

BLMJ 2789: A Neo-Assyrian Cylinder Seal with a Healing Scene in a Reed Hut

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Introduction

While studying seals at the Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem for the planned publication of the collection, I came across BLMJ 2789, a large cylinder seal, which warrants immediate attention.¹



Figure 1: BLMJ 2789 Seal and Seal Impression

The seal, made of reddish serpentine stone, and measuring 1.9 x 4.9 cm., is cut in the linear style and so may be dated to the earlier parts of the Neo-Assyrian period, ca. 900–720 BCE, when this style was quite popular. The seal is drawn in two registers which are marked by upper and lower rulings. The upper register depicts a procession scene, while the lower register depicts what is probably a royal healing ritual that is performed in a reed hut. Such healing scenes in reed huts are rare in Assyrian glyptic. All known examples of this motif, like ours, are made of serpentine

* I would like to thank Batya Borowski, the founder and chairman of the board of the Bible Lands Museum Jerusalem, and Amanda Weiss, the director of the museum, for their kind permission to study and to publish BLMJ 2789 here. I am also grateful to Prof. Susanne Herboldt, University Leipzig, for her many useful comments on the seal.

¹ This seal has previously published by E. Williams-Forte in Muscarella 1981, pp. 129–130, no. 86.

and cut in the linear style.² The closest parallel example to BLMJ 2789 is a seal unearthed in a tomb in Room 74 at Ashurnasirpal's Western Palace at Calah (modern Nimrud), probably a tomb of a royal family member or someone closely connected to the royal family.³ This seal also has two registers with a healing scene in a reed hut in the lower register and a procession scene above. Al-Gailami Werr 2008, p. 157 suggests that BLMJ 2789 and the Nimrud seal were probably produced in the same workshop. If so, given the fact that the Nimrud seal was unearthed during a controlled excavation by the Iraqi archaeologists, we can extrapolate a ninth century date and provenance of Nimrud for BMLJ 2789 on the basis of the Nimrud seal. Other examples of the healing scene on serpentine cylinder seals include Teissier 1984, pp. 170–171, no. 231⁴; and Oppenheim 1962, p. 34 and Pl. 23, no. 9⁵.

The Lower Register of BLMJ 2789



Figure 2: BLMJ 2789 Lower Register

The lower register depicts what appears to be a healing or cleansing ritual of a patient.⁶ From left to right we see: a crescent moon; a dog jumping on a dome-like reed structure in which three persons are visible; seven dots (the Pleiades); another but larger dog facing in the direction of the reed structure; a lozenge; a bearded man, dressed in a tunic and a kilt, stretching one arm

² Al Gailami Werr 2008, p. 157.

³ Al-Gailami Werr 2008, p. 158, Fig. 19-k; Hussein 2008, pp. 83–90. Hussein 2008, p. 90 points out a possibility that this section of the Western Palace was for burial chambers but also suggests that it might have been a temporary detention centre. The large number of findings in Room 74 speaks in favour of it being a burial chamber.

⁴ This seal belongs to the Marcopoli Collection. See also, Collon 1987, pp. 172–173, nos. 803–804.

⁵ Like the Nimrud seal, the latter seal too was recovered in an organized archaeological expedition by the German archaeological team headed by Oppenheimer at Tell Halaf (near Aleppo).

⁶ Williams-Forte in Muscarella 1981, pp. 129–130, no. 86.

(holding a bow) towards the reed hut with his second hand extending upwards; and a bare breasted woman raising both her arms high. As in the parallel examples cited above, her breasts hang down to her abdomen. However, here, in contrast to the other examples, the female figure is walking away from the reed structure while turning her head backwards, as if she is fleeing from the reed structure. On the other examples, the female figure stands in front of the reed structure, turning her body in its direction.

The arched structure depicted on the seal probably represents a reed hut wherein a purification/healing ritual is taking place. The male figure bending over the patient lying on the bed probably represents the incantation-priest who performs the ritual on the patient's behalf. The priest holds a rod in his left hand while he places his right palm on the patient's chest.⁷ On the parallels, the priest does not wear headgear. This is very likely the case in BLMJ 2789 too, but our seal is damaged at this place so we cannot be certain.⁸ The significance of the kneeling figure (probably also a male) is also not certain. On a parallel example from the Marcopoli Collection (Teissier 1984, pp. 170–171, no. 231), a similar figure kneeling at the head of a patient holds a bowl with a flame, probably some sort of a lamp.⁹ On the left side of the reed hut and at its right side, there are two dogs; dogs being the sacred animal and emblem of the Mesopotamian goddess of healing Gula.¹⁰ One might speculate that dogs, or at least those associated with Gula, were believed to possess magical powers that allowed them to drive away malevolent agents, just as guard dogs chase intruders. For example, archaeologists at the palace of Assurbanipal at Nineveh found five figurines of dogs under a floor, each one with a different cuneiform inscription reading: “*The one which chases out evil;*” “*Conqueror of the enemy;*” “*Bark without hesitation;*” “*The one which bites his foe;*” and “*Its bark is powerful.*”¹¹ These inscriptions clearly indicate a belief that dogs in general, and these dog figurines in particular, had the magical power to expel malevolent agents such as illnesses, demons, ghosts, sorcerers, and curses.

⁷ A Sumerian-Akkadian bilingual incantation against the *di'û*-disease (a headache with fever?) from the *Utukkū Lemnūtu*-Incantation Series (Tablet 13, lines 195ff) refers to a ritual involving erection of a reed hut (Sumerian *šutug*; Akkadian *šutukku*) and the use of a wooden wand (Sumerian ^gma-nu; Akkadian *e'ru*), Geller 2007, p. 174, lines 197 and 200 respectively. This incantation also offers an instruction to place the bed of the patient in the reed hut for the healing-ritual (line 198). Although the key elements (i.e., a reed hut, a wand, and a bed in the reed hut) may remind one of the ritual scene depicted on the seal, because it does not refer to other elements known from the healing scene (e.g., the dogs and the woman with bare breasts) and the procession scene in the upper register, we cannot relate this seal to the *Utukkū-Lemnūtu*-incantations without further study. Incidentally, the cause of the *di'û*-disease in this incantation is said to be ‘spittle’ of various gods, Geller 2007, p. 248, lines 184–194.

⁸ The face of this male figure is totally destroyed except for the right eye. What appears to be the mouth of a wolf with fangs in Figs 1–2 is an illusion caused by the shading on the damaged area of the seal impression.

⁹ Teissier 1986, p. 170 identifies this human figure as female.

¹⁰ Black and Green 1992, p. 101.

¹¹ Curtis and Reade eds., 1995, p. 116. For the terracotta statuettes of the dogs, see Fig. 4 below.

There are two additional human figures outside of the reed hut — the aforementioned male stretching his one arm towards the reed hut and the woman with bare breasts. Again, the exact significance of these two figures is not clear, but it seems that the woman might represent a malevolent agent because she appears to be leaving the scene while she raises her both hands — i.e., she herself is trying to ward off the healing spells of the priests. If this female figure represents a malevolent agent, one may speculate that the patient in the scene is suffering from a disease which was deemed to have been caused by witchcraft.

The seven dots, the lozenge, and the crescent moon are used as filling motifs, with the crescent perhaps also functioning as a scene divider. There might have also been a star just above the larger dog at the right side of the reed hut where the surface of the seal is now damaged.

The Upper Register of BLMJ 2789



Figure 3: BLMJ 2789 Upper Register

The upper register gives a procession scene. In the most common form of this motif, we typically observe a deity or deities standing in front of his/her/their symbols and facing a worshiper(s) who offers prayer or carries oblations to the deity/ies. However, in this particular example, judging from their garments, the two male figures receiving the column of people (at the far left) are not deities but most likely priests, although they too stand in front of divine symbols.¹²

The upper register depicts (from the left to the right): a standard (or so-called “bottle-brush” tree)¹³; a priest in the gesture of blessing, a standard similar to the first one but much shorter than

¹² See, e.g., Fig. 5: BLMJ 2530.

¹³ For the “bottle-brush” tree, see Collon 2001, p. 12.

the former; another priest, this one with a headdress; another standard, probably representing the stylus, the symbol of the god Nabu; two priests (the one in the front holds a long object of some sort which might be the same as that held by the priest in the reed hut, while the second one pulls what looks like (in modern terms) a wheelchair; a bearded man with a headdress on the “wheelchair” who holds a long stick in his right hand; three attendants — the first one holds a long object with a round top (probably a parasol¹⁴) and has a long towel hanging on his shoulder, while the other two following him make the same gesture of blessing as the priests on the right. The headdress of the enthroned figure, unlike the headdresses of the others, looks like a bucket which is a common royal insignia of the Assyrians. Note also the headband hanging down from his head to his back which is also a typical Assyrian royal insignia.¹⁵ Given this, one may speculate that the enthroned figure is actually the Assyrian king. The tall triangular shaped headdresses worn by the two people walking in front of the “wheelchair” and the one receiving the procession resemble the headdress known from the Nimrud seal referred above.¹⁶

A star (probably Venus), seven dots (Pleiades); a crescent moon, lozenge, two wedges (probably representing Nabu), and another star or the Sun, are used as filling motifs while the long standard topped with the “bottle-brush” tree referred to above functions as the scene divider.

Concluding Remarks on BLMJ 2789

The scenes in lower and upper registers do not begin at the same place of the seal. However, as has already been observed by Williams-Forte in Muscarella ed. 1981, p. 130, the enthroned figure is placed directly above the man lying on the bed in the lower register. Thus, the arrangement of the central figures in the both registers may suggest that these two images represent the same person¹⁷. If so, it is very likely that the seal commemorates the patient’s recovery from his illness, and subsequent “pilgrimage” to a temple in order to thank the gods and the priests by means of offerings and prayers. It is also possible that this seal functioned as an amulet which was used

¹⁴ Cf. the round topped canopy known from the Western Palace of Assurnasirpal II (Curtis and Reade 1995, pp. 45 and 54). One might also think of a fan as its identification. Teissier 1984, pp. 160–161, no. 201 identifies an object similar to this as a fan. However, the most common shape for fans held by attendants in Assyrian glyptics is rectangular, like a flag. For Assyrian fans, see, Collon 2001, p. 65; Curtis and Reade 1995, pp. 122–123, with Collon noting that such rectangular fans “made of woven reeds,” are still in use in Iraq today.”

¹⁵ Note also the parasol-like object discussed above. A parasol as a royal insignia, see Hrouda 1965, pp. 106 and 153, and pl. 32.

¹⁶ Al Gailami Werr 2008, p. 158, Fig. 19-k.

¹⁷ The same arrangement — placing the enthroned figure above the one lying in the bed — is also attested in the broken seal found in the room 74 of Ashurnasirpal II’s palace complex in Nimrud discussed above, al-Gailami Werr 2008, p. 158.

during a healing/cleansing ritual for a royal personage when he was suffering from an illness. If so, the procession depicted in the upper register may be a visual expression of the patient's “promise” to offer donations and gifts to the temple upon his recovery. In fact, many Akkadian prayers used during purification and curing rituals include vows by the petitioner to make his piety known in the future by means of offerings and prayers (Cf. Oshima 2011, pp. 65–71).



Figure 4: Terracotta Figurines found in Nineveh
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Figure 5: BLMJ 2530

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