



## The Jalalabad Seal, A Reappraisal

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(283-297)

### Abstract

We re-discuss the so-called Jalalabad seal, a well-known cylinder seal dating of the late 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC, reportedly found in Fars. It displays a scene related to a south-eastern Iranian religious or mythological iconography, showing a male supernatural character with snakes spreading out of his body, probably a divinity, and three women bowed for worship or submission in front of him. This scene is combined with an Indus Script signs sequence which connects this seal to a ‘family’ of short, equally well-known inscriptions in Indus signs recorded on ‘Persian Gulf’ round stamp seals, notably coming from Bahrain, ancient Dilmun, and southern Mesopotamia. The present discussion is based on a new, more detailed recording of the seal's intriguing iconography, and it brings another brick in the already imposing wall of the of acculturation and cosmopolitanism phenomena attested in the Persian Gulf during the second half of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC. At that time, Mesopotamian, Dilmunite, Maganite (Oman), Meluhhan (Indus) and Marhashean (Halil Rud) traders were interacting along the then main Near Eastern commercial highway, and a pervasive process of cultural hybridization was in full development. A review of the various Indus iconographic elements currently known in Iranian glyptic is finally proposed, trying to reconstitute for each of them their respective historical implications.

**Keywords** :Jalalabad cylinder seal, Jiroft, Halil Rud pantheon, Indus inscriptions, ‘Persian Gulf’ stamp seals.

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### **1. Introduction**

Previously defined as "a complex case of artistic syncretism" and "expression of the cultural interactions between the regions of eastern Iran and the easternmost provinces, rather than an evidence of trade contacts among Bactria, the Indus Valley, Sistan, Baluchistan and Trans-Elam/Marhashi" (Ascalone 2003), the Jalalabad seal still provides one of the most important evidences of cultural and commercial interactions between south-eastern Iran and the western Indus frontiers (Figs. 1 and 2: NMI 2698, Ascalone 2003: fig. 5; 2008; 2010: figs. 24-25; 2011: n. 6B, 388-390, Tav. LXV; on the context of provenience, see Chakrabarti & Moghadam 1977). However, its complex and unusual iconography is not completely understood yet based on the images of the artefact made available so far, in spite of their good quality.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the published sketchy drawings of the modern impression combined with the apparently bad conservation state of the cylinder's surfaces, further blur its interpretation. Thus, we decided to digitally re-draw the impression in Fig. 1 at the maximum possible magnification, obtaining the drawing in Fig. 2.

### **2. Base material, description and typological notes**

Ascalone (2008: 255) wrote that the seal was made from a green stone, possibly serpentinite, but looking at the way the surface is damaged, the impression is that it bears remnants of the glazed layer distinguishing – like in the Indus and Dilmunite seals – steatite objects fired at high temperatures, presumably after a chemical interaction with applied alkaline substances. At any rate, in absence of analytical data, if a talcose rock remains quite probable, the question remains open. The same author (2008: 255) compares the peculiar form of the cylinder seal with others found in southern Central Asia (Akra, Taip-depe, and probably Sistan). As other examples were discovered at Sibri, not far from Mehrgarh, Pakistan (Shah and Parpola 1991: 412, cat. no. Sb-2 and 413, cat. no. Sb-3), it seems mandatory to ascribe this type of cylinder to a wide sphere of interaction embracing the mid Oxus valley, the northern stretches of Baluchistan, and the central-eastern hinterland of the Iranian Plateau (on the existence of such phenomenon, see also Vidale 2018; Frenez 2018: 16-17). As we shall show below, the Indus characters further expand this network of links to the shores of the Persian Gulf.

### **3. Iconography**

The round base of the cylinder opposed to the handle is relatively well preserved and shows the head in profile of a bearded male individual (Fig. 1,1). The carving is of outstanding quality and gives the impression that it was meant to identify a precise imaginary or real character. Hair and beard seem to be carved with continuous traits that follow the contour of the face. The profile, particularly for the rendering of the beard, may be perhaps compared with those of human headed bulls fighting a hero in a cylinder seal found by S. Salvatori on the surface of site 1220 in the Murghab

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<sup>4</sup> We are very grateful to Enrico Ascalone for providing the images we re-arranged in Fig. 1 and made possible the drawing in Fig. 2.

delta, Turkmenistan.<sup>5</sup> The hair dress is completed on the front by what could be a crown, a fillet, or a horizontal braid.

While the eye, nose and chin are worn and scarcely legible, the ear, lips and orbital arcs, deeply carved with simple lines, are perfectly recognizable and assist the eye to immediately perceive the image. Left of the profile, one sees a less preserved, more problematic element consisting of an elongated, perhaps winding feature, which might have been entirely covered with oblique segments. It is not to be excluded (but far from certain) that it represented a snake, a hypothesis that, at least, would match with the characterization of the main figure carved on the cylinder. On the other hand, this feature might also recall a kind of braid visible on rear of the head, also shown in profile, of a hybrid creature carved on a white stone stamp seal from Tepe Yahya IVB (Pittman 2001: Fig. 10.57). The question remains an open one.

As remarked by previous scholars, the main personage on the Jalalabad seal (Fig. 2,2) is an imposing supernatural anthropomorphic entity, shown frontally, who wears a long gown covered with sequences of vertical traits, changing into or emitting a terrifying group of snakes or dragons. There are no obvious indications of gender, but the gown and bared chest, as opposed to the entire dress of the other personages, hint to a male entity. Moreover, in the art of 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC south-eastern Iran, the supernatural personage who grabs snakes, or generates them from the back, sometimes bearing a bull head cap, is consistently male.<sup>6</sup>

Two of the reptiles, the most prominent, are symmetric transformations of his arms, and turn back to open their fangs towards the head of the figure. Below, one sees what is left of four superimposed snakes on the left, and as many on the right – probably imagined as springing from the back, which bring the number of the creatures thus generated at least to ten (further below, to the right, there are other poorly preserved carvings or cracks of more difficult interpretation). The head of this entity, seen in profile, is badly damaged and little can be said about it. Its setting on the torso, however, seems eccentric, possibly due to the original existence a poorly preserved feature immediately to the left, which might have been a bird (but this remains highly speculative).

A row of three other personages (Fig. 2,3), bowing in respect or worship of this monster epiphany, in contrast, are most likely females. Although the surviving details are not fully clear, the dress of these three personages was probably rendered with the fine lozenges that often qualify the robe as made with the *kaunakes* so frequent in the art of the Oxus or BMAC civilization (Vidale 2017: 98-166). The first one from right lets loose her long hair down to the ground, in a very explicit gesture of submission that, as far as we know, has no comparisons in the iconographic repertoires of the ancient Near East and Middle Asia. In front of the second and behind the third figure, two stylized ‘tulip’-like objects with three upper projections, or perhaps pomegranates, are possibly represented as offerings. Above the back of the central bending figure there is a well preserved eight-rays star.

Problems, however, affect the interpretation of the last and third (from the right) personage of the row (Fig. 2,5). Previous interpreters seem to have considered the last

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<sup>5</sup> Salvatori 2008; Pittman 2014, 2020. For the former, the engravings are a Margianan stylistic translation of an Akkadian seal, while for Pittman, in contrast, the style links the seal to craft workshops of the Halil Rud valley.

<sup>6</sup> Contra Winkelmann 2000, who rather sees this supernatural character as an enthroned goddess.

image at left as a single standing personage in frontal view with open arms. In contrast, we propose that the torso with open arms belonged to an unfinished carving which pre-existed that of the three bowing women. This would also explain why this anthropomorphic standing element has no head (its place seems to be covered by the right leg of the last Indus 'man' sign of the inscription above). Unfortunately, details are not clear, and at present it is not possible to substantiate our hypothesis, from which the graphic reconstruction in Fig. 2 is inspired.

The divine character represented in the Jalalabad seal is to be related to the male divinity sitting on a chair/throne with snakes emanating from shoulders preserved on two other seals (in the Foroughi collection and in the Louvre/formerly in the Bailey collection) and the kneeling masculine character with snakes emanating from his arms and a bull head from his head (and 'tulips') in the Rosen seal<sup>7</sup>. The three bending women in the Jalalabad seal could be compared to the three standing ones in front of the god in the Bailey collection seal, while a bird (maybe on the shoulder of the god in the Jalalabad seal), a lute (played or not) and tulips seem to be regularly associated to this divinity.

### 3. The Indus Inscription

The inscription (Fig. 3) includes a number of Indus Script signs that may range from three to five. Unfortunately, cracks and flaking do not allow to properly discriminate individual signs from composite signs or ligatures, which are typical of the still undeciphered Indus Script (for an overview of the Indus Script, see Parpola 1994a; Wells 2015). A precise interpretation of the Indus signs engraved on the Jalalabad seal is further complicated by the high occurrence of singletons as initial signs of Indus inscriptions (Wells 2015: 33).

Reading from right to left, which was the largely prevalent direction (more than 80% of the total cases) in the Indus corpus (Parpola 1994a; Ashraf & Sinha 2018), the initial sign is largely effaced and hardly recognizable. It somehow resembles the so-called 'fringed V' sign (Parpola's 1994: 76, fig. 5.1, signs group #311; or Wells 2015: 21, fig. 2.6, sign #740), which usually ends the Indus inscriptions in the left terminal position. If so, the direction of the inscription would be from left to right, therefore resulting relatively anomalous. However, as B.K. Wells (2015: 124-125, tab. AII.3) clearly demonstrated, even minor graphic variants of this sign (#312 / #741 rather than #311 / #740) resulted in different preferred positions within the signs string.

The second sign from the right, featuring two long vertical strokes, could likely be Parpola's #148 / Wells' #32. This sign is quite frequent in the Indus corpus and on seals it usually occurs in middle positions.

The third sign from the right seems a variant of Parpola's #13 / Wells #90, the so-called 'man' sign. This sign presents a great number of variants and ligatures with other Indus signs. Thus, if combined with the preceding long vertical strokes, they may form a single sign similar to Parpola's #33 / Wells' #142 but with two strokes, or even to Parpola's #41 / Wells' #111. Unfortunately, cracks and flaking do not allow to reliably interpret some short strokes in the lower part of the sign as active components of the inscription or surface damages.

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<sup>7</sup> For the Foroughi, Louvre/(Bailey) and Rosen seals, see respectively Amiet 1986, fig. 132 no. 10 and 12 and Porada 1988, pl. 1.

The last section of the inscription is badly eroded but the remaining parts of one or two Indus signs, respectively three short vertical strokes and a man, suggest the possible occurrence of the low frequency composed sign Parpola's #42 / Wells' 112, or a variant of Parpola's #31 / Wells' 145 with three short vertical strokes only. Alternatively, the 'man' sign Parpola's #13 / Wells' #90 may be a separated sign from the three short vertical strokes of Parpola's #130 / Wells' #3.

Despite some uncertainty in the reading of a few signs, the most evident and undeniable feature of the inscription is the co-occurrence of different variants of the 'man' signs. In this light, according to S.T. Laursen (2010: 117-118, cf. Parpola 1994b and Vidale 2004: 265; 2005: 156-157):

Asko Parpola made a small, but important comment on the significant fact that whereas 'twins' signs...begin inscriptions in a mere three texts in the Indus Valley, they do this in as many as four inscriptions in the Near East... Parpola's observations were later elaborated upon by Vidale who argued that the general abundance of variants of the 'twins' and 'man' related signs in the western seals may well testify to the presence of patronymic components in these inscriptions. Vidale has demonstrated the relative high frequency of these signs in the inscriptions previously found to be non-Harappan by Parpola.

The fact is that, from a strict epigraphic viewpoint, the sequence of Indus Script signs on the Jalalabad seal NMI 2698 could well belong to the Bahrain group of Persian Gulf round seals inscriptions, as compiled in Laursen 2010 and 2020 (Fig. 4). The inscription, for the same characters, also recalls that of the so-called McMahon fragment of a steatite cylinder seal, BM 1960,0718.1.1 belonging to a group of "Nine seals and four beads collected in Seistan and Swat by General Sir Henry McMahon and presented by his grand-daughter Mrs Evans-Gordon".<sup>8</sup> A provenience from Sistan, of course, is more probable than that from Swat.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. Conclusions

Studies by Holly Pittman, the authors and other scholars, at present, attempt at analytically defining the iconographic identities of the presumed deities which appear on the Jiroft (Marhašean?) corpus of carved chlorite artefacts, as well as on the glyptic records of the Kermani and Halil Rud areas. Another important source of information lies in a group of copper and even silver statuettes, presumably coming from illegal excavations, whose stylistic features recall more or less closely the Halil Rud or Jiroft collections. These artworks, in general, unfortunately have no context and are not accessible to scientific exams, so that their value, at present, is limited. In a broad sense, the statuette of a woman character carrying a jar found at Shahr-i Sokhta (Tosi 1983) might belong to the same production; as well as another statuette (a female personage strangling a snake rolled around her waist) recently confiscated in the Jiroft area and studied together with Nasir Eskandari and other colleagues (Eskandari *et al.* 2021).

Undeniably, the various iconographic spheres, at least at present, do not overlap or match easily. The main areas of uncertainty are the various hybrid figures which

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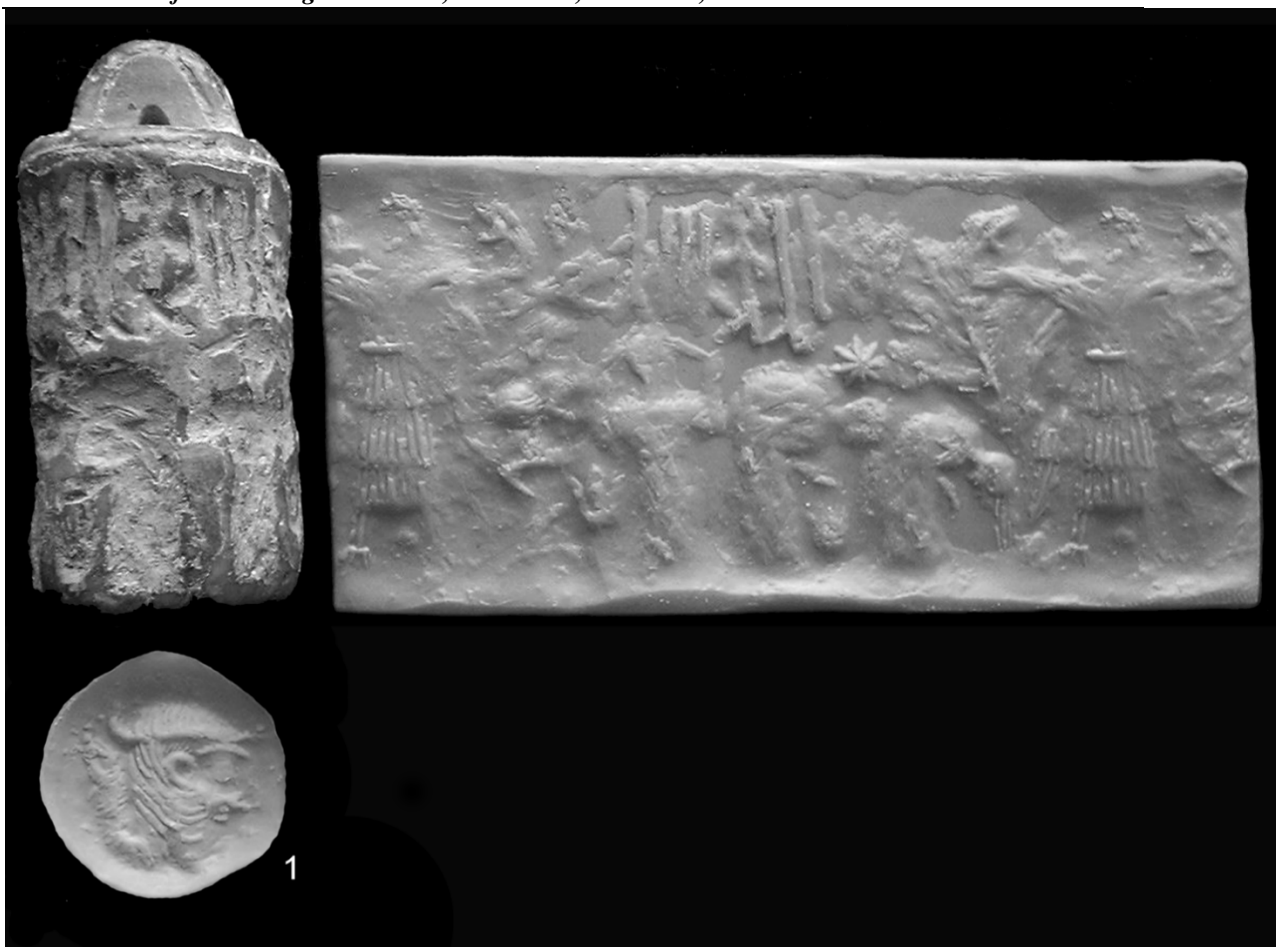
<sup>8</sup> From the site [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A\\_1960-0718-1-1](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1960-0718-1-1). The seal (Knox 1984) is currently on exhibit at the British Museum.

<sup>9</sup> The question also involves a third, well known cylinder belonging to the le Clercq collection (le Clercq and Menant 2018: cat. n. 26), without inscription but carved with coherent Indus images and style, while the two registers and some details (in first place the horned snakes aside the main personage) indicate a south-eastern Iranian milieu.

appear on the chlorite objects (the bovine/human/lion/raptor bird hybrids), their relationships with less preserved and much smaller images on seals and seal impressions, where the animal reference may be rather expressed by objects/icons appearing on the heads (scorpion, bull's horns, bird) and, above all, the changing relationships between male identities and snakes. How far, in fact, the reptiles emerging from shoulders and those grabbed in heralding postures belong to similar or related ideological projections? All this requires further published information and a much wider discussion. The focus of this paper is on the seal itself and its meaning in the framework of the relationships between the early urban worlds of the Iranian Plateau, the Indus valley and possibly, as we have seen, with the Persian Gulf.

Figure 5 summarizes the information about nine seals and one seal impression found in the Iranian Plateau or along its edge which show epigraphic or iconographic elements of Indus origin. This short list starts from the discovery of three Harappan seals in southern Turkmenistan in Oxus/BMAC contexts (1.-3.) to hybrid products or personal documents that attest quite different forms of socio-economic interactions between individuals linked to the Indus world and local communities of the Iranian Plateau and the Persian Gulf. The choices made by these persons while applying for accreditation in foreign lands range from the formal translation of crucial icons through local materials and manufacturing techniques (4.-9.) - with various degrees of contamination - to the adoption of the Indus writing signs to express names, qualification or roles and beliefs of other communities and cultures.

While the apparent religious meaning of the le Clerq cylinder summarizes in a local style multiple references to a wider and apparently original Indus ideological scenario, the Jalalabad seal shows the impressive cult scene of a local deity, adding written information that linked the owner to the Indus craft interests of the Persian Gulf. The possible historical implications are quite variable and stress the highly dynamical and opportunistic nature of the individual 'careers' and the relative commercial networks extending westwards of the Indus valley communities of interest.



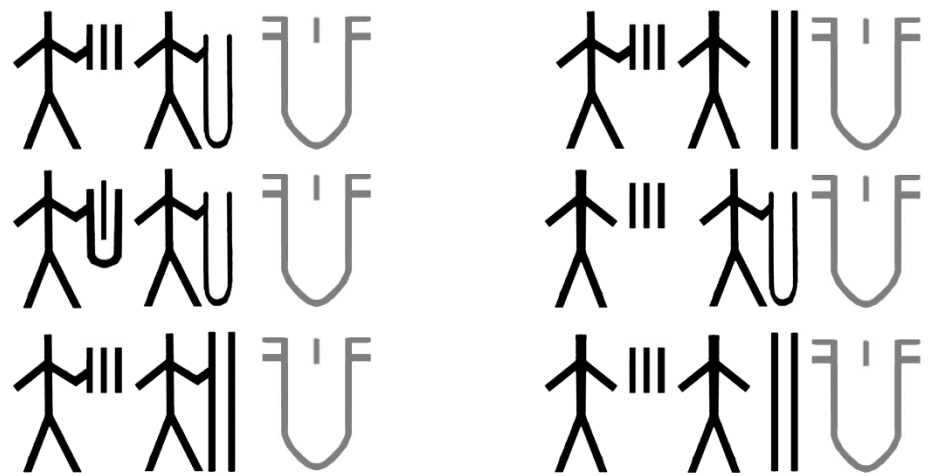
**Figure 1.** The Jalalabad seal and its modern impressions (originals kindly provided by E. Ascalone).



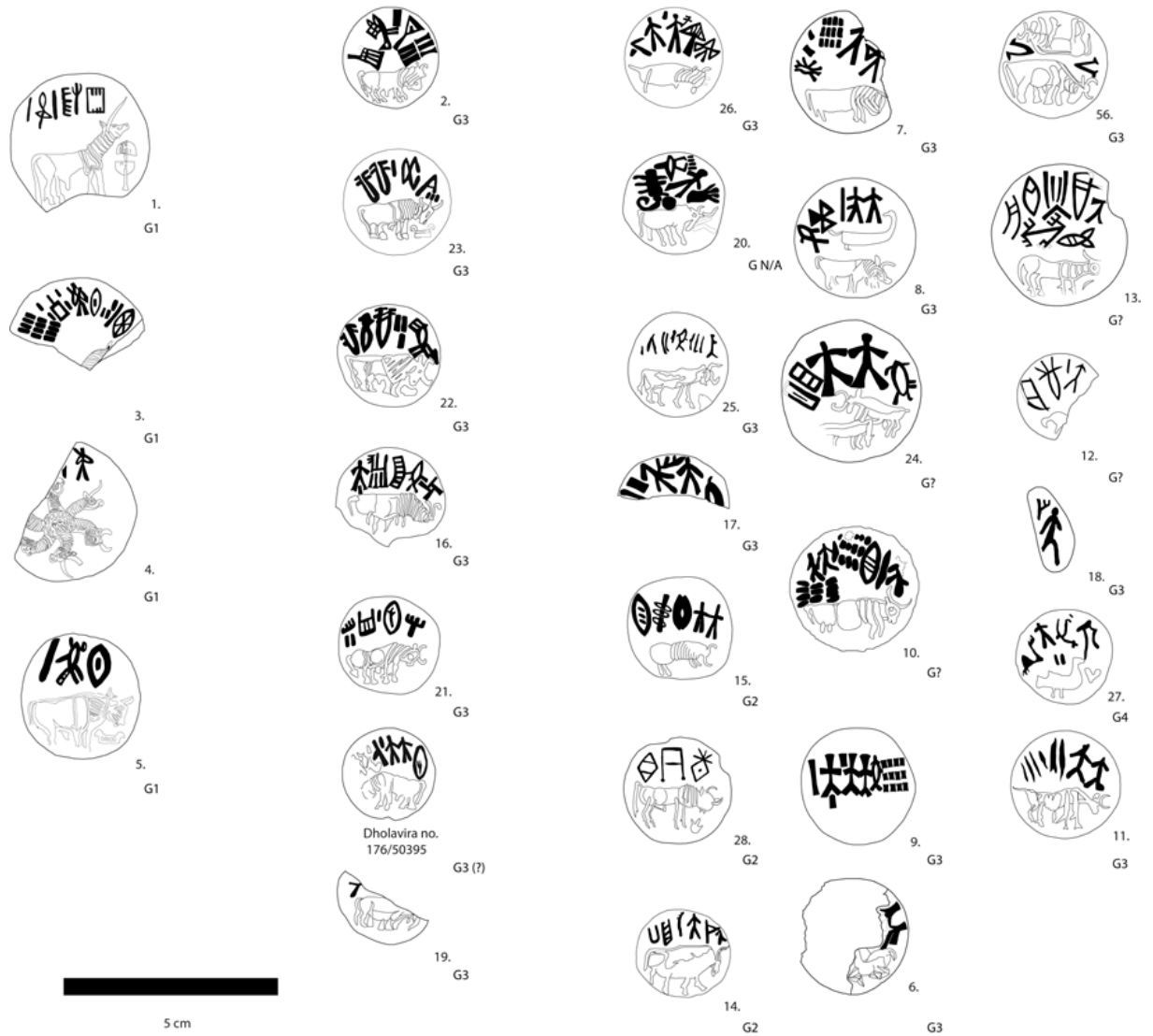
**Figure 2.** Graphic interpretation of the iconography of the Jalalabad seal, digitally retraced after the modern imprint of Figure 1. The various elements (1 to 6) are separately discussed in the text.



Parpola (1994)	#130	#148	#13	#41	#42	#33*	#31*	#312
Wells (2015)	#3	#32	#90	#111	#112	#142*	#145*	#741



**Figure 3. List of Indus Script signs mentioned in the text (\*variant) and possible alternative readings of the inscription on the Jalalabad seal including respectively three, four and five different signs. The sign in grey is uncertain.**



**Figure 4. Note the apparent similarity of some inscriptions of the 2. and 3. generations' Persian Gulf seals, mostly from Bahrain, with the 'man' and 'twins' transformations, accompanied with vertical strokes, to that of the Jalalabad seal (from Laursen 2020). Nr. 28, of course, bears the Linear Elamite inscription V.**

**Table 1. Information and comments on seals and one sealing (4., from Tepe Yahya) with Indus-related features found in the eastern Iranian Plateau. The Omani Indus-related settlements are not included. \*: as hypothesized long ago in Ashtana 1979, 1993.**

Material	Provenience and description	Reference	Interactive aspects and historical implications
1. Fired steatite	Gonur: square stamp seal with Harappan inscription and elephant	Bakry 2016, Fig. 10	Seal imported from the Indus, local activity of Indus merchants
2. Fired steatite	Altyn Depe: square stamp seal with two Indus signs	Bakry 2016, Fig. 8	Seal imported from the Indus, local activity of Indus merchants
3. Fired steatite	Altyn Depe: square stamp seal with swastika	Bakry 2016, Fig. 8	Seal imported from the Indus, local activity of Indus merchants
4. Pottery	Tepe Yahya: imprint of an Indus seal on a sherd, with a transformed 'man' sign	Pittman 2001, Fig. 10.63	Import of the pot? Local activity of Indus craftsmen or merchants?
5. White marble	Konar Sandal South: hybrid cylinder seal made with local techniques, with transformed Harappan animal icons (zebu, buffalo, unicorn and others)	Vidale and Frenez 2015	Activity of an Indus-related family in Kerani copper trade?*
6. Copper	Konar Sandal South: hybrid (?) stamp seal with antelope, crocodile and dots (these latter unusual in Indus specimens)	Madjidzadeh and Pittman 2008, Fig. 28, and b	Similar seals circulated in the Persian Gulf. Activity of an Indus-related craft family?
7. White stone (marble?)	Provenience unknown, Ligabue collection. An Indus-like bovid stands above an object with three projections, perhaps a pomegranate (?). This object substitutes a manger. The animal is surmounted by a Linear Elamite inscription of three signs (V)	Caubet 2018, 50	Made with local techniques, with a transformed Harappan animal icon (gaur) and a name perhaps written in a local language
8. Stone (steatite?)	Unknown provenience. Hybrid cylinder seal, with two-registers: one with an enthroned Harappan deity among horned snakes and a hero fighting tigers; the other with bulls, rhino, markhor and eagle. Style and structure are south-eastern Iranian, the icons largely Harappan	Winkelmann 2020: Fig. 13 (from the le Clerque collection, Paris)	Perhaps made in south-eastern Iran for Indus residents by an immigrant craftsman, or by a local craftsman accustomed to Indus models
9. Fired steatite	Perhaps found in Sistan. The iconography is lost. The Indus inscription contains 'man' signs and vertical strokes. The removal of the upper part of the seal, perhaps with icons, might have been intentional	Knox 1984	The signs of the inscription point to Bahrain and the Persian Gulf
10. Fired steatite?	Fars, Jalalabad? The type of seal is common in the Oxus/BMAC areas. Scene of worship of a southern-Iranian deity by three women. Iconography and style are local, the inscription is in Indus signs but possibly expresses a language spoken in the Persian Gulf	Chakrabarti and Moghadam 1977, Ascalone 2008, this article	Made and used in the context of the trade interaction between Persian Gulf traders in Bahrain and inland settlements, by Indus-related traders or acting with Indus investments

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### چکیده

در این مقاله، مهر شناخته شده "جلال آباد" که از منطقه فارس پیدا شده است مورد بررسی قرار گرفته است. این مهر استوانه‌ای مربوط به اواخر هزاره سوم پ.م است و تصویری مذهبی یا اسطوره‌شناختی از جنوب شرق ایران را به نمایش می‌گذارد. شمایل نگاری آن، مردی با قدرتی فراطبیعی، احتمالاً خدا، را نشان می‌دهد که مارهایی از بدن آن بیرون زده و سه زن به حالت پرستش در مقابل آن تعظیم کرده‌اند. این مهر همچنین ترتیبی از علائم نوشتاری تمدن سند را به نمایش می‌گذارد که آن را به گروهی از علائم نوشتاری تمدن سند مرتبط می‌کند که بر روی مهرهای مسطح "خلیج فارس" که از بحرین، دیلمون باستان و جنوب بین النهرین بدست آمده اند دیده می‌شوند. بحث این مقاله بر اساس یک شمایل نگاری جدید و دقیق از این مهر است که اجرای بر روی دیوار پدیده فرهنگ‌پذیری و جهانشمولی است که در نیمه دوم هزاره سوم پ.م در خلیج فارس وجود داشته است. یعنی زمانی که تجار بین النهرینی، دیلمونی، مگنی (عمانی) و ملوچه‌ایی (سندی) و اهل مارهاشی (هللیل رود) از طریق شاهراه اصلی تجاری خاور نزدیک در ارتباط بودند و یک فرایند فراگیر پیوندزنی فرهنگی در اوج توسعه خود بوده است. در نهایت مروری از علائم متنوع شمایل نگارانه سندی که اکنون بر روی اثر مهرهای ایرانی شناخته شده است ارائه گردیده و سعی شده است تا دلالت تاریخی هر یک از آنها بررسی شود.

**واژگان کلیدی:** مهر استوانه‌ای جلال آباد، جیرفت، معبد هللیل رود، خط سند، مهرهای مسطح "خلیج فارس"