

**SCENE OF FIGHTING WITH SERPENT(S) ON THE OLD
ASSYRIAN SEAL IMPRESSION FROM KÜLTEPE
(PUSHKIN STATE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, I 2 B 1591)***

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**Summary: Scene of Fighting with Serpent(s) on the Old Assyrian Seal
Impression from Kültepe**

The aim of the article is to publish and present in detail an Old Assyrian sealing from Kültepe (collection of the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow), which carries a scene of a hero's struggle with a serpent-like monster. Such scenes are rare in the Ancient Near Eastern art, while the seal is one of the few highly original artifacts from Kültepe (most seals from Kültepe, on the contrary, present images repeated

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on other seals from there or other centers). This interpretation of the scene is confirmed in detail by photographs and parallels in the glyptics as well as among other preserved artifacts of cuneiform cultures of the 3rd–1st millennia BC that existed in the Mesopotamian and Syro-Anatolian spaces. The closest parallel to the monster on the seal in question can be seen, apparently, in the monstrous serpent on the famous Neo-Hittite relief from Malatya, suggesting an essential role of Anatolian imagery in the genesis of composition at our seal. The question of the specific myth or plot reflected in this composition remains open.

Keywords: Dragon slayer – Kültepe – Old Assyrian period – Seal – Serpent – The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts.

Resumen: Escena de combate con serpiente(s) en la impresión de un sello paleo-asirio de Kültepe

El objetivo de este artículo es publicar y presentar en detalle un sello paleo-asirio proveniente de Kültepe (colección del Museo Estatal Pushkin de Bellas Artes, Moscú), el cual presenta una escena de combate entre un héroe y un monstruo con forma de serpiente. Tales escenas resultan extrañas para el arte del Cercano Oriente antiguo, y el sello es uno de los pocos artefactos especialmente originales de Kültepe (dado que la mayoría de los sellos allí encontrados presentan imágenes que se repiten en otros sellos del mismo sitio o de otros centros). La interpretación de la escena se encuentra confirmada en detalle por fotografías y hallazgos con algunos paralelos en los glípticos y entre otros artefactos conservados de culturas cuneiformes del tercer al primer milenio a.C. y que existieron en los espacios mesopotámico y siro-anatolio. Los paralelos más cercanos del monstruo en el sello en cuestión, pueden ser vistas, aparentemente, en la monstruosa serpiente del famoso relieve neo-hitita de Malatya, lo cual nos permite hablar de un papel esencial de la imaginería de Anatolia en la génesis de la composición de nuestro sello. La cuestión del mito o de la trama específicos reflejados en esta composición permanece aún abierta.

Palabras clave: Dragon asesino – Kültepe – Período Paleo-asirio – Sello – Serpiente – Museo Estatal Pushkin de Bellas Artes

ITEM IN QUESTION: GENERAL OVERVIEW

The collection of the Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts (Moscow) includes a little fragment of a clay tablet envelope (inv. N^o. I 2 b 1591) from Kültepe (Kanish) dated to the Old Assyrian colonies period (early 2nd millennium BC). This fragment luckily happens to bear a sealing with an image of significant interest. The fragment entered the

Museum in 1911 as a part of the collection of V. S. Golenishchev, who probably purchased it in Constantinople along with other tablets and tablet fragments of the Old Assyrian period. Although the fragment has been kept in the Museum for over a century, its small size (1.77x2.62x0.62 cm) and a number of damages have for long prevented its publication and the very recognition of the image's details. An attempt to present the outline drawing of this sealing undertaken in 1968 by N. Yankovskaya¹ remained unsatisfactory and, in fact, cannot be considered as its publication: only a few lines from those actually present on the sealing were noticed and shown (thereunto, with errors), and the result does not allow us to understand either the plot of the composition in general, or the meaning of lines shown on the drawing.



Fig.1

Drawing of the clay envelope fragment I 2 b 1591 as in Yankovskaya 1968: 306.

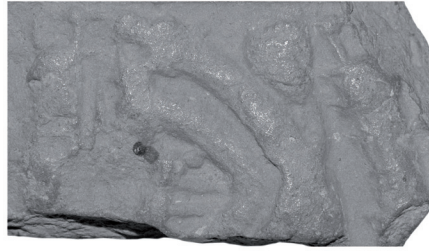
However, at that time it was hardly possible to do more: the sealing is very small and damaged. Only the modern technology of high-resolution digital photography with magnification, combining shooting at different angles with different lighting and using various methods of further computer processing of the obtained images (contrasting, etc.), and collating the results with a detailed study of the clay original under high magnification, has now made it possible for the first time to recognize to a quite reliable degree the main part of the sealing's lines and to get a clear idea of most of the elements and the general plot of the com-

¹ Yankovskaya 1968: 306, No. 119, see our **Fig. 1**.

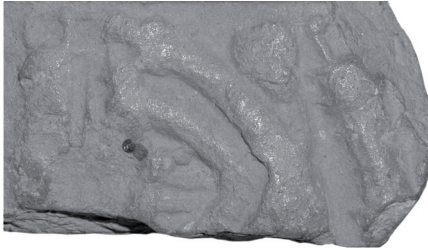
position, although the question of details' number remains open. The artifact's photographs (Fig. 2, 4 and 5) were obtained due to a joint project of the Pushkin Museum and CJSC "EPOS Group" aiming to create a digital archive of the cuneiform collection in 2014–2017. We provide here some photographs and drawings of the seal impression.



a



b



c



d



e



f

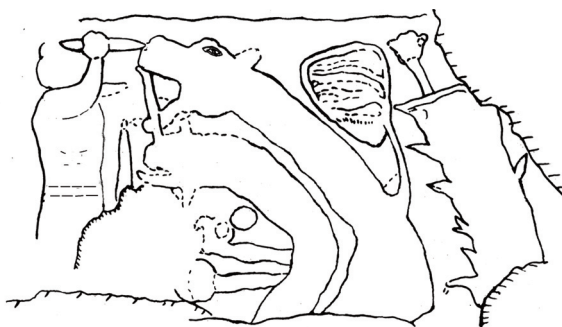


g

Fig. 2, a–g

Seal impression on the clay envelope I 2 b 1591 (a–e, with variations of shooting angle and lighting; f, with contrasting; g, general view). Photos in copyright of authors (see in text).

In **Fig. 2**, we have provided several photographs of the fragment in question taken from different angles and with different lighting,² with the aim of certifying our drawing and interpretations of some of the lines (**Fig. 3, a–c**). For the same purpose, in addition to photographs of the entire impression with magnification (**Fig. 2, a–g**), we also provide additional photographs for some elements of the drawing (**Fig. 4, a–g**). All photographs were collated with the original under magnification. This research method made it possible to make a more accurate drawings (**Fig. 3, a, c**). The image turned out to be very rare in terms of plot and composition.



a

² This seems necessary because different elements of the image are more distinguishable at different angles with different lighting or contrasting.

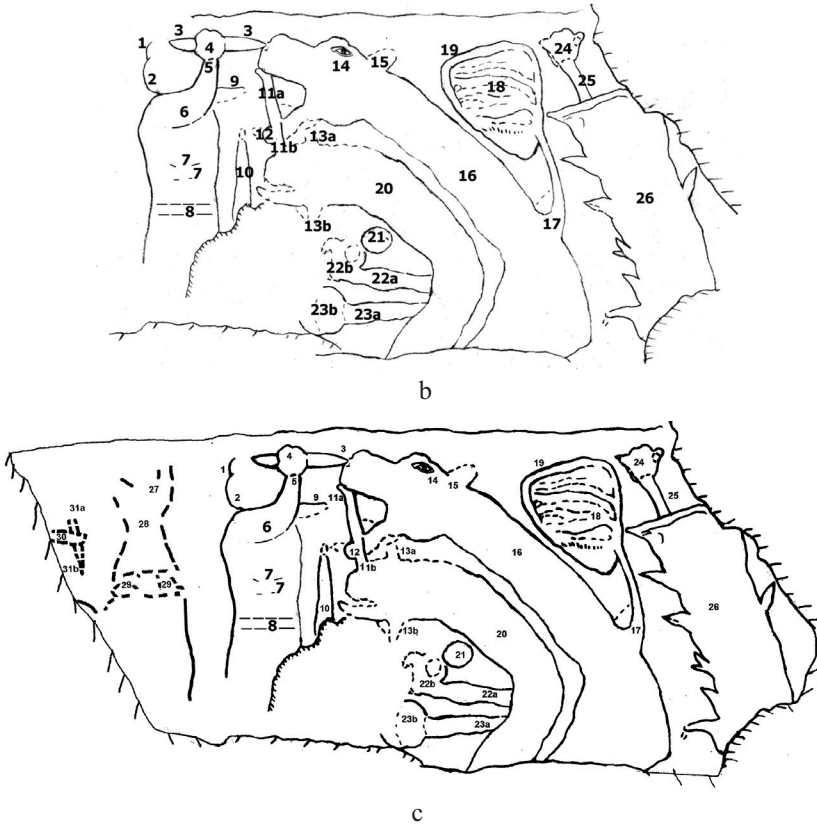
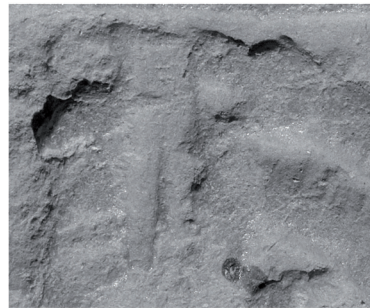


Fig. 3, a-c.

Drawing of the sealing on the envelope I 2 b 1591 and its elements (a, b, the main part of the seal impression).



a



b



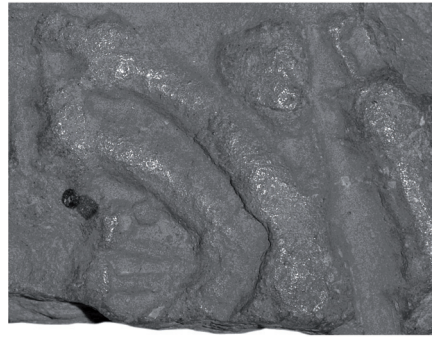
c



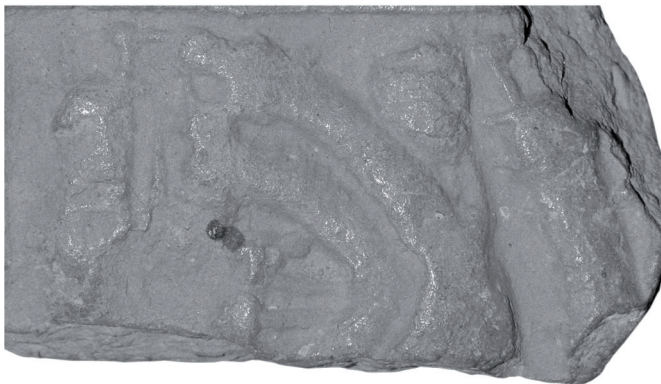
d



e



f



g

Fig. 4, a–g.
Additional photos confirming certain details of our drawing.

Fig. 3 shows our seal's drawing (a, c) with indication of its elements (b, c). The shaded lines show chips and broken zones, while the continuous lines show clearly recognizable details of the composition, and the dashed lines show questionable details.

The problem of the composition's orientation (that is, where to find its top and bottom) is resolved with confidence. This was correctly determined already in 1968, **Fig. 1**. It is clear from the impression's length that it was a cylinder seal; thus, the image can be considered correctly oriented either as shown in **Fig. 2–3**, or rotated by 180 degrees. Since the only well-preserved edge of the image (cf. **Fig. 2, g**) does not seem to serve as a base of the composition (most of the presented figures not only have no points of contact with it, but also have different angles of inclination relative to this edge) it should be considered to be the top edge, and the resulting version of the image's orientation gives the most clear sense for the composition.

The lower, left and right edges of the image are broken off, but most likely almost the entire image is preserved on the unbroken part of the fragment. It can be concluded from the following considerations that: the figure on the left (depicted in full growth), *i.e.* the hero striking with a dagger, is preserved almost entirely, and all other elements of the scene attached to it should have been placed in the same register, without going much lower than it. Furthermore, as the space of this register occupies just the extant part of the fragment, the elements belonging to this register (*i.e.* constituting the whole scene in discussion) filled entirely or almost entirely the preserved part. This means that the whole composition, in all likelihood, could not go significantly out of it and down from the lower chipped edge; thus is preserved in its main part.³

Based on the above remarks, we define the plot of the scene as follows: an anthropomorphic character (left) strikes a blow with a dag-

³ The Ancient Near Eastern seals, in particular, from Kültepe, can carry several scenes, each with several figures (each scene has the register's alignment with the full-length figure of the hero). Therefore, we cannot judge whether there were other registers on the Pushkin Museum's sealing, but we can infer that at least the scene reflected on the extant envelope's fragment is preserved rather fully.

ger to his monstrous serpent-like enemy. On the right, behind the monster's back, there is a depiction of a certain figure, possibly a plant.

Detailed analysis of this composition follows below, but we have to make some remarks on examples taken for comparison with our seal. Such examples represent the Ancient Western Asian iconographic material concerning serpent-like monsters, on the one hand, and snakes as opponents of the protagonist, on the other. As will be seen below, we use for comparison images from different regions of Anatolia and Mesopotamia and from different periods, from 3rd mill. BC to 1st mill. BC (without trying to organize them into chronological and local types). At the same time, we will rarely refer to the Old Assyrian cylinder seals from Kültepe, the original place of our seal, despite the large size of the Kültepe seal corpus. The reader might ask: why are the authors comparing images coming from various periods and localities of the Ancient Near East while Kültepe glyptics themselves occupy such a small place in this comparison? The reason is that images of serpent-like personages which have come down from Ancient Western Asia are so rare that it is necessary for us to compare them with the newly found serpent-like monster image. At the same time, many motives of these images seem to be very stable throughout the whole region to justify such comparisons. For the same reason, the previous researchers of the Ancient Western Asian images of hydras and dragons considered them altogether.⁴

As for the iconography of serpent-like monsters in Kültepe glyptics, none of the types known can be interpreted as parallel to our image. Many Kültepe seals depict two beast-headed monsters with crossed prolonged and curved (*i.e.* serpent-like) necks;⁵ these long-necked monsters are either lion-headed monsters, or a lion-headed monster attacking a goat-headed one. Some seals depict only one lion-headed monster with a long neck.⁶ On the other hand, the Old Assyrian seals

⁴ Bisi 1964–1965; Bellucci 2008.

⁵ Özgüç 2006, CS 366, 532, 553, 610, 761, 783, 809; Özgüç and Tunca 2001, CS 161.

⁶ Özgüç 2006, CS 624, 627, 628, 639, 671.

quite often carry the images of snakes;⁷ however, such seals cannot be regarded as close parallels to our image, because the latter depicts a serpent-like monster, not a snake.

The style of our seal is rather linear but not too schematic; these features are more appropriate for the Old Syrian Colony style of the Kültepe glyptic.⁸ But the Pushkin museum's sealing is lacking another feature of this style, *i.e.*, the drilled anatomic details.⁹ Its composition consists of one (not two!) row of figures without filling motifs; similar Old Syrian seals in Kültepe (like Kt k/k16) belong to the style 2A of A. Erkanal's classification.¹⁰ N. Özgüç considered such seals to be the sub-group with predominantly Syrian traits within the developed Old Syrian style.¹¹ Otto defines the place of origin for this sub-style as Yamhad,¹² but she adds to the features of this sub-group the braided ornament that we cannot observe at I 2 b 1591. The simplicity of figures resembles another sub-group of Old Syrian seals that originate from the vast region covering both Cilicia and Palestine,¹³ but our sealing depicts a less complex scene and has smaller size than most of these seals. Having general features of several Old Syrian sub-styles and matching exactly none of them, I 2 b 1591 is unique in several aspects.

Thus, the material from Kültepe does not present close parallels to our image (except for the probable binarity of its monster: the examples of binarity of various creatures are found, *inter alia*, in Kültepe seals;¹⁴ but in Kültepe such creatures do not belong to the serpentine monsters which seem to be absent in Kültepe material) while the composition in study remains unique in the context of this material. The extra-long curved necks of fantastic creatures from Kültepe seals men-

⁷ For example, Özgüç 2006, CS 295: a snake surrounded by human figures; CS 292: a deity holds a snake in one hand; CS 610.

⁸ Teissier 1984: 69.

⁹ Erkanal 1993: 92–93, 183–184; Teissier 1994: 57.

¹⁰ Erkanal 1993: 93–94, 184.

¹¹ Özgüç 1968: 54.

¹² Otto 2000: 134.

¹³ Otto 2000: 126, 131.

¹⁴ Cf. Ward 1910: 304 (fig. 954), 305 (fig. 956a), 316 (fig. 1000); Porada 1948: CXXXV, fig. 894e; Özgüç 1968: 44; Özgüç 2006: CS 609, CS 621, CS 686, CS 717, CS 806, CS 827.

tioned above can hardly be treated as parallels to our image and be used for comparison. In other cases, the appearance of these creatures has nothing in common with the monster on our sealing; the creatures in question are not even serpent-like, and their long slender necks look completely different and are curved in a different way than the trunk-like and slightly bent body (passing into the neck without any visual border between them) of the monster(s) at the Pushkin Museum's seal. The closest, and still very distant parallels of our image can be seen in the simple snakes presented as antagonists of heroes on some Kültepe seals (as well as on the seals from other territories). These examples, which are also very rare, will be mentioned below. Such a distribution of the available sources suggests that Western Asian items of different time and geographic origin must be used for comparison with our image in a much larger proportion than the items from Old Assyrian Kültepe.

DETAILS OF THE COMPOSITON

Image elements in detail:

- 1—detail of the hero's head or accidental chipping;
- 2—back detail of the hero's head;
- 3—dagger and its handle;
- 4—the hero's fist squeezing the dagger (especially clear and in detail in **Fig. 2**, d–f; **Fig. 4**, b);
- 5—detail of the wrist (?);
- 6—raised hero's hand with the dagger;¹⁵
- 7—chips or details of the hero's clothes (?);
- 8—chip (or detail of clothing or legs, cf. element 29, **Fig. 3**, c?; cf. **Fig. 4**, g);

¹⁵ Normally such position of the hand with a dagger (stretched to the right from the hero's torso, which is also oriented to the right) could mean that this hand is the left one, but some seals from Kültepe [e.g. Özgüç 2006, CS 675, 676, 677] demonstrate that the hand in this position can be the right one as well. This still does not mean that the hero's figure is depicted strictly in profile, which would be uncharacteristic for the relevant material. We assume that our hero's figure is shown in the same partial shift (with the figure's front oriented to the right and the right hand stretched in front of it and to the right as well) as the figures on the just mentioned seals from Kültepe.

- 9—clearly visible element (especially on **Fig. 2**, b, e; **Fig. 4**, b–e), but it can be hardly interpreted (this may be a detail of the hero’s other arm extended forward?);
- 10—another clearly visible element, not amenable to clear interpretation: pointed “sword-shaped” detail, possibly a symbol (**Fig. 2**; **Fig. 4**, a, b). It does not reach element 9;
- 11a–11b—details that merge into one long, straight object which clearly crosses the monster’s mouth 16 (**Fig. 2**, a–f, **Fig. 4**, a, d, f, g), and, apparently, continues even further down against the background of the monster’s lower jaw (or through it), up to the intersection or contact with the element 20 (**Fig. 2**, b, e; **Fig. 4** a, d). Probably, the element 11a+11b can be a dart,¹⁶ although its interpretation as tooth of a monster 16 or as a horn of a monster 20 is not completely excluded. Some similarity to the element 10 is noteworthy;
- 12—detail (**Fig. 2**, a, d, f; **Fig. 4**, a, b, f), which we propose to interpret as the lower jaw’s edge of the monster 16;
- 13a–13b (**Fig. 2**, d, e; **Fig. 4**, g)—elements that do not lend themselves to unambiguous interpretation. Possibly chips or another dart going through the tip of the figure 20;
- 14—seemingly, the eye of the monster 16, distinguishable in a number of photographs (**Fig. 2**, b, c), including after contrasting (**Fig. 5**);

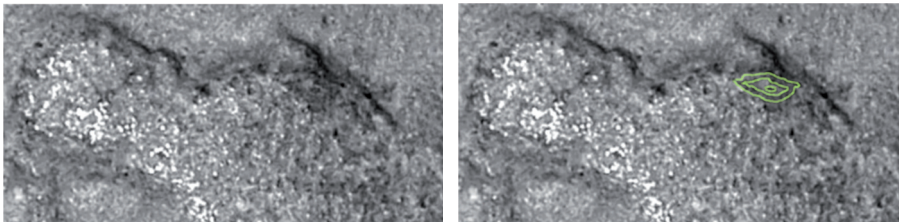


Fig. 5.
Eye of the monster.

¹⁶ Then this dart either (a) pierces the jaw of the monster 16, or (b) is simply shown against the background of this jaw, and hits the figure 20, or (c) pierces the lower jaw of the monster 16,

- 15—occipital protuberance/horn, crest or ear on the head's back of the monster 16 (clearly visible in **Fig. 2**, b, e; **Fig. 4**, c–e, g);
- 16—neck/body of the monster hit by the hero. It has an elongated shape; the monster, apparently, did not have either front or hind legs;
- 17—clearly visible element growing from the body 16 and ending with a clearly distinguishable detail in most of the photographs. Perhaps, this latter detail should be interpreted as the crown of a tree graphically circled with a rim 19 (**Fig. 2**, b–f; **Fig. 4**, e–g), this would mean that some tree grows out from the body of the monster 16¹⁷ (or is it just presented as growing behind of it?);
- 18—branches (?) in the “tree crown” 17, better distinguishable in a number of photographs (**Fig. 2**, d–e; **Fig. 4**, f–g);
- 19—rim outlining the “crown” 17, better distinguishable in a number of photographs (**Fig. 2**, b–f; **Fig. 4**, e–g);
- 20—figure that defies unambiguous interpretation. It is located below and to the left of the neck/torso of the monster (16), resembling this monster in shape—the figure goes and bends in a parallel way to it. From this figure (20) two similar sets of elements (22a+22b and 23a+23b) protrude forward. The figure 20 and the monster body 16 are separated from each other by a narrow curving gap (cf. **Fig. 1**, **Fig. 4**, d, f, g). Unfortunately, the left extremity of the figure 20 is badly damaged, which makes it much more difficult to interpret.¹⁸ Nevertheless, given the position of the figure 20,

and come through it until it touches and hits the figure 20. Is it possible that this dart is held by an outstretched hand and that the element 9 might be identified as a trace of the latter?

¹⁷ Cf. the frequent pictorial motif of plants growing from the shoulders and backs of Mesopotamian fertility deities (Frankfort 1939: 106, 107, 114, 115, 124) and visual combination of a tree with a legless monstrous serpent (with a dragon head vaguely resembling the head of our monster 16) on the seal published in Ward 1910: No. 710, where the serpent seems to grow just out of the tree.

¹⁸ The left extremity of the figure 20 (below the element 11a) is very poorly visible. The dashed lines shown in the drawing could imply that it is a head, if these lines really reflect some figure's cutouts and not occasional chips.

its similarity in shape with the monster's torso/neck ended with the monster's head (16) and parallel bending of the figure 20 to this body/neck 16, we think it is possible to interpret the figure (20) as either the second serpent, or as the second head and neck of a two-headed monster (16+20); in such a case the damaged left extremity of the element 20 might be the head. If this is a two-headed monster, then elements 16 and 20 should have been connected like its two necks/torsos slightly below the edge of the lower chip, like two trunks with one root. The elements 22 and 23 are most likely the forward paws of the serpent-like creature represented by the figure 20 (that is, either a separate serpent-like monster if the figure 16 belongs to another creature, or a two-headed monster 16+20 if the figures 16 and 20 belong to the same creature and represent its necks). Note that the forward paws of a serpent/dragon without hind legs is a common feature of one of the types of the Western Asian (and specifically Mesopotamian) dragon iconography (primarily of the Mesopotamian serpent *bašmu*), which, by the way, is also characterized by a protrusion on the back of the head (horns),¹⁹ similar to our element 15. There are quite similar extended paws, apparently, at the representation of the serpent smashed by the hero on the famous Neo-Hittite relief from Malatya (this serpent also has no hind legs, see below). Malatya lies in the same South-Eastern part of Asia Minor as Kanish-Kültepe.

The choice between the two above interpretations (two serpent-like monsters or one two-headed serpent-like monster) cannot be made with full certainty, but a number of considerations speak in favor of the second option. Firstly, if we assume that two monsters are depicted here, it would turn out that, despite of their high general similarity and

¹⁹ See, for example, the images of dragons (most likely *bašmu*) on the Neo-Assyrian seals BM 89589 (Ward 1910: No. 579 = Collon 2005: fig. 850) and AO 30255 (Louvre), where there are paws extended forward and a protruding element at the back of the head (horns).

parallelism in form, posture and location, they are depicted, nevertheless, so different that one of them (20) has the paw-like limbs (22 and 23), while the other (16) has not such limbs, but on the other hand the latter creature (16) has the tree-like element 17 growing from its back, which, in turn, is absent from the other creature. It seems more likely that this is a one two-headed serpent, with both body parts and elements 22, 23 (paws) and 17 attached.

Secondly, the two-headedness of various characters was generally a fairly widespread motif in the Ancient Near East and, in particular, in the Syro-Anatolian art,²⁰ including seals from Kültepe; meanwhile, the Old Akkadian seal VA 3303²¹ shows a two-headed snake (and the Mesopotamian seal of the Early Dynastic time BM 123279²² shows a three-headed snake captured by the hero).

Thirdly, the Neo-Hittite relief H from Malatya (AMM 12250) dated to the early 12th century BC²³ seems to depict a two-headed serpent without hind legs with two parallel paws extended forward (and holding weapons?, see **Fig. 6**²⁴), which would constitute a good Anatolian example, in the light of which we could similarly interpret our image from the Pushkin Museum. However, the place of interest to

²⁰ Collon 1982: 41

²¹ van Buren 1946: fig. 5

²² Amiet 1961: pl. 105, fig. 1389.

²³ Gilibert 2015: 143–144.

²⁴ On the relief, a hero fights a huge serpent without hind legs. A number of authors believe that this serpent is two-headed (van Loon 1997: 589; Boardman 1998: 32; Bellucci 2008: 149). And, indeed, upon a detailed examination of the relief from the best photographs, primarily from the publication of L. Delaporte (Delaporte 1940: pl. XXII, our fig. 6), it seems that the serpent is two-headed (both necks are shown to the right of the large fissure that damages the relief) and protrudes forward paws-like limbs with weapons (?) (shown to the left of the fissure and touching the hero's skirt), cf. our drawing of this part of the relief in **Fig. 6**. Two supposedly visible "offshoots" from the serpent's body, both of them to the right of the fissure, and an element or elements which the same serpent extends in front of it to the left of the fissure may represent a parallel, correspondingly, to two serpent-like figures 16 and 20 and elements 22+23 extended in front of one of them in our seal impression. However, the relevant part of the relief from Malatya is heavily damaged by the aforementioned fissure. This prevents from being indisputably sure at present moment that the depicted monster is really two-headed and/or protrudes forward its forepaws.

us on the Malatya relief is very badly damaged by a fissure, so it cannot be stated indisputably that this serpent was two-headed.

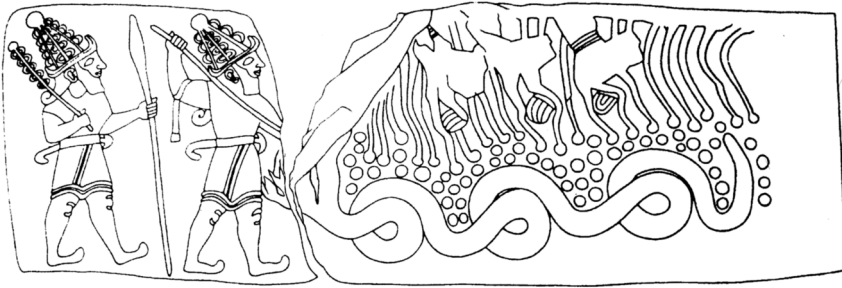


Fig. 6.

Drawing of Neo-Hittite relief from Malatya
(upon photograph in: Delaporte 1940: Pl. XXII, Relief H).

Looking back at the list of image elements:

21—clearly delineated circle;

22–23—details with left extremities are unfortunately located in the damaged area which extends up to the chip that covers the lower part of the hero's figure on the left and the lower part of the element 10. These lines cannot be interpreted with full certainty, but, as mentioned above, they look like paws growing from the figure 20; this interpretation may be confirmed by the Ancient Near Eastern iconography of dragons/serpents with the paws thrust forward in the same way²⁵ the elements 22–23 closely resemble these paws;

24, 25, 26—perfectly visible lines constituting a single object, which, however, presents a great difficulty for interpretation (especially since the lower part of this figure is chipped off). On the one hand, the general outlines of this figure are somehow mirror symmetrical (up to some degree) to the general outlines of the left figure (the hero), and the elements 6+5+4 of the left figure are also made in a certain

²⁵ Cf. Neo-Assyrian seals BM 89589 (Ward 1910: No 579 = Collon 2005, fig. 850) and AO 30255, Louvre 33.

symmetry with the elements 25+24 of the figure in question, as well as the protruding element 9 of the left figure and the upper left projection of the element 26. Such symmetry can hardly be accidental. Obviously, the carver at least wanted to approach a mirror-symmetrical composition with figures similar in silhouette at its edges (with the monster between them). One might then suspect that these symmetrical figures represent some objects of similar nature. However, upon examination, it turns out that the symmetry of the hero's figure and the figure 24+25+26 is far from complete: a number of significant differences exist between them. This cannot be the result of natural variations and deviations when one and the same object is carved on the seal repeatedly. The logical conclusion is that these figures are different and represent different objects, and the carver just wanted to make their silhouettes similar to each other in order to get a symmetrical composition if possible.

What then does the figure 24+25+26 represent? A number of considerations might support its identification as a sacred tree. The element 24 resembles in its general outlines a petal corolla²⁶ growing on a stem (25) from a trunk-like base (26) which has bough-like protrusions. All of this can be compared with images of the sacred tree—an exceptionally frequent element of the Near Eastern seals and reliefs (**Fig. 7**). Though we did not find a precise parallel to our figure 24+25+26, having looked at several thousands of the Near Eastern images of trees, we have to keep in mind that the Ancient Near Eastern iconography of the tree is characterised by exceptional diversity and variability, even within a group of objects of one and the same time and place of origin²⁷ (including very rare and unique specimens).²⁸ At the same time, both all

²⁶ The “petalled” segmental structure of the upper part of the element 24 is clearly visible in **Fig. 2**, b, d, and **Fig. 4**, a, g.

²⁷ See Van Buren 1945: 27; York 1975; Parpola 1993: 163 and some summary representations of various examples of the sacred tree images (York 1975: 272; Collon 1982: 11).

²⁸ Cf. the general structure of the typical sacred tree images: a flowering (rarely leaf-like) top

the details of our figure 24+25+26 taken separately, and its structure as a whole, find parallels in the existing images of the “sacred tree”; only a specific combination of elements in our figure and their dimensional ratio seem unique within the sacred tree iconography, but some known images of the “sacred tree” display not lesser particularities. The representation of “sacred tree” as a two-part structure, consisting of a “flower-like” top, similar to a multi-petalled object, growing from a columnar trunk (more or less clearly separated from the top part, in particular by a horizontal line) which has boughs or short branches is one of the most common types in the Western Asian art for centuries²⁹ (see **Fig. 7**³⁰), and that is exactly what our right figure looks like.

Yet, a serious counterargument to the identification of our right figure as a “sacred tree” is that the element 26 (“trunk”) is much wider than element 24 (“top/crown”). We did not find any parallels for such a ratio; on the contrary, the width of the sacred tree’s top turns out to be greater than the width of the trunk (although sometimes an almost equal width is observed, for example, **Fig. 7**, a). If, however, this single element excludes the correlation of our figure with a sacred tree, given that the images of trees are infinitely variable, and the noted disproportionality of our right figure, be it a “sacred tree,” could also be simply the result of the very desire to bring it closer in general outlines (for symmetry’s sake) to the silhouette of the left figure, which was independently identified above?

and a clearly separated trunk: York 1975: 272, fig. 9; Collon 1982: No. 71, No. 108; Osten 1934: No. 359; columnar trunk with boughs or branches (including short and asymmetrically spaced ones): Collon 1982: No. 108; Osten 1934: No. 359; Eisen 1940: No. 99; Black, Green 1992: 23, fig. 16; massive trunk—York 1975: fig. 9; Collon 1982: No. 71, No. 112; stem-like connection of top and trunk—Collon 1982: No. 112; top of the tree as a single multi-petal corolla—Eisen 1940: No. 98, comes close to this Collon 1982: No. 108, No. 112.

²⁹ Cf. York 1975: fig.9; Collon 1982: No. 71, No. 108, No. 112; Eisen 1940: No. 98, No. 99; Osten 1934: No. 359 = Ward 1910: No. 956a/1000; Osten 1934: 8; Black, Green 1992: 23, fig. 16.

³⁰ General structure of the image: flower-like (rarely leaf-like) top + clearly separated trunk—fig. 7, a (up to leaves hanging to the sides), b, c, f; columnar trunk with boughs/branches (including short and asymmetrical ones)—fig. 7, c, f, g, h; the massiveness of the trunk—fig. 7, a, b, d; stem-like connection of the top and the trunk—fig. 7, d; a clear horizontal element separating the trunk from the top—fig. 7, b, f; top part as a single multi-petal corolla—fig. 7, e, close to this are c, d. Fig. 7, d and c are the closest to the figure 24+25+26 in our seal.

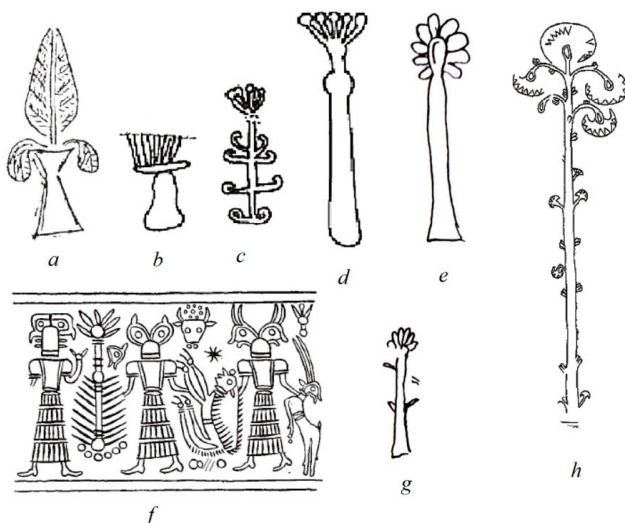


Fig. 7.

Some Ancient Near Eastern images of trees. “Sacred tree”: a—on the Ur-Nammu stele (Sumer, c. 2100 BC), see York 1975: fig.9; b, c, d—on seals from Alalakh IV (15–14th centuries BC), see Collon 1982: No. 71, No. 108, No. 112; e, g—on the Neo-Babylonian seals (Eisen 1940: No. 98, No. 99), f—on the “Syro-Hittite” seal of the Cypriot style (Osten 1934: No. 359 = Ward 1910: No. 956a/1000), approx. the end of the 2nd millennium BC (see Osten 1934: 8); the tree on a fresco from Mari (18th century BC)—h (after Black, Green 1992: 23, fig. 16).

It should be noted that the sacred tree hardly appears on the seals originating from Kültepe. This fact can serve as one more argument against the version in question. In addition, one of the seals from Kültepe³¹ presents a pillar-like object (in the publication, this element is also not clear; however, Özgüç suggested that it could be interpreted as a door or a temple), which is somewhat reminiscent of the figure 24+25+26 from the Pushkin Museum’s sealing.

On the whole, while recognizing the possibility of seeing here a sacred tree unusual in proportions or some architectural element, we do not consider it permissible to express any opinion on this point with certainty. Until closer parallels are found, the question of the reliable

³¹ Özgüç 2006, CS 352.

identification of this figure remains open. However, this does not affect the definition of the general plot of the preserved scene.

27—31: possibly, unclear traces of two other figures of hero(e)s (?): 27—hands of the second left figure raised to the top, probably in a pose of preparation for striking, similar to the position of the hand 6; 28—body of an anthropomorphic figure; 29—legs of an anthropomorphic figure; 30—hand gripping a dagger or a dart; 31—dagger or dart, a weapon similar to 3? There is no confidence in the interpretation of these traces.

CONCLUSIONS

The plot of the main scene can now be clarified in greater detail—it is undoubtedly the scene of fighting with a serpent. An anthropomorphic character (hero or god), standing on the left, is fighting with a two-headed serpent-like monster (**Fig. 3 b**, 16+20—or yet two single-headed monsters?) which protrudes its paws in the direction of the fighter. The fighter (1, 2—head, 4—fist squeezing a dagger, 5—wrist (?), 6—body and raised hand with a dagger, 7—lines on clothes (?), 8—lines on clothes or legs (?), 9—clearly prominent element, possibly a fragment of the outline of the hero's other arm extended forward) strikes his opponent (a serpent-like torso 16—we can recognize an eye 14, a protrusion (horn) or an ear on the head's back 15, and possibly—the edge of his lower jaw, 12). The hero hits the front of one of the monster's heads with a dagger; apparently, he also struck with a weapon similar to a dart, either the same head in the mouth, or the second head in its front part, or both these objects at once. From the neck/body of the two-headed monster (or one of two one-headed monsters) the plant-like element 17 grows (see note 17), encircled with the rim 19. Within it, lines 18 resembling branches are slightly distinguishable without certainty. This may have something in common with the fact that the very shape of the snake-like monster's body 16 resembles a trunk.

The hero is separated by his antagonist (or two antagonists) from the object (24+25+26) where one can see the “sacred tree” without full certainty. In this case, the antagonist (or a pair of antagonists) of the hero seems to block this object from the hero and his path to it. Such a composition allows us to assume (albeit, again, without certainty) that the hero fights the monster(s) precisely in order to pave his way to this object (conditionally, the “tree”). However, this interpretation is significantly hampered by the fact that the “trunk” of the “tree” (26) is much wider than its “flower-shaped crown” (24), and we have not found images of the tree with such a ratio of the lower and upper elements among many hundreds of examples. A number of image’s elements still remain unclear. On the left, broken off edge of the image, the remains of two more anthropomorphic figures seem to be visible (first: 28—torso, 29—legs, 27—raised arms; a possible remnant of the second, extreme figure: 30—a hand clutching a dagger or a dart 31 (?)). We dare not to determine their role at present.

We emphasize that the differences noted above between the snake-like figures 16 and 20 (the first one has the element 17 growing from its body, the second one has elements 22+23, which resemble paws of the Near Eastern dragons) support the idea that the figures 16 and 20 are two parts (necks/torsos) of one and the same creature.

The serpent-fighting plot revealed on the seal gives a special value to the little artifact under study and makes it a significant rarity, since scenes of fighting with serpent-like monsters were present in the Mesopotamian and Syro-Anatolian areas,³² but only few of them have been preserved, and among them scenes of fighting with legless serpent-like monsters are especially rare in the Near Eastern figurative inventory.³³ And if we are talking specifically about a two-headed ser-

³² On the Ancient Near Eastern images of multi-headed serpents (“hydras”) and scenes of fighting them from the 3rd–1st millennia BC see, in particular, Frankfort 1934; Levy 1934: 49–50; Frankfort 1935: 105–108; Frankfort 1939: 71–72, 121–122; van Buren 1946: 18–20; Bisi 1964–1965; Orthmann 1975: 537; Parayre 2003: 276, 294; Amiet 2006.

³³ Let us note vivid, but few examples of different times (given in descending order of chronological and territorial proximity to our sealing): one Syro-Anatolian seal of the 2nd millennium where the hero—the Storm God—strikes with a dart (just at the mouth) a snake next to a tree

pent-like character (according to the generally accepted terminology, it would be considered one of the varieties of “hydra”), then the image we are examining turns out to be even more rare, since although the images of “hydras” in the art of Mesopotamia, Anatolia and Syria are firmly fixed starting from the Early Dynastic period, still less than a dozen of such images (including hydras with legs) have come down to us and are noted in the literature.³⁴ In both cases—whether we are talking about two monsters or a two-headed monster—our artifact belongs to a relatively very small number of seals from Kültepe, characterized by highly original plots and pictorial elements, not repeated constantly on other seals (the overwhelming majority of seals from Kültepe bear, on the contrary, imagery which is massively repeated on other seals from the same center and region, in different combinations).³⁵ Among the

(Eisen 1940: 158)—a parallel to our image in several points at once; on another similar seal, the hero with a spear attacks a snake (Eisen 1940: No. 159); in yet another seal, the hero standing before the deity carries in his hand two captured snakes (Ward 1910: No. 823); Neo-Assyrian seals with a scene of archer and the *bašmu* serpent (horned and legless) (e.g., Frankfort 1939: Pl. XXXIV, g); several Sumerian-Akkadian images of the second half of the 3rd millennium BC (plaque, Green 1997: 155, fig. 13; print, Frankfort 1939: 72, ill. 27 = van Buren 1946: fig. 16 = Frankfort 1955: No. 497; print, Frankfort 1939: Pl. XXIII j = van Buren 1946: fig. 17 = Frankfort 1955: No. 478) where the hero fights a seven-headed hydra—possibly representations of the plot of the fight with the seven-headed snake *mušmahhu*; iconography of these scenes is quite stable, although the monster can be four-legged or legless (moreover, the parallelism of shape and bending of these hydras’ necks resembles the parallelism of shape and bending of the elements [necks/bodies] 16 and 20 at our seal impression. On one of these examples (Frankfort 1955: No. 497) the hero hits a legless hydra in the front part of one of the heads, similarly to our image. On another Sumerian-Akkadian seal of the 3rd millennium BC the hero holds in his hand a defeated three-headed snake (BM 123279 = Amiet 1961: Pl. 105, fig. 1389). For the relief from Malatya, see above, note 24.

³⁴ Frankfort 1934: 8–11, 22–24; Levy 1934: 49–50; Frankfort 1935: 105–108; Frankfort 1939: 71–72, 121–122; van Buren 1946: 18–20; Bisi 1964–1965; Orthmann 1975; Parayre 2003: 276, 294–295; Amiet 2006.

³⁵ Seals and sealings from Kültepe were published primarily in: Contenau 1922; Özgüç 1965, 1968, 2006; Özgüç and Tunca 2001; Teissier 1994. Seal impressions are also found on tablets, editions of which are catalogued in Michel 2003. This corpus covers just under two thousand seals (Palmisano 2018: 73 counts 1615 sealings found in the course of regular excavations) and is representative despite the fact that most of the approximately 23,500 tablets found at Kültepe remain unpublished, because many seal impressions were published prior to the publication of the tablets etc. containing them (Lassen 2014: 117).

Kültepe seals, despite the variety of plots, those with snakes or serpent-like creatures taking part in the scene are also quite rare. The main plots of such compositions (besides the aforementioned ones) are the eagle pecking the snake;³⁶ the Storm God capturing a snake in his hand;³⁷ a snake crawling on the ground;³⁸ snake as a space filler.³⁹ The sealing from the Pushkin Museum is thus rather unique for Kültepe, since it is not a snake that appears on it in the snake-struggling context, but a serpent-like monster, and its antagonist is an anthropomorphic figure, not an eagle.

It may seem paradoxical that within the great quantity of seals from Kültepe, no analogues can be found of this image (except for the ones of the most distant circle, *i.e.* where usual snakes figure as antagonists of the hero, and even these distant analogies from Kültepe are rare). It is also strange that the closest analogies belong for the most part to other times and regions of the Western Asia. However, this can be explained by two reasons: the extreme rarity of serpentine monsters' images that have come down from the Ancient Western Asia in general, and the unique particularities of the studied seal in the context of the Kültepe material, that only increases its interest.

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³⁶ Özgüç 1965: Pl. XXV, No. 76.

³⁷ Özgüç 1965: Pl. XI, No. 31.

³⁸ Özgüç 1965: Pl. XXI, No. 64.

³⁹ Özgüç 1965: pl. XVIII, No. 54; Pl. XXVI, No. 77.

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