

## NOTES AND DISCUSSION

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### THE PHOENICIAN SEAL FROM MILETUS: AN EPIGRAPHIC NOTE

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*Abstract:* Anatolia provided several Phoenician inscriptions, and the best-known ones were found in Cilicia. Outside of Cilicia, Phoenician inscriptions are rare in this region. In 2018, Jan-Waalke Meyer published five seals from Miletus in Ionia. One of them represents a sphinx and bears a Phoenician inscription. Its paleography is typical of the second half of the eighth century and the beginning of the seventh century BCE. The iconography and inscription allow this artifact to be attributed to a Phoenician production. To this day, the Phoenician seal from Miletus carries both the oldest and the most northwestern of the Phoenician inscriptions unearthed on the Ionian coast.

*Keywords:* Phoenicians; Epigraphy; Miletus; Ionia; Glyptic.

#### 1. INTRODUCTORY NOTE

In 2018, Jan-Waalke Meyer published five seals from the excavations of the Aphrodite shrine in Miletus, directed by Volkmar von Graeve.<sup>1</sup> The first four were found in a bothros linked to the sanctuary. The last one was discovered on the surface. Among the seals discovered in the bothros, the first is a button seal bearing a geometric decoration, the second, shaped like a scarab, represents a winged sphinx with leonine traits and has an inscription, the third and fourth are also scarab-shaped seals and illustrate a well-known motif throughout the ancient Near East: an archer hunting a wild animal (ibex). The last seal, uncovered out of context, is hemispheric and represents two individuals around a plant element with, above it, a lyre. According to Jan-Waalke Meyer, the five seals probably come from northern Syria or southern Anatolia.<sup>2</sup>

Regarding the second seal, as the author notes, the proposed reading and translation are not satisfactory. Therefore, a new study of this seal and especially of its inscription is in order.<sup>3</sup>

#### 2. THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The inscribed seal was discovered in a bothros located in the sanctuary of Aphrodite in Miletus. According to the author, two phases exist: a first between 700 and 630 BCE, and a second in the sixth century.<sup>4</sup> Inside this bothros, an important cluster of material remains was unearthed (terracotta figures, labels, seals). All the objects found inside are related to the deity honoured in this sanctuary: the Greek goddess Aphrodite.

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1 Meyer 2018. I warmly thank Emile Puech, Director of Research Emeritus at the C.N.R.S., for alerting me to this publication.

2 For the historical exploitation of northwest semitic inscribed seals, see Sass – Uehlinger 1993.

3 I note here that I have not been able to access the object or better photographs. I will therefore repeat some observations from the *Editio princeps*.

4 Meyer 2018.



Fig. 1. Photography and drawing of the seal (Meyer 2018, p. 110).

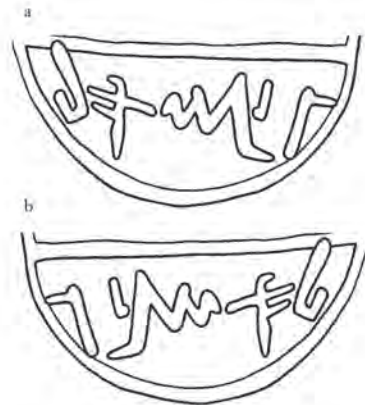


Fig. 2. Facsimile of Jan-Waalke Meyer (a) and reversed (b).

This rapid presentation of the context already allows for certain remarks. First, this closed context provides a *terminus ante quem* for the dating of this seal. As such, it is contemporary with or earlier than the sixth century. In addition, the nature of the context provides some information about this group of seals discovered. They were exhumed in a *bothros*, the cultic function of which is clear.

### 3. DESCRIPTION

The seal is characterized by a so-called scaraboid shape. Its dimensions are: 2.2 cm high, 1.5 cm wide and 0.8 cm thick. It seems to be rock crystal<sup>5</sup> surrounded by a silver wire. The flat side of the seal is divided into two registers separated by a line. The upper register, the most spacious, is dedicated to the representation of a winged animal on four legs passing from right to left and a vegetal element in front of its forelegs.<sup>6</sup> The body is elongated. The waist and legs are thin. The animal's bipartite wings are curved. The tail of the animal is raised, wrapped on itself ending in a large tuft of hair. Between its front legs, the sphinx appears to be wearing an apron, characteristic of the sphinxes of Egyptian art since the middle of the 18th Egyptian dynasty.<sup>7</sup> J.-W. Meyer proposed to perceive a red crown on the animal's head. However, if his drawing is correct, except for the supposed horn which is a break of the surface, it would be a double crown, formed of the red crown and the white crown: the white crown having the shape of a "nest".<sup>8</sup> It is interesting to note that this form of double crown is specifically present among the ivories from Arslan Tash.<sup>9</sup> The author proposes to identify the head of the animal as a lion's head, specifying that the state of preservation of the object does not ensure it. However, the mane visible around the neck seems corroborate his point.

5 It should be noted that Jan-Waalke Meyer advances the hypothesis of this material with a question mark. If this proves to be true, the low proportion of the use of rock crystal for the development of Phoenician registered seals will be emphasized. See in the various corpuses of Phoenician seals published: Herr 1978; Bordreuil 1986; Avigad – Sass 1997.

6 Jan-Waalke Meyer provides relevant parallels for the style and the iconography. For instance, he quotes Avigad – Sass 1997, n° 83, 168, etc.

7 Dessenne 1957, p. 96. I thank Karen Henderson, PhD student in Egyptology at Sorbonne University, for the information she was able to provide to me.

8 Goebis 2015, p. 7.

9 Fontan – Affanni 2018, p. 178-197.

Nonetheless, thanks to the elements presented here, it is possible to define this representation as typical of Phoenician art,<sup>10</sup> obviously influenced by Egyptian art. For instance, the proportions of the animal are characteristic of Egyptian influence in Phoenician art and easily differentiated from the Mesopotamian type.<sup>11</sup> In addition, the Lower Egyptian crown and apron are characteristic elements of Egyptian influence. Mythical Mesopotamian animals tend to wear a crown. They do not wear aprons. More generally, it is interesting to note the absence of “hit-titizing” elements, Syrian or Mesopotamian: curled hair, larger wings, a coarser and less thin body, etc.

The integration of this seal into the corpus of Phoenician art distinguishes it from the other seals unearthed in the *favissa*. Indeed, as the author notes, this seal seems to have a Phoenician origin while the other four published are identified with certainty as coming from South Anatolia or North Syria.

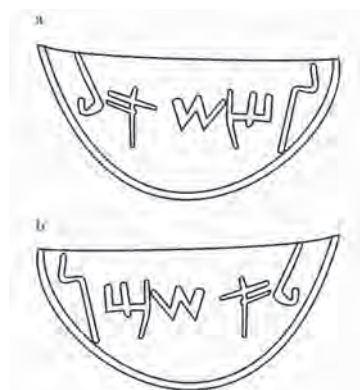


Fig. 3. Proposed facsimile (a) and inverse (b)

#### 4. THE INSCRIPTION

Jan-Waalke Meyer quickly realized that this was not a “pseudo-inscription”.<sup>12</sup> He recognizes a North-Semitic script. However, the author does not specify its regional or linguistic character: Phoenician, ancient Hebrew or ancient Aramaic. He identifies and counts four letters. His reading is: “L’ŠT”. He then provides several paleographic arguments to retain a dating between the ninth to the eighth centuries BCE. Jan-Waalke Meyer interprets the term “ŠT” as a possible hypocoristic form of the anthroponym ‘ŠB’L. Nevertheless, he insists on the difficulty of justifying such a proposal.

Our reading is different and is based on the following epigraphic observation: it is possible to identify five letters (fig. 3). The reading of the first two letters does not change. However, the shape of the *alef* presented here differs from the one presented by Meyer. One can notice a slight *apex* at the top of the central stem of the *alef*. This is most likely a crack that continues until the *lamed*. The third letter ought not be a *šadé*. Indeed, to our knowledge the *šadé* sign never has the shape of a W with, to its left, a long vertical stroke. This letter is probably best read as a *šhin*. Reading the next letter is more delicate because of the surface scratches but remains nonetheless possible. We propose the reading of a *mem*. The sign consists of three shafts and a horizontal line. The first stroke (formerly Jan-Waalke Meyer’s *šadé* shaft), a long vertical one, has an elbow in its lower part. The second one which is shorter, runs parallel with the first stroke. The third stroke is the shortest of all three and forms a right angle with the horizontal line. In the photograph provided in this article, we read, for the last letter, a *nun*, formed by a single sinuous line.

These observations provide the following reading: L’ŠMN, “For/To Eshmun”. This is the name of the deity Eshmun, preceded by the preposition L-, introducing the destination or proprietor of the sealed object.

Once reading and translation are admitted, it is necessary to study the paleographic characteristics in order to provide a chronological range. The base of the *lamed* is characterized by an almost rounded shape. This form can be seen in inscriptions dated from the end of the ninth century to the beginning of

10 Another Phoenician seal is mentioned in the note 97 of Hölbl 2007.

11 Ivories offer a relatively large number of representations of Syrian and Phoenician sphinxes. For more details, see Winter 2010, p. 187-224; Fontan – Affanni 2018, pp. 178-197.

12 Meyer 2018, pp. 110-111.

the seventh century.<sup>13</sup> It is very different from the typical *lamed* of the second half of the first millennium which displays a foot at an acute angle. The shape of the *alef* is marked by the absence of a junction between the two traits initially forming the horns of the ox. It is attested from the beginning of the eighth century in the Praeneste inscription and in many other inscriptions from the following centuries: however, it does not allow to date the inscription accurately with more precision. The *shin* is characteristic of the beginning of the first millennium. Indeed, its W form is found in the oldest Phoenician inscriptions until those of the eighth century. The *mem* distinguishes itself from the oldest *mem* attestations by its construction with several strokes. It appears under this form from the second half of the eighth century or the beginning of the seventh century.<sup>14</sup> The study of the *nun* does not allow to limit the inscription in chronological terms. Indeed, its form is barely changing. In the present state of our knowledge<sup>15</sup> and according to the consistency of these different dating proposals taken into account, the paleography of the inscription suggests dating the inscription between the second half of the eighth century and the beginning of the seventh century.

What is the meaning of this inscription? Is it a mention of the god Eshmun or is it a hypocoristic name? Two arguments can be developed to defend the second hypothesis. First, the inscription is engraved from left to right. This provides information on the practical destination of this seal. Indeed, P. Bordreuil notes that an inscription engraved in the order of reading may be indicative of a votive seal.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, it is unlikely that it is an ex-voto “to Eshmun”. Secondly, a parallel argues in favour of a hypocoristic name. It is a stela from Carthage mentioning a certain “MRT, son of PŠR, son of ṢMN”.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, the seal from Miletus could bear further witness to the existence of the personal name Eshmun.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

This inscribed seal is as of now fundamental to understand the Phoenician influence in the region. Its importance is manifest in two points: it is the oldest Phoenician inscription unearthed on the Ionian coast and yet another testimony of the prestige of Phoenician writing.

The archeological context provides significant clues for the status of this object, for it was indeed was unearthed together with several precious objects (statues representing deities, etc.). Consequently, this seal, like the other three, from this bothros, had a certain symbolic importance. The reasons of this symbolic importance are more difficult to identify. Can we imagine that the seal studied here with its iconography and Phoenician inscription has a particular prestige linked with its Phoenician character?

Phoenician contacts with southern Anatolia date back to the tenth century BCE.<sup>18</sup> They are relatively well attested by several Phoenician inscriptions.<sup>19</sup> The inscriptions unearthed on the eastern coast of Anatolia are much more recent and date mostly from the end of the Hellenistic period. However, an older Phoeni-

13 Inscription of Kilamuwa (KAI 24), of Karatepe (KAI 26) or of Seville. The seals' parallels are much more difficult to exploit because few seals bearing a Phoenician inscription have been unearthed. However, some of the proposals for dating in the Bordreuil, 1986 tend to confirm the presence of this form of *lamed* during the first half of the first millennium (see seal 2, for example).

14 For example, see the inscription Karatepe (KAI 26) and Malta (KAI 61).

15 From a methodological point of view, it is interesting to note that the paleographic parallels used come from inscriptions with various media and techniques.

16 Bordreuil 1986, p. 2.

17 CIS 5724.

18 Lehmann 2008 ; Lehman 2017.

19 Lipiński 2004, p. 109-143 ; Peckham 2014, p. 175-188 and 207-218; Richey 2019, p. 227.

cian presence is not unknown in this region. This is particularly the case of Rhodes, where it was possible to confirm the presence of a Phoenician community in the eighth century.<sup>20</sup>

However, as with many small objects, it is very likely that this seal travelled extensively before ending up in the *favissa* of Miletus. This is confirmed by the four other seals studied by Jan-Waalke Meyer, which are stylistically similar to the productions of southern Anatolia and northern Syria and therefore most likely come from this geographical area. Thus, the seal presented in this article could come from the same region or from the Phoenician kingdoms: it testifies to the relationship with the Syrian and Phoenician cultures.

The Phoenician inscription of the Miletus seal thus represents the oldest and most northwestern one of the Phoenician inscriptions unearthed on the Ionian coast, and could possibly constitute, despite the small size of the inscription, an important element to trace the contacts between the Phoenicians and this region.

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<sup>20</sup> Lipiński 2004, p. 146.