged to a settlement now buried under the airport runway.

A series of temples was excavated at Pella. The layout of the Middle Bronze Age II temple has a lot in common with the layout of the temple at Tall Zar‘a. However, during the time of the Middle to Late Bronze Age transition it was remodeled to a ‘Migdol’ or ‘Fortress’ temple, and in the Late Bronze Age to a ‘Pillared Hall’ temple. Within the foundation deposits of this temple, cylinder seals of various types, glass ingots, glass plaques, gold foil and a variety of agate, lapis lazuli, faience and glass beads – perhaps a necklace – were found. Metal offerings included a miniature bronze harpoon, a bronze lower arm and fist, a fragmentary copper snake and a strip with modeled animal heads. In the temple itself, scarabs, cult stands and other valuable objects were also found.

Crossing the Jordan river, a similar tradition of depositing cylinder seals in cultic contexts can be detected.

Cylinder seals and glass ingots were placed in temple foundation deposits at Beth Shean (Bourke 2012: 175; James and McGovern 1993). Temple 58066 in Stratum R-2 and Temple 1230 in Stratum IX recall Canaanite non-monumental irregular-style temples and monumental Syrian style temples. At the time of the building of these temples in the mid 15th century BC, Egyptian influence on the local population is less evident than was subsequently the case in the time of the 19th and 20th Dynasties, when in Levels VIII - VI a greater interaction of Canaanite and Egyptian religion and iconography, as well as

religious syncretism, can be observed in temple architecture and the variety of artifacts.

Further to the north, the temples at Hazor in Areas A and H also yielded Mitanni-style cylinder seals. The so-called ‘Southern Temple’ in Area A is a symmetrical long-room temple forming part of the ‘Ceremonial Precinct’ (Zuckerman 2012: 99-125). A certain degree of cultic activity continued in the courtyard of the abandoned ‘Northern Temple’. A monumental symmetrical temple with a forecourt, *i.e.* building 7050, also belongs to this building complex. In this area, various types of pottery, cultic stands, a figurine, a silver crescent, metal and stone statues, jewelry and personal ornaments, including more than two dozen Mitanni-style cylinder seals, were excavated (Peri 2010: 525-526).

The temples in Area H are monumental structures with a courtyard in front of them (Zuckerman 2012: 99-125). The finds consisted of large quantities of serving and storage vessels, vessels with special functions, incised bone and ivory plaques, metal and stone statues and figurines, ceremonial weapons and also cylinder seals.

All these examples of find contexts in temples should demonstrate that the finds of Mitanni-style cylinder glyptic at Tall Zar‘a belong to a common southern Levantine tradition of depositing cylinder seals with other precious artifacts in temples.

However, there seems to be another aspect to the ritual deposition of cylinder seals, *viz.* the question of individuality. Not all of the valuable offerings, such as beads of glass or precious stones, metal or stone figurines, special pottery and so on, can be connected with an individual person. This is different in the case of the seals. Although these seals were probably not used for administrative purposes, it has to be assumed that the singularity of each seal was still important for the owner. Otherwise, it would not be necessary to work each seal as a unique specimen. It seems that it was important for

the builders of these temples to offer not only ‘simple’ precious artifacts but also something really individual – such as a seal – to the god or goddess for their own sake or for the sake of the community.

This paper thus gives an insight into the wider context of different cultural influences, especially from Syria but also from Egypt, on sites such as Tall Zar‘a in north-west Jordan and demonstrates the transparency of borders.

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