

Exploring Unpublished Cylinder Seals Preserved in the Iraqi Museum from the Third Millennium BCE

Abbas Taha Abd Ali^(*)

Received Date: 25/1/2025

Revised Version: 27/4/2025

Accepted Date: 5/5/2025

Available Online: 1/6/2025

Abstract:

Cylinder seals are among the most important artifacts for studying the art of Mesopotamian civilization. They offer researchers and specialists a clear understanding of their themes, symbolic meanings, and the progression of artistic styles depicted in their sceneries over different historical periods. This study focuses on five unpublished cylinder seals, three of which date back to the Jemdet Nasr period (3000-2900 BC), a fourth seal from the Early Dynastic II period (2800-2600 BC), and the fifth and final seal from the beginning of the Akkadian period (2370-2154 BC). The study provides a technical description and analysis of the contents of these seals, as well as a comparison, with tables, photos, and drawings to support it.

Keywords: Seal, Cylinder seal, Third millennium BC, Exploring, Iraqi Museum.

^(*) Assistant Lecturer /University of Kufa / College of Archaeology

Email: abbast.alhadrawi@uokufa.edu.iq

ORCID: 0000-0002-0522-3356

دراسة أختام أسطوانية غير منشورة من الألف الثالث قبل الميلاد محفوظة في المتحف العراقي

عباس طه عبد علي(*)

تاريخ المراجعة: ٢٠٢٥/٤/٢٧

تاريخ التقديم: ٢٠٢٥/١/٢٥

تاريخ النشر الالكتروني: ٢٠٢٥/٦/١

تاريخ القبول: ٢٠٢٥/٥/٥

الملخص:

تُعد الأختام الأسطوانية واحدة من أهم المواضيع لدراسة الفن في حضارة بلاد الرافدين، إذ تعطي للباحثين والمختصين فكرة واضحة عن موضوعاتها ودلالاتها وتتبع تطور الأسلوب الفني في مشاهدتها عبر العصور المختلفة، وعني هذا البحث بدراسة خمسة أختام أسطوانية غير منشورة ثلاثة أختام منها تعود إلى عصر جمدة نصر (٣٠٠٠-٢٩٠٠ ق.م)، والختم الرابع من عصر فجر السلاوات الثاني (٢٨٠٠-٢٦٠٠ ق.م)، أما الختم الخامس والأخير فإنه يرجع إلى بداية العصر الأكدي (٢٣٧٠-٢١٥٤ ق.م)، إذ استعرض البحث وصفاً فنياً وتفسيراً لمضامين هذه الأختام ومقارنتها، وعززت الدراسة بالجدول والصور والرسوم. الكلمات المفتاحية: ختم ، ختم اسطواني، الالف الثالث قبل الميلاد، دراسة، المتحف العراقي.

(*) مدرس مساعد/ كلية الآثار/ جامعة الكوفة

The artistic styles of seals of study

The early stages of the precise engraving style appeared on the seals of the Jemdet Nasr period. Then, a new style began to approach reality in some of its seals. Artists used elements to fill the empty spaces and eliminate stagnation. The sceneries were influenced by the Uruk period, such as sceneries of endowing materials and artifacts to the temples. At the end of this period, artists moved towards lines and interwoven shapes⁽¹⁾The artistic style of executing the sceneries continued to produce themes of animal conflict in a crowded and interposing style. Among the most important scenes are the conflict and the protective hero, and the emergence of the idea of protecting domesticated animals from predators and other mythical and secular themes⁽²⁾

Another prominent scenery is the eye shaped, which was named so because of its resemblance of the human eye, which is an oval-shaped circle with a small line inside. This oval shape has one or more rows, sometimes separated by a decoration or tree. The cylindrical seals that carry these sceneries were found in different locations in Mesopotamia⁽³⁾. As for the geometric seal sceneries, excavators found many of these geometric decorations that cover the entire surface of the seal. Hence, when the seal is rolled on clay, it gives the image of a strip with various themes, including decorations with straight lines, curves, or overlapping or intersecting lines, broken lines, and sometimes perpendicular, wavy lines or other plant decorations⁽⁴⁾.

Moreover, seals from the Jemdet Nasr Period appeared with sceneries of animals in a continuous, uninterrupted march (procession) of a connected chain. Most of them were found in Diyala region, Jemdet Nasr Hill, Uruk, Ur, and Fara Kish. Some of the seal sceneries had animals engraved with deep, wide lines in a different style, such as a succession and some in a standing position. There, the space between the animals was filled with elements such as flowers, small trees, stars, etc. This is a reflection of the environment in Mesopotamia during this period, i.e. the dawn of civilization era⁽⁵⁾.

In the Early Dynastic Period, the elements were deeply carved showing details. Some sceneries were made in the oblique scraping style using a rotating disc to imprint particular sides of the drawings. The artist used other scraping and incising discs, such as the thin sharp edged disc with and the triangular edged disc, obtuse edged disc, to imprint some parts of the sceneries on the surface of the seal⁽⁶⁾. The cylinder seals of the Second Early Dynastic Period were known for their simple style and shallow, abstract carving (thin lines). The shapes were carved in an abridged and thin manner, without showing details of the bodies. As for

the seals of the Third Early Dynastic Period, they adopted a more elaborate and distinctive style, with deeply carved shapes. The artist moved towards highlighting the details of the human and animal shapes. Among the most prominent sceneries are those of conflict and worship ⁽⁷⁾. The artistic style of the sceneries of the Early Dynastic Period was deep carving to show the details. In the middle of this period, it moved towards shallow, oblique carving. In the last Early Dynastic Period, the sceneries became deeply carved in an elaborate style, with condensed engravings. Their shapes were harmonious, with their heads ending at the same level and the feet standing at one level without sectioning ⁽⁸⁾.

There are scenes of conflict between wild and tame animals dating back to ancient times up to the present day. The predatory animals are often signified by lions and the tigers attacking domesticated animals such as bulls, goats, deer, and so on. The artist was keen to distribute the elements in the scenery in the form of a pack of animals lined up next to each other, standing on their back legs, being generally of the same size, with the lion being larger in size. Sometimes the bodies are intersected with curved bodies. Some sceneries were depicted with four or more elements, and sometimes three sets with a main scenery interposed with a secondary scenery showing a shepherd protecting these animals ⁽⁹⁾.

* * * * *

See Figure (1):

Museum No.: Lesson ⁽¹⁰⁾

Stone: Light brown limestone.

Dimensions: Length: 15.37 mm, diameter: 12.17 mm, not holed longitudinally.

Scenery extension: 32.27 mm

Weight: 4.61 g.

Subject: Geometric decoration scenery.

Era: Jemdet Nasr.

Artistic style:

A cylinder seal featuring a geometric decoration scenery consisting of two rows with two oval-shaped lines, wide grooves at the top, repeated at the bottom, within which is a deeply engraved oval line, resembling an eye. This line meets the second row, and the same oval shape is repeated, with two lines at the top and bottom between them, forming the shape of eyes. This design closely resembles the eye-idols found in the Tell Brak Temple from the Uruk period ⁽¹¹⁾. The scenery does not have any symbols or space-filling elements. The seal is in good condition ⁽¹²⁾.

* * * * *

See Figure (2):

Museum No.: (245119) ⁽¹³⁾

Stone: Unbounded transparent green calcite.

Dimensions: Length: 22.53 mm, diameter: 16.45 mm, opening: 4.33 mm.

Scene extension: 46.69 mm

Weight: 11.93 g.

Subject: Geometric decoration scenery.

Era: Jemdet Nasr.

Artistic style:

A cylindrical seal featuring a geometric decoration scenery consisting of two vertical diamond-shaped rows separated by a deeply engraved oval line. On the right side, we see a shape representing two parallel lines, opposite each other on the left. These lines are repeated at the bottom, forming a vertical diamond shape with a straight line inside. On the left, the second row meets, and the same geometric shape is repeated, intersected by a deeply engraved oval line. The scenery is centered on a curved line at the top and bottom, resembling a crescent. These decorations meet as the seal is continuously rolled over the clay, forming a continuous decorative frieze. The space between the vertical diamonds is filled with a curved line resembling a crescent at the top and bottom. The seal is in good condition ⁽¹⁴⁾.

* * * * *

See Figure (3):

Museum No.: (245120) ⁽¹⁵⁾

Stone: Pink-white marble.

Dimensions: Length: 27.39 mm, diameter: 15.56 mm, hole opening: 4.03 mm.

Scene extension: 33.29 mm.

Weight: 15.16 g.

Subject: Natural scenery.

Era: Jemdet Nasr.

Artistic Style:

There is a cylinder seal bearing a natural scenery from the daily life of deer or perhaps a goat, eating from the branches of a tree while standing to the left. We can notice deer with a small head and small ears, large, curved horns that curve back, a long neck, a slightly plump body, its front legs close together, its back limbs slightly apart, and a short tail hanging downwards. It is eating from a small tree, and one of the tree branches intersects with its neck. In the middle of the scenery at the top are deep grooves that resemble a four-pointed star, most likely to fill the space. The seal scenery was executed in an abstract style with reduced features. The seal is in good condition. The oldest representation of a deer

on artistic products is that on flat seals from the Ubaid era from Arbajiya and Tepe Kura (4500 BC) ⁽¹⁶⁾.

See Figure (4):

Museum No.: (245240) ⁽¹⁷⁾.

Stone: Beige veined marble.

Dimensions: Length: 24.76 mm, diameter: 18.05 mm, hole opening: 4.25. scene extension: 51.41 mm

Weight: 15.37 g.

Subject: Conflict scenery.

Era: Early Dynastic II Period.

Artistic style

A cylinder seal depicting a scenery of a conflict between wild animals or predators and tamed animals. It consists of three sets of seven elements: three lions and three deer, with the hero protector between them. The scene is centered on the male protector, standing frontally, with his head to the side and his hair in wavy locks. He holds a deer horn in his left hand and the neck of another deer on his right in his right hand. He wears a short apron wrapped with a belt of three turns. In the first and second sets, on the right side, there are two lions crossing each other, standing on their hind limbs. The first has its head and body turned to the right, attacking a graceful deer standing on its hind legs, its front limbs directed upwards, and its head tilted backwards, trying to escape the grip of the lion that is trying to devour it.

The body of a second lion interposes with the body of the first lion, standing on its hind legs facing left, sideways, attacking the deer held by the protector to devour it. The third and final set is on the left, where we see a lion standing on its back legs, its body intersecting with the deer held by the protector by the neck. The engraving style developed in this era and became more flexible, using the entire surface of the seal. When the seal impression is rolled and continued, the tails of the deer touch each other ⁽¹⁸⁾. The appearance of intersecting bodies is a characteristic of this era and continued through the subsequent eras. They were used actually in the Akkadian era.

* * * * *

See Figure (5):

Museum No: (245270) ⁽¹⁹⁾.

Stone: White alabaster.

Dimensions: Length: 20.65 mm, diameter: 9.59 mm, hole opening: 4.33.

Scene extension: 30.65 mm.

Weight: 3.22 g.

Subject: Conflict scenery.

Era: Jemdet Nasr.

Artistic style:

A cylinder seal depicting a scene of predators fighting domestic animals. It consists of two sets of four elements: two lions and two gazelles. In the first set, we notice a lion attacking a gazelle, standing on its hind legs. The facial features are abstract and devoid of detail. The mouth is open, and the fur is composed of upward-raised tufts, indicating body movement. The long tail is raised upward. The lion holds the gazelle by the neck. The gazelle has a graceful body, a small, upward-raised tail, and stands on its hind legs, its forelimbs raised upward, attempting to escape the lion's attack. The neck is long, the head is small, and the horns are small and tilted backward. It has turned its head toward the mouth of the attacking lion. The scenery was made in a simple, abstract style, with no attention for details or features. The same scenery was repeated in the second set, with slight differences, facing left ⁽²⁰⁾. The seal is in poor condition, with cracks and breaks in the middle and sides, both at the top and bottom.

Conclusion:

1. The geometric sceneries are typical of the Jemdet Nasr period. They were widely used at the end of this period. The appearance of eye sceneries, along with sceneries from natural life, is a characteristic of this period.
2. The sceneries on cylinder seals from the Jemdet Nasr period were made in a basic (abstract) line style, with minimal features. Sharp-edged hole punches were used to create slanted lines to highlight the details of certain shapes, demonstrating the principle of filling space, as in Seal No. (3).
3. The use of variously colored marbles was prevalent. It was considered a precious and rare stone in the Mesopotamian environment, and the acquisition of these seals was reserved for individuals of high status.
4. This study included a group of cylinder seals of varying sizes and weights. The largest seal was Seal No. (4), the smallest was Seal No. (1). The longest scenery was (51.41 mm), the smallest (30.65 mm), the heaviest (15.16 g), and the smallest (3.22 g). In other words, they were made in different sizes and shapes depending on the subject. It is worth noting that this group is similar in the measurement of the longitudinal hole opening, indicating that they were made with a fixed and conventional size. However, Seal No. (1) was not holed longitudinally, suggesting that it was included in a formulation, that it is incomplete, or perhaps a forgery.

5. By tracing the artistic style of the seal sceneries in the study, it is clear that these themes appeared and were widely used during this period in Mesopotamia and neighboring countries in general, and in the cities and sites of Diyala, Tell Jemdet Nasr, Uruk, Ur, Fara, and Kish in particular.

6. The artist executed the human and animal elements in a condensed and intersecting manner in the bodies in Figure No. (4), and followed the abstract style in the sceneries of the study seals, and some sceneries took on a character of liveliness and vitality in (Figures: 4, 5).

Appendix

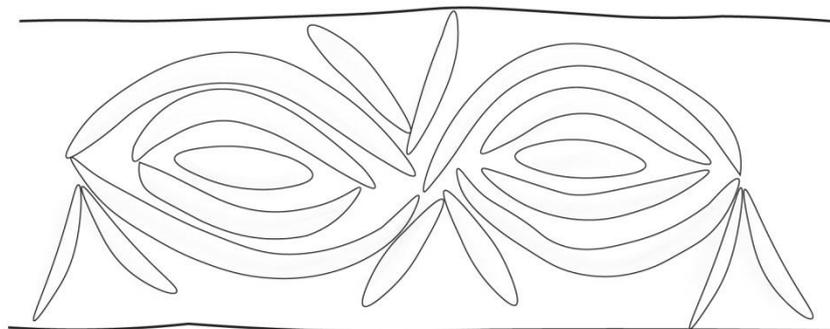
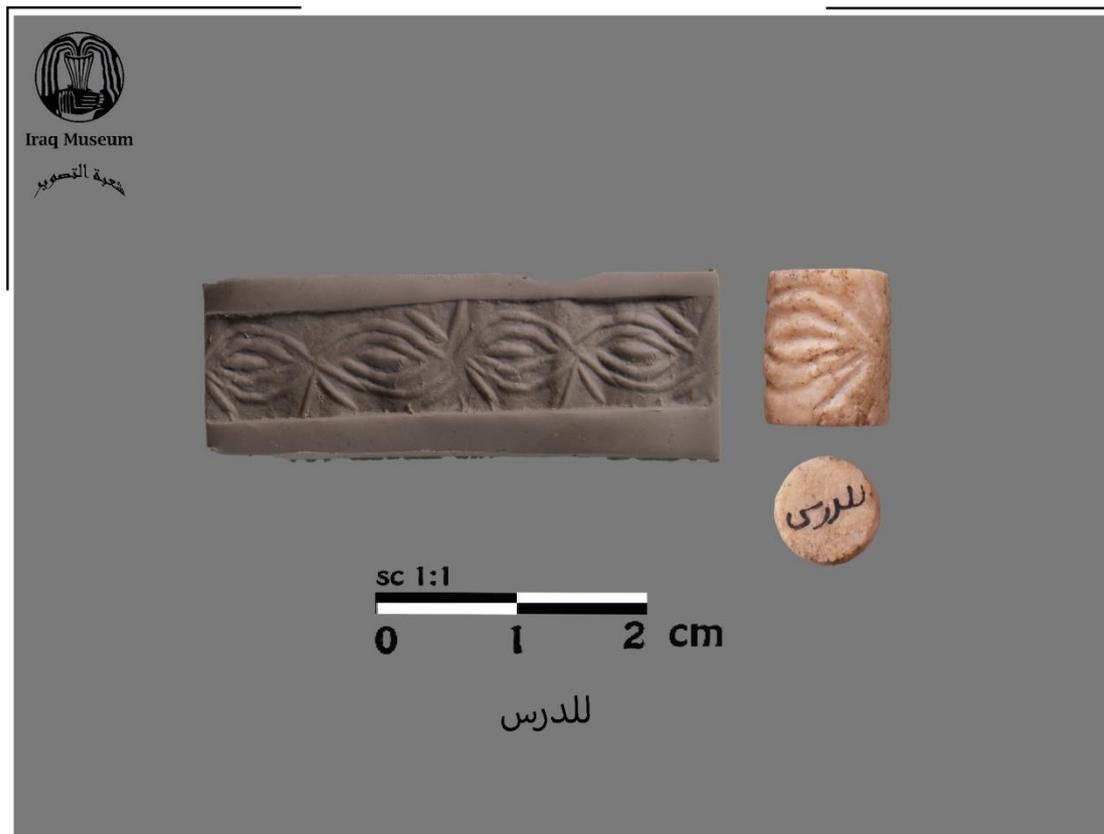
	Museum No.	Stone and color	Dimensions	weight	Era	Carving style	Belonging
1.		Light brown limestone	Length 15.37 mm Width 12.72 mm Lengthless unperforated Scene border 32.27 mm	٤.٦١ g	Jemdet Nasr Period	Deep carving, scraping, and notching	(Sources) Resolution (154) of 2023 Provision of public security for the Iraq Museum
2.		Unbounded transparent green calcite	Length 22.53 mm Diameter 16.45 mm Punch hole 4.33 mm Scene border 46.69 mm	١١.٩ g	Jemdet Nasr Period	Deep carving, scraping, and notching	(Purchase) Resolution (7) of 2023, Citizen Damir Salman Radam

Abbas Taha Abd Ali..... Exploring Unpublished Cylinder Seals Preserved in the Iraqi Museum from the Third Millennium BCE

3.	 <p>IM-245120</p>	Pink-white marble	<p>Length 27.39 mm Diameter 15.56 mm Punch hole 4.03 mm Scene border 33.29 mm</p>	10.1 g	Jemdet Nasr Period	Slant carving with notching	(Purchase) Resolution (7) of 2023, Citizen Damir Salman Radam
4.	 <p>IM-245240</p>	Beige veined marble	<p>Length 24.76 mm, Diameter 18.05 mm, Punch hole 4.25 mm Scene border 51.41 mm</p>	10.3 g	Early Dynastic II period	Deep carving, scraping, and notching	(Recovery) Resolution (104) of 2023, from the Office of the Presidency of the Republic, Iraq's Representation to the United Nations, New York

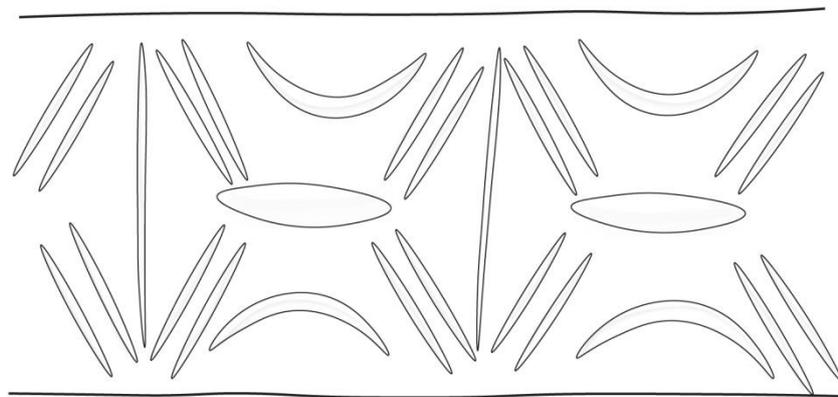
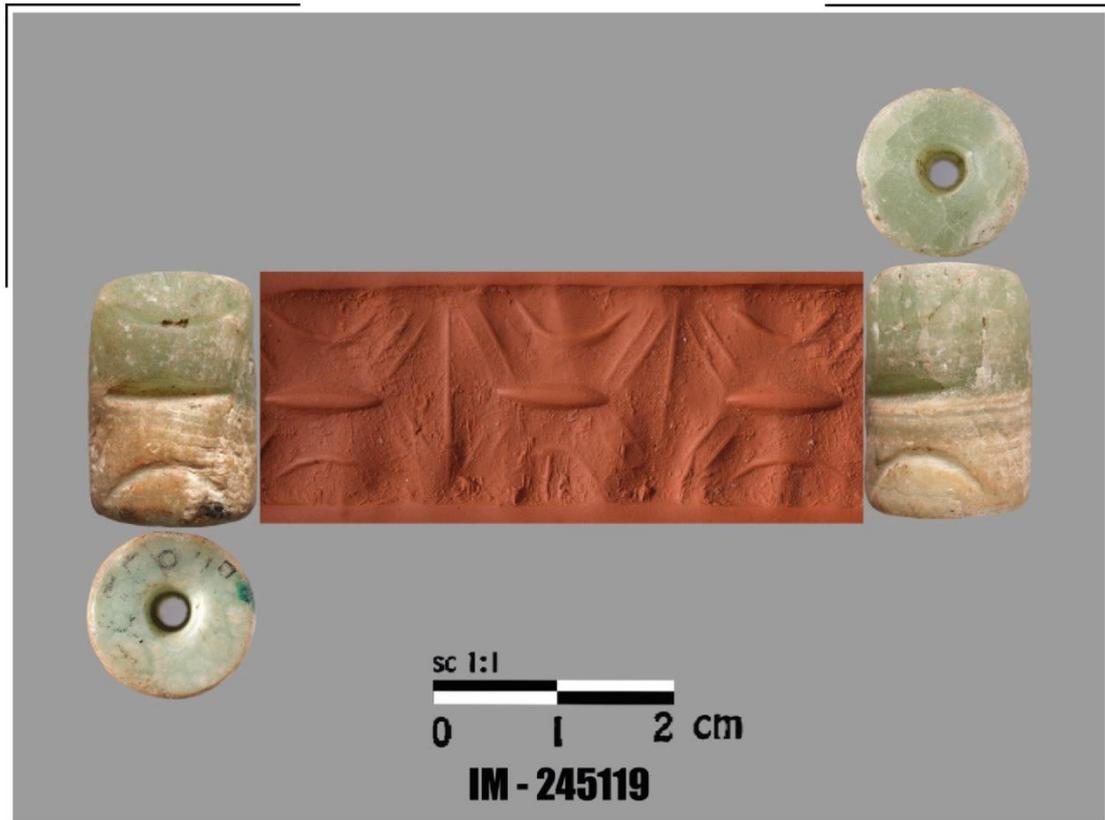
5. .		White alabaster	Length 20.65 mm, Diameter 9.59 mm, Punch hole 4.33 mm Scene border 30.65 mm	٣.٢٢ g	Akkadian period	Surface carving, scraping, and notching	(Sources) Resolution (87) of 2023 Provision of public security for the Iraq Museum
------	---	-----------------	---	--------	-----------------	---	--

Figures and Pictures Appendix
Figure (1)



رسم الباحث ببرنامج (A. Illustrator)

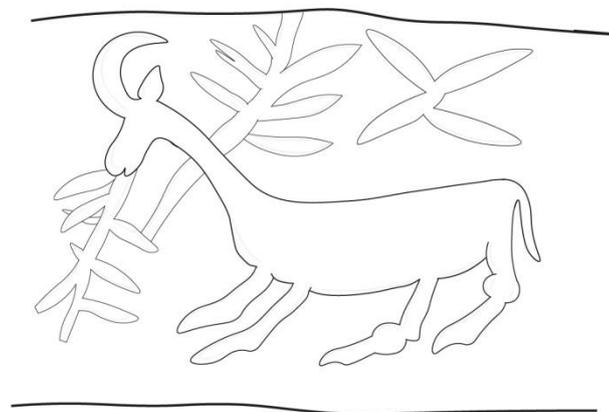
Figure (2) Researcher's drawing by A. Illustrator



رسم الباحث ببرنامج (A. Illustrator)

Researcher's drawing by A. Illustrator

Figure (3)



رسم الباحث ببرنامج (A. Illustrator)

Researcher's drawing by A. Illustrator

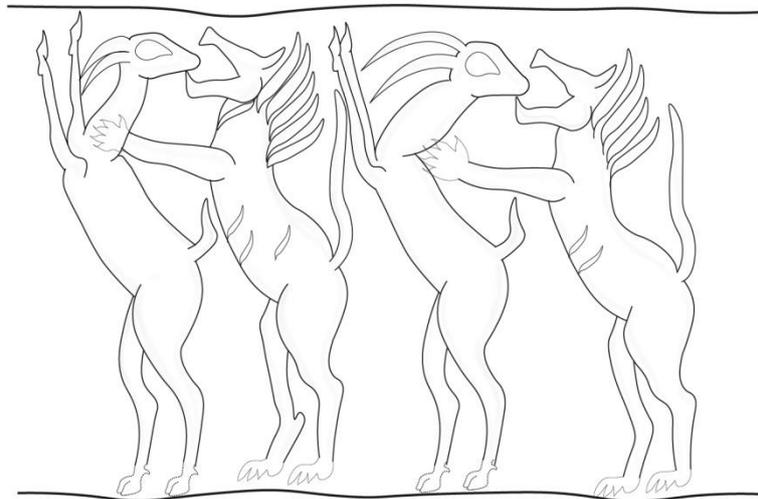
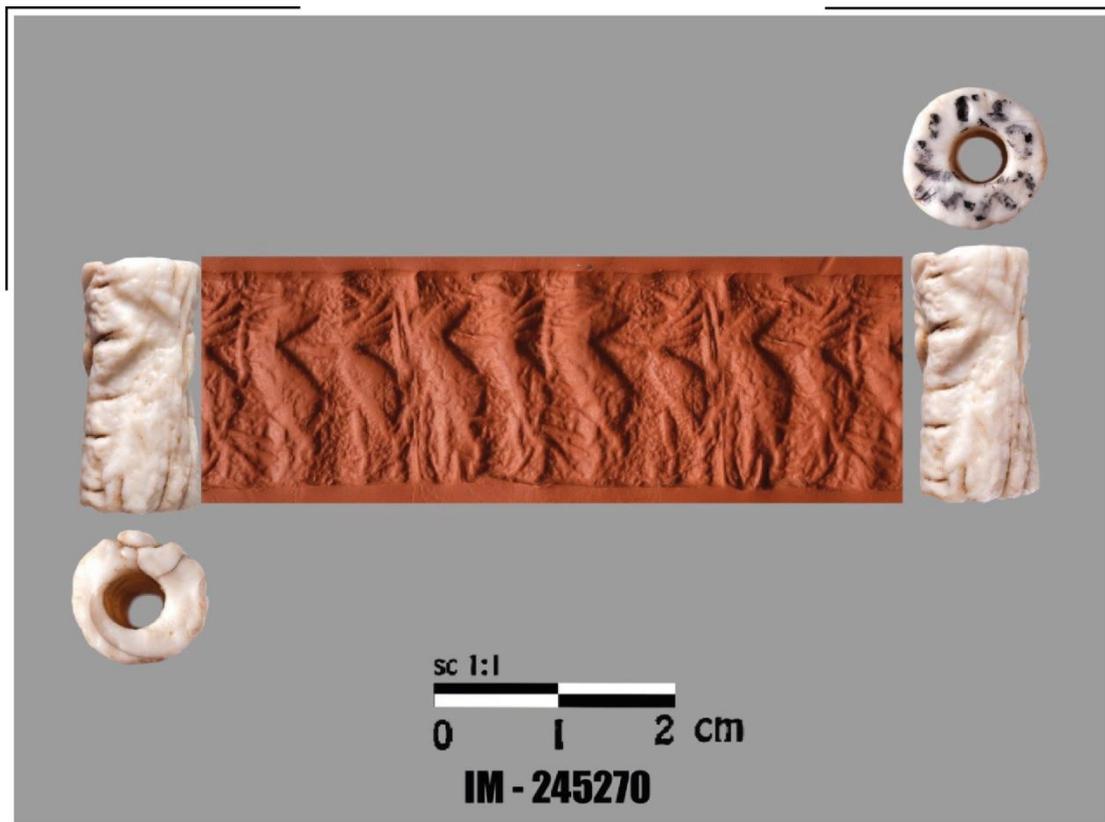
Figure (4):



رسم الباحث ببرنامج (A. Illustrator)

Researcher's drawing by A. Illustrator

Figure (5)



رسم الباحث برنامج (A. Illustrator)

Researcher's drawing by A. Illustrator

References:

- (1) Naji, Adel, Cylinder Seals Until the Early Dynastic Era, Civilization of Iraq, 1st ed., Dar Al-Hurriyah, Baghdad, 1985, vol. 4, p. 226.
- (2) *ibid*, pp. 227-228.
- (3) Basmaji, Faraj, Cylinder Seals in the Iraq Museum (Uruk and Jemdet Nasr), 1st ed., Nabu Publications, Baghdad, 1994, p. 93.
- (4) Basmaji, Faraj, Cylinder Seals in the Iraq Museum..., pp. 102-103.
- (5) *ibid*, pp. 85-87.
- (6) Al-Jawari, Mona Mahoud, Sceneries of Nature on Cylinder Seals in the Third Millennium BC (In Light of Published and Unpublished Cylinder Seals), Unpublished MA Thesis, College of Arts, University of Baghdad, 2017, pp. 34-35.
- (7) Al-Khuza'i, Hadeer Shamel, A Study of Cylinder Seals from the Third Millennium BC (Confiscated) Unpublished from the Iraq Museum, Unpublished Master's Thesis, College of Archaeology, University of Al-Qadisiyah, 2020, pp. 25-26.
- (8) Ibrahim, Hala Karim, Religious Themes in Cylinder Seals from the Uruk Period to the End of the Neo-Sumerian Period, Unpublished Master's Thesis, College of Arts, University of Baghdad, 2014, pp. 76-77.
- (9) Al-Ghanimi, Faten Mansour, Sceneries of the Conflict over Seals until the End of the Third Millennium BC, Unpublished Master's Thesis, College of Arts, University of Baghdad, 2012, p. 184.
- (10) The seal entered the Iraq Museum through (confiscation) by Resolution (154) of 2023. See: Table (T-1).
- (11) Teremy Black, Anthony Green, Gode, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia, Britain, 1992, p. 78, Fig. 62.
- (12) For a general comparison of the scenery, see:
 - Andé Parrot, Tello vniqt Campagnes de Fouilles (1877-1933), Paris, 1952, Planche, II, p. 33; H. Frankfort, Satified Cylinder Seals From The Diyala Region, Chicago, 1955, pp. 36, Fig. 376, p. 164; Stephanie Dalley, Sales From The Hutchinson Collection, Iraq, Vol. PL. xlix, Fig. 2.
- (13) The seal entered the Iraq Museum through (purchase) by Decree (7) of 2023. See: Table (T-2).
- (14) For a general comparison of the scenery, see:
 - Louis, D, Catalogue Des Cylinderes, Paris, 1920, p. 29, Planche 14, Fig. 11 (s. 35).
 - Al-Huri, Hayat Abd Ali, Seals from the Qadisiyyah Dam Basin, Sumer, Vol. 19, p. 20, Fig. (1).
 - Donald M. Matthews, The Early Glyptic of Tell Brak - Cylinder Seals of Third Millennium Syria, Van-denhoek, 1997, p. 281, Pl. XXXIII, Fig. 424. TNP.
 - Lambert, W. G., Ancient Near Eastern Seals in Birmingham Collections, Author, Iraq, Vol. 28, No. 1, Spring, 1966, p. 66, Pl. XIV, Fig. 4.
- (15) The seal entered the Iraq Museum through (purchase) by Resolution (7) of 2023. See Table (T-3).
- (16) For a general comparison of the scenery, see:
 - P.R.S. Moorey, O.R. Gurney, Ancient Near Eastern Cylinder Seals Acquired by the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford 1963-1973, Iraq, Vol. 40, No. 1, Spring, 1963, p. 44, PL. IV, Fig. 11.
 - William Peck, Mesopotamian Cylinder Seals, Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Art, Vol. 42, No. 4, Summer, 1963, p. 74, Fig. 1.
 - Frankfort.H, Stratified Cylinder Seals From the Diyala Region, Chicago, 1955, pp. 102-106-128, Pl. 5 Fig: 26; Pl. 7 Fig: 38.

(17) The seal entered the Iraq Museum through (recovery) Resolution (104) of 2023. See: Table (T-4).

(18) For a general comparison, see:

-Roswitha Del Fabbro, *The Craft of the Seal Engraver, Signs Before the Alphabet, Mesopotamia at the Origins of Writing*, Italy, 2017, p. 106, Fig: 53.

-Eva Moller, *Sylinder Seal From the Horniman Museum, London, Iraq*, Vol. 48, 1986, p. 65, Pl. XI, Fig: 1.

-Cyrus H. Gordon, *Western Asiatic Seals in the Walters Art Gallery, Iraq*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Spring, 1939, p. 8, Pl. 11, Fig. 7.

(19) The seal entered the Iraq Museum through confiscation by Decree No. (87) of 2023. See Table (T-5).

(20) For a general comparison, see:

-Collon, D, *Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum, Cylinder Seals II Akkadian-post Akkadian UR III-periods*, 1982, British, p. 47, Pl. VI, Fig. 37.

-Collon D, *First Impression Cylinder Seals in the Ancient Near East*, 1987, Chicago, p. 32, Pl. III, Fig. 97.

Bibliography of Arabic References:

- Al-Ghanimi, Faten Mansour, *Sceneries of the Conflict over Seals until the End of the Third Millennium BC, Unpublished Master's Thesis, College of Arts, University of Baghdad*, 2012.

- Al-Jawari, Mona Mahoud, *Sceneries of Nature on Cylinder Seals in the Third Millennium BC (In Light of Published and Unpublished Cylinder Seals)*, Unpublished MA Thesis, College of Arts, University of Baghdad, 2017.

- Al-Khuza'i, Hadeer Shamel, *A Study of Cylinder Seals from the Third Millennium BC (Confiscated) Unpublished from the Iraq Museum*, Unpublished Master's Thesis, College of Archaeology, University of Al-Qadisiyah, 2020.

- Basmaji, Faraj, *Cylinder Seals in the Iraq Museum (Uruk and Jemdet Nasr)*, 1st ed., Nabu Publications, Baghdad, 1994.

- Ibrahim, Hala Karim, *Religious Themes in Cylinder Seals from the Uruk Period to the End of the Neo-Sumerian Period*, Unpublished Master's Thesis, College of Arts, University of Baghdad, 2014.

- Naji, Adel, *Cylinder Seals Until the Early Dynastic Era, Civilization of Iraq*, 1st ed., Dar Al-Hurriyah, Baghdad, 1985, Vol. 4.