

An Unusual Large Circular Compartmented “Stamp Seal” of the Goddess with Animals: Some Thoughts on the Religious Symbol System of the Central Asian Bronze Age Culture of Bactria-Margiana

An insight into the religious symbol system of the Oxus Civilisation,¹ a proto-urban sedentary cultural entity in the region of Bactria-Margiana in southern Central Asia (*ca.* 2300–1500/1400 BC),² is afforded by a large circular compartmented “stamp seal” (fig. 1).³ A portable high-value artefact fashioned out of the splendid medium of silver, a precious material that itself has symbolic power, it must have been produced for a special purpose.⁴ The “seal” features a powerfully balanced and symmetrical composition of a standing female figure rendered with anthropomorphic features and wings together with real-world animals and hybrid creatures.⁵ Situated in the region around the upper Oxus River (Amu Darya) comprising parts of present-day



Fig. 1. Large compartmented stamp seal featuring a standing goddess as the upper part of the vertical axis with quadruped dragons in lieu of wings and between addorsed lions, resting on intertwined serpents from the tips of which spring small caprids; the loop handle fashioned in the form of a seated female figure with knees tucked up and heels raised. Silver. Diameter 8 cm. Putative origin: Northern Afghanistan, Bactria. Germany, private collection. Photo by the author.

1 A term introduced by Henri-Paul Francfort (1984).

2 The material culture of the Oxus Civilisation, *Outer Iran* in the words of Pierre Amiet, has been studied by a number of archaeologists from the former Soviet Union, foremost among whom was Viktor Ivanovič Sarianidi. In collaboration with colleagues affiliated with the Turkmen Academy of Sciences, to 1970th he discovered a group of Middle and Late Bronze Age archaeological sites with monumental architectural constructions, particularly in the Gonur and Togolok oases of historical Margiana (in Greek, Margush in Persian, mentioned in the trilingual inscription of Bisutun, Iran, dating to *ca.* 516 BCE) on the lower course of the Murghab River in the Kara Kum Desert of southeastern Turkmenistan, that were part of the same cultural complex. The later phases of the Late Bronze Age Oxus Civilisation (1800/1750–1500/1400 BCE) are characterised by largely aniconic phases (see recently: Luneau, 2014), hence the putative date of the manufacture of the present seal may be sought in the Middle Bronze Age period (2200/2100–1800/1750 BCE).

3 The seal belongs to one of the varied mostly circular metal “stamp seals” relief cast in bronze or copper alloy, but more rarely in silver or gold, which is classified as so-called “compartmented seal” (a term first used in 1943 by the British archaeologist Stuart Pigott – 1943. P. 179–180, fig. 4) fabricated in openwork and with closely related *champlevé* whereby the design was gouged out. The obverse of the seal is decorated in relief and with fine incisions, and fitted with a central loop handle which was held to make an impression into another material by means of the perpendicular strips at the reverse that form compartments, echoing the design at the obverse.

4 Seals of this type have been excavated from gravesites and are generally found near a corpse’s pelvic region indicating that they were probably attached to clothing or tied to a perishable belt-like object placed around the waist (Masson, Sarianidi, 1972. P. 122). The absence of printed impressions suggests that rather than serving as genuine seals, they functioned as status symbols, clan/family insignia with an ideological or protective/amuletic purport (Klochkov, 1999. P. 55. n. 46; cf.: Amiet, 1988a. P. 169).

5 In a previous paper, I introduced the compartmented seal in the context of a distinct hierarchical progression that may be deduced on the basis of available iconographical sources (see: Kuehn, 2010. P. 43–67). Since it may be hypothesised that some significant, indeed forceful meaning can be attached to the seal, the present paper attempts to reinvestigate its iconographic language taking into account variable and chronologically often uncertain iconographic elements in order to tentatively reconstruct some vital conceptualisations of the Oxus religious symbol system.

Turkmenistan (particularly Margiana along the Murghab River), western Tajikistan, southern Uzbekistan and northern Afghanistan (ancient Bactria), this Bronze Age culture is commonly referred to as the Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex (BMAC).⁶ Evidence so far uncovered shows it to be characterised by a distinctive iconography and style suggestive of a complex system. Viktor Ivanovič Sarianidi (1929–2013) of the Institute of Archaeology in Moscow, the main excavator of the Oxus Civilisation, whose memory is honoured in the present volume, remains the major contributor to the study of the iconographical scheme within the Oxus Civilisation, the interpretation of which continues to be the subject of much speculation.

It is worth noting that ceramic and metal objects, including prestige items like metal “stamp seals,” “attributes of power” (Francfort, 1994. P. 415) were present in much higher quantities in BMAC female burials. Even though the relative wealth of the grave goods might not necessarily correspond to an actual political and economic power in society and thus does not represent a reliable index, the gender difference reflected in the grave goods probably is not coincidental and indicates that women seem to have enjoyed a high social prestige as far as ritual was concerned their position must have been substantial in the Oxus Civilization (see: Luneau, 2008. P. 147; Biscioni, Bondioli, 1989. P. 67–69; Francfort, 1994. P. 415; 2010. P. 83).⁷

Even if we have not found textual references⁸ to the mythical identity of the goddess,⁹ and view the compositional scheme of the seal without preconceptions, the celestial connotation evident in BMAC belief system seems to imply a dipartite universe consisting of a supernatural world above (or heaven) and earth including the underworld,¹⁰ a belief which practically all human traditions reveal. Associated with water and the cycle of nature, the goddess is known to peacefully reign over the animal and plant worlds¹¹ as well as over mythical creatures that either serve as her vehicle or attribute or come under her dominance (Art of the First Cities, 2003. P. 370–371. Cat. N 261). The generic overtones and multiple layers of meaning observed in this configuration will be discussed in the context of the symbolic iconography of the Oxus corpus of metal compartmented seals and other glyptic art as well as that of its neighbouring regions.

The anthropological approach into the nature of myth advanced by Claude Lévi-Strauss entails the perception that symbolism and myth has universal structuring principles thanks to procedures of opposition, homology, symmetry and inversion which derive their meaning as part of a system and that their structural relationships can, to a certain extent, be deciphered.¹² In the attempt to focus human religious experience, a distinction of similar generality seems to have been made between a “mundane” realm and a “sacred” realm;¹³ even though it must be questioned to what extent such as division may

6 A term coined by Sarianidi (1977. P. 4–5).

7 In this context it is interesting to recall that in neighbouring Elam women of the ruling classes occupied prominent positions (Vallat, 1989. P. 46–49).

8 No textual or oral tradition can be drawn upon to elucidate the iconographic language of the Oxus Civilisation; indeed no inscription of the III or II millennium BCE that may be linguistically used has been found in Central Asia (Francfort, Tremblay, 2010. P. 159).

9 Myths have been defined by Alan Dundes (1984) and others as “sacred narratives” defining them as stories told in a religious context.

10 The pair of Heaven and Earth is ubiquitous in ancient religions. For instance the Babylonian pair AN/*šamû* ‘Heaven’ and KI/*eršetu* or Uraš, ‘Earth’ (see: Lambert, 2013. P. 311–315, 407–408, 334–335, 352–353).

11 She is connected to the cultivation and fertility of crops, such as wheat and millet, the emergence of increasing sedentary patterns of social organization, which finds reflection on a cylinder seal found at Gonur Depe in Margiana (in grave n. 23 at the Large Gonur necropolis) depicting the goddess with grain stalks springing from her body; Sarianidi 1998b. P. 324, N. 1785; 2007. P. 105, fig. 180; Francfort 2010, 69, fig. 3. Cf. Another cylinder seal from the “Temple of Sacrifices” of Gonur Depe features a standing female deity, hands at her waist, clad in a long garment, with four pairs of stalks springing from either side of her body (Sarianidi, 2006. P. 162, 283, fig. 137; 2008. P. 80, fig. 25; Francfort, 2010. P. 69, fig. 2; see also: Sarianidi, 2006. P. 217, fig. 79). Related “Trans-Elamite” cylinder seals were found in Tepe Yahya (Pittman, 2001. Fig. 10.46–10.49, 10.51; Francfort, 2010. P. 75, fig. 10), Shahdad (Hakemi, 1997. Fig. Ib.2, Ib.4; P. 355, N 2263), and Töd Treasury (Amiet, 1986. P. 299, fig. 132.2 and 4; 2007a, fig. 4a–b; Winkelmann, 1997; 2003, fig. 25a).

12 His seminal articles (on art and myth, respectively) were both reprinted in: Structural Anthropology, 1978.

13 For a discussion of the distinction between these religious phenomena, between profane and sacred, see: Assmann, 1984. P. 9–10.

be justified since, as Jan Assmann succinctly points out, “in an early culture, everything has a religious basis” (Assmann, 2001. P. 2). Yet at the same time the “sacred”¹⁴ and the forms of dealing with it were conspicuous and distinguished from everyday life. By implication, beings that participate in the sphere were deemed “deities,” and thus super-, or extrahuman, beings or powers, hence “divine” (on the ambiguous conception and polysemic nature of divinity [Panikkau, 2004. P. 264–276; Ludwig, 2006. P. 59–66]).

The “divine” identity of the goddess on the seal under discussion, displayed in her posture, gesture and dress, is underlined by the presence of a pair of wings emanating from her shoulders that are spreading out on either side and stress her celestial and protective nature. Outstretched wings are also an attribute of the ancient Mesopotamian Inanna/Ishtar, the goddess of beauty/love, creatress of the gods/all mankind, mother of those who give birth/midwife as well as of battle/war,¹⁵ at least from the Akkadian period onward (ca. 2350–2150 BC). Wings emerge from both bareheaded and horned¹⁶ female deities of Bactria-Margiana (fig. 2, 3, respectively), a characteristic also featured on Eastern Iranian seals. These basic iconographic similarities between BMAC discoveries and the Mesopotamian and Iranian cultural sphere may be due to various interactions such as intensive cross-regional and cross-cultural economy allowing for reciprocal impact. On the whole the people of Bactria-Margiana drew inspiration from neighbouring religious iconography but maintained a distinctive imagery of their own.¹⁷



Fig. 2. Circular compartmented loop-handled stamp seal with winged goddess with caprids in lieu of wings seated on a quadruped dragon. Silver. Diameter 4,1 cm, height including loop handle 1,3 cm. Putative origin: Northern Afghanistan, Bactria. Germany, private collection. Photo by the author.



Fig. 3. Circular compartmented loop-handled stamp seal with winged goddess seated on a quadruped dragon. Silver. Diameter 6.5 cm. Putative origin: Northern Afghanistan, Bactria. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités Orientales, Acquisition 1992 AO 30226. Photo by the author.

Although her body with gently tapered waist is shown frontally, the head is depicted in profile, and her hair is swept back at the ear to form an intricate roll. The refined countenance of the bare-headed and bare-chested goddess is closely related to that of the female deity depicted on a Bactrian compartmented silver seal now preserved in the Musée du Louvre, Paris (fig. 3).¹⁸ In contrast to renderings of the standing (for in-

14 The notion extends to sacred places, such as temples or sanctuaries, sacred time such as festivals as well as sacred activities or rituals (Assmann, 2001. P. 2).

15 Inanna (in Sumerian, Ishtar in Akkadian) had very ancient roots and was part of an amalgamation of Sumerian and Akkadian religious and political beliefs, extending back to 3000 BCE. Characterised by a coincidence of opposites, she embodied in herself a wide variety of Mesopotamian goddesses (Art of the First Cities, 2003. P. 213–214, cat. N 139). As Jan Assmann (2008. P. 139, 148) points out the Babylonians were perhaps the first to match and equate Sumerian and Akkadian gods “by defining their common functional definition or cosmic manifestation” allowing for a “mutual translation.”

16 As distinctive headdress of divine status the horned cap was known in ancient Mesopotamian art from the early III millennium BCE onwards. A visual image of power and strength for a deity, the wide-sweeping horns may well be derived from the horns of wild cattle (*bos primigenius*), which must have been a truly awe-inspiring beast. Even after the domestication of cattle it remained a separate species throughout the Near Eastern world. For a discussion of the horn motif in ancient Near Eastern literature and iconography, see: Siring, 1980.

17 The BMAC symbolic system is “an original expression of more general Eurasian mythological universe of very ancient origin,” and as Henri-Paul Francfort (1994. P. 406, 416) so succinctly put it that “the brilliant eclectic Middle Eastern formal aspect of the Oxus Civilization is just the colourful blanket covering deeper structures of ‘archaic’ Eurasian type.”

18 It shows the goddess seated sidesaddle on a recumbent dragon with its tail curled above the back. From her shoulders and upper arms emerge wing-like the foreparts of small caprids (Art of the First Cities, 2003. P. 370–371, cat. N 261; Pottier, 1984. P. 179, fig. 332; P. 227, Pl. 4, fig. 332; Amiet, 1986. P. 147, 198, fig. 184; Sarianidi, 1998b. P. 26, N 16–1; 2002. P. 262, upper row; Kuehn, 2010. P. 61, fig. 27a, b).

stance, Kuehn, 2010. P. 60, figs, 24a, b, 25a, b; see also fig. 5) or seated (for instance, Kuehn, 2010. P. 60, fig. 26a, b, 28a, b; see also fig. 3) goddess on other known seals, the goddess's head is turned to the left, a characteristic she shares with the standing female figure on the inscribed silver vase clad in similar tufted garments dated to the reign of the Elamite king Kutik-Inshushinak (ca. 2090 BC), now housed in the Iran Bastan Museum in Tehran (fig. 4b) (for the entire figure, see: Girshman, 1968. P. 242, fig. 10; for a view of the crouched and more ample, long-haired female figure on other side of the vase, see: Art of the First Cities, 2003. P. 367, fig. 92). Roman Girshman identifies the slender standing female figure, which however is rendered without wings, as the Elamite goddess of war and victory, Narunde, who is found only in the III millennium (Girshman, 1968. P. 243–244).¹⁹ As on the two Bactrian silver seals (fig. 2, 3), the goddess wears only a long flounced/tufted *kaunakes*-type skirt, a garment worn not only in Mesopotamian Sumer (ca. 2800–2000 BC) but also in neighbouring Elam in southwestern Iran. However, unlike the representation of the Elamite figure who wears a full-length dress (fig. 4a), the BMAC goddess's breasted upper body is shown nude to the waist. Bent at the elbows her arms are held across the abdomen, the hands, which are no longer extant, might have been joined, the distinctive gesture of the goddess.

The hieratic intensity noted in the depiction of the latter is accentuated in her ceremonial posture. She forms the upper part of the vertical axis, flanked on either side by two addorsed lions with upward-curling tails that divide the seal horizontally (fig. 4b). A rare gold stamp seal shows the standing winged deity, the head is depicted in profile to the right, in a closely related position. Nude to the waist bearing a torque (or clad in a diaphanous garment defined by a neckline which would explain why the breasts are not discernible), she is clad in the same long skirt out of which “grow” the foreparts of two addorsed inward-looking lions (fig. 5). The necks and bodies (with the exception of the haunches and legs) of the latter are covered with rows of juxtaposed

scales, an otherwise ophidian characteristic associating them with snakes. As animals of the desert lions frequently embody might, majesty and unapproachability representing not only aggressive strength but also exemplifying life forces and regenerative powers. These aspects are illustrated on a two-sided chlorite discoidal stamp seal laminated with gold foil that features a lion



Fig. 4a. Inscribed vase depicting two female figures, portrait of the standing figure.

Silver. Iran, reign of Puzur-Inshushinak, ca. 2090 BCE.
After Girshman 1968, p. 241, fig. 11.



Fig. 4b. Large compartmented stamp seal with a standing goddess as the upper part of the vertical axis with quadruped dragons in lieu of wings and between addorsed lions (detail). Silver. Diameter 8 cm. Putative origin: Northern Afghanistan, Bactria. Germany, private collection. Photo by the author.

¹⁹ It is important to bear in mind Assmann's (2008, p. 148) keen insight that “[i]n pre- and early historical times, reciprocity and mutuality meant a process of growth and enrichment for all cultures involved.”



Fig. 5. Circular stamp seal with standing winged deity and lions. Gold. Switzerland, Schaffhausen, Museum zu Allerheiligen, Sammlung Ebnöther, inv. no. Eb 33345. *Arts of the first cities*, 2003. P. 371–372, cat. N 262.



Fig. 6. Circular two-sided discoidal stamp seal (obverse) with lion in profile with scorpion-tail, bifid tongue projecting from his open mouth and bifurcating double-headed serpent springing from his belly. Chlorite laminated with gold foil. After: Ligabue, Salvatori, 1988. Fig. 60.



Fig. 7. Large compartmented stamp seal with a standing goddess as the upper part of the vertical axis with quadruped dragons in lieu of wings (detail). Silver. Diameter 8 cm. Putative origin: Northern Afghanistan, Bactria. Late III–early II millennium BC. Germany, private collection. Photograph by the author.

in profile, oriented to the left, characterised by a mighty scorpion-tail, a bifid tongue projecting from his open mouth and a bifurcating double-headed serpent, the open jaws of which reveal rows of sharp teeth and bifid tongues, which

springs from his belly (fig. 6) (comparable depictions exist mainly on Murghab-style cushion-shaped stamp seals; see for instance: Sarianidi, 1986a. P. 256, fig. 108, 109). This representation of the great feline “engendering” snakes associates it with arachnids²⁰ and ophidia, both of which carry chthonic associations. Comparable depictions with snakes connected to the “bellies” of lions and other animals are frequently depicted on Oxus seals and glyptic art and link the lion with the ophidian attribute of fertility-fecundity and reproduction (for instance, Kuehn, 2010. P. 50, fig. 9b; P. 51, fig. 10b; P. 57, fig. 20b).

Perhaps the most striking feature of the goddess is her wings. These take the form of powerful recumbent quadruped dragons which burst forth from her shoulders (fig. 7). The necks and chests of the feline-bodied dragons are covered with imbricate scales signifying the close relation of the creatures with snakes. In contrast to the lion heads that look ahead, the dragon heads *regardant* are at eye level with the female deity. They are crowned by single curved horns and have curled goatee beards projecting from the chin, their gaping long puckered snouts have turned-up tips (distinctly visible on the dragon head to the left), revealing rows of teeth and long projecting tongues which are directed towards the deity. The body of the goddess and the dragons thus are conjoined as a single image giving the impression of endless mutability. The wing-like emergence of natural animal attributes from the shoulders of the otherwise anthropomorphic body of the goddess are known on other examples of BMAC visual and mythic culture. It appears on the above-discussed Bactrian compartmented seal, on which paired caprids emerge wing-like from the shoulders and upper arms of the goddess who is enthroned on a dragon (fig. 3) (see: N 22; cf. Francfort, 2010. P. 5, 10, fig. 4). Another Bactrian copper alloy compartmented seal shows raptorial birds with outspread wings, perhaps eagles or circatus gal-

²⁰ Depictions of scorpions on BMAC seals may indicate the protective power of the dangerous creature (see: for instance, Sarianidi, 1986a. P. 289; 2006. P. 279 [on a stone seal from Margiana]; 2006. P. 231, fig. 92 [on an ivory disc from Margiana]; Amiet, 1988a. P. 170, fig. 15d [compartmented copper alloy seal, Musée du Louvre, Paris, Département des Antiquités Orientales, inv. no. AO 26343]; *Bactria an Ancient Oasis Civilization*, 1988. Cat. N 49 [compartmented copper alloy seal, lower left corner]; N 50 [compartmented copper alloy seal, lower left corner]; N 64 [gold scorpion pendant]). In astral mythology Innana/Ishtar is connected from most ancient times with the constellation Scorpio. In Babylonia, scorpions were regarded as religious symbols. Starting in the late Kassite period (1651–1157 BCE), the scorpion was labelled a symbol of the goddess Ishara, who was equated with Ishtar (Van Buren, 1937–1939. P. 1–28).



Fig. 8. Circular compartmented loop-handled stamp seal with standing goddess with raptorial birds in lieu of wings and flanked by a pair of leaping felines.

Copper alloy. Putative origin: Northern Afghanistan, Bactria. Late III–early II millennium BC. After: Sarianidi, 1986c. P. 6–8, figs. 1 and 12.

licus, that appear to “come out” of the shoulders of the standing goddess (cf. Francfort, 1994. P. 411), that arise in lieu of wings, and flanked by a pair of leaping felines with open mouths (fig. 8) (Sarianidi, 1986c. P. 6–8, fig. 1, 12).²¹ At the same time, her body is seen to visually conflate with these animal attributes.

The main body parts of the goddess known to transform into a natural or mythical animal are thus her wings – entailing a therianthrope process, during which these creatures issue from her body – by means of her celestial attribute (Francfort, 2008. P. 4; she is also known to “beget” plants – see Sarianidi, 2007. P. 105, fig. 180; for associations of the goddess with the tulip, see: Teufer, 2007; cf. Pottier, 1984. P. 202, Pl. 20, N 150). On the above-discussed gold seal, her lower body is, at the same time, also seen to “merge” with the bodies of the lions as if conjoined as a single image (fig. 5). This “integrated message” (Francfort, 1992. P. 181) concurrently juxtaposes two principles into a unified being. Its nature as dialectic category simultaneously contrasts and fuses two images of non-contiguous categories, anthropomorphic and theriomorphic features, and makes them continuous. The resulting representations are neither separate nor unified, associated with the intermediate stages of the creation. This process gives rise to a “divine” therianthrope representation which

²¹ See also another Bactrian copper alloy compartmented seal featuring the goddess with the same birds issuing from either side of her lower body (Sarianidi, 1986c. P. 6–8, fig. 2, 13).

perhaps synthesises the qualities that define the nature of the goddess. Owing to their ambiguity as awe-inspiring yet ostensibly also benign creatures – their nature thus merging two opposing metaphorical principles – it may reasonably be conjectured that the serpent-dragons also afford an insight into the nature of the divinity. It is thereby of note that the BMAC dragon himself also acquired wings alluding to his aerial as well as possible “celestial” aspect (see, for instance: Kuehn, 2010. Fig. 2–5, 7b, 8b, 9b, 10b, 11b, 13, 16, 18b, 20b, 22b).

The same partly therianthrope aspect is found in neighbouring regions. A comparable ideogrammatic expression is rendered on “Trans-Elamite” or “East Iranian” cylinder seals (ca. 2200–2100 BC), on which serpent-dragon heads are shown to rise from the shoulders of a seated male or female deity, one of which is crowned by a bull’s head (on the other the head is damaged and thus not clearly decipherable) (fig. 9, 10) (Cf. Amiet, 1986. P. 299, fig. 132.10; 1998. P. 5, 7, fig. 1, 2; Porada, 1993. P. 48; fig. 28; The



Fig. 9. Seal impression of cylinder seal with a cult scene with a deity crowned by a bull head with serpents springing from the shoulders seated on a chair (detail).

Shell. Putative origin: Southeastern Iran. ca. 2200–2100 BC. After: Porada, 1993. Fig. 28.



Fig. 10. Seal impression of cylinder seal with a cult scene with a deity with serpents springing from the shoulders seated on a chair on a platform temple (detail).

Shell. Putative origin: Southeastern Iran. ca. 2200–2100 BC. After: Amiet, 1986. Fig. 137.



Fig. 11. Seal impression of cylinder seal with serpents growing out of the armpits of a genuflecting male figure crowned by a bull head with outstretched raised arms (detail).

Shell. Putative origin: Northern Afghanistan, Bactria. Late III–early II millennium BC. Jonathan P. Rosen Collection, New York. After: Sarianidi, 2002. P. 310.

Royal City of Susa, 1992. P. 7, fig. 8; Francfort, 2010. P. 72, fig. 5; for a comparable representation on another Iranian cylinder seal see: Amiet, 1986. Fig. 137; Francfort, 2010. P. 72, fig. 5; cf. Francfort, 2008. Fig. 15, 16). The ophidian character of the chthonic god Tishpak, tutelary god of the ancient Sumerian city-state of Eshnunna in central Mesopotamia during the Akkadian period (ca. 2350–2150 BC) is likewise expressed by horned and crowned *bashmu*, or “venomous,” serpents emerging from his shoulders (The Royal City of Susa, 1992. P. 111, fig. 36; Peyronel, 2013. P. 53, fig. 2).²² These are closely related to the heads of the quadruped serpent-dragon, *mushhushu*, the “awe-inspiring” snake (cf. Wiggermann, 1992. P. 147), which serves as

his symbolic animal and vehicle. This distinct characteristic is shared by the god Ningishzida, “Lord of the True Tree” (Lambert, 1990. P. 289–300), the personal deity of Gudea (ca. 2150–2125 BC), ruler of the city-state of Lagash (modern Tell al-Hiba) in southern Mesopotamia which for a period of fifty to sixty years enjoyed great importance. In his anthropomorphic manifestation the god is likewise identified by *bashmu* serpents rising from his shoulders (cf. Wiggermann, 1992. P. 166). A related symbolic concept can be observed on yet another “Trans-Elamite” cylinder seal which shows serpents growing out of the armpits of one of two genuflecting warrior-like male figures with outstretched raised arms whose head is crowned by a bull’s head

²² The paired ophidian protrusions may be associated with the god’s symbol, the serpent-dragon *mushhushu*, who might be the dragon whose origin is described in the Labbu myth (Wiggermann, 1989. P. 126; 1992. P. 154). The *mushhushu* is likewise associated with other chthonic gods of vegetation, who died and were resurrected together with the cycles of nature (Lambert, 1990. P. 290, 300), such as Ninazu, Ningishzida, Tishpak, Ashshur, Ninurta, or Nabû, etc. (see: Wiggermann, 1997a; Lambert, 1985. P. 87–94). The influence of these chthonic gods of vegetation declined in the second half of the II millennium BCE and later played no longer a part in the Mesopotamian national pantheon. Their cult centres, as F. Wiggermann shows, were all located across the Tigris near the Iranian mountains. Their characteristics may have developed through imported religious ideas from beyond the Tigris where, especially in Elam and the Iranian mountains, a religious interest in serpents goes back to pre-historic times (cf. Wiggermann, 1997).



Fig. 12. Circular compartmented loop-handled stamp seal with winged genuflecting male deity flanked by a pair of diagonally-undulating serpents.

Copper alloy. Southeastern Turkmenistan, Margiana, North Gonur, Room 273. Late III–early II millennium BC.

After: Sarianidi, 2005. P. 129, fig. 33.



Fig. 13. Circular stamp seal with loop handle with genuflecting winged and horned superhuman figure with serpents in lieu of arms and a serpent at the waist.

Copper alloy. Diameter 3.3 cm, height including loop handle 1.4 cm maximum. Putative origin: Northern Afghanistan, Bactria. Late III–early II millennium BC. Frank L. Kovacs Collection, Los Angeles, CA. After: Sarianidi, 2002. P. 285.

(fig. 11) (The head of the other figure is crowned with a lion's head [see: Porada, 1993. P. 48, fig. 29; Sarianidi, 2002. P. 310; Francfort, 2010. P. 72, fig. 6]. The figures with muscular arms, which exude a virile bellicose power, have been described in detail by E. Porada [1988. P. 139–141]); they are rendered in a pose indicative of an attitude of worship as featured on several BMAC

seals. A point of resemblance is afforded on a copper alloy compartmented seal, found during the excavations of the fortified settlements of Gonur (room 273 in North Gonur). It depicts a winged male deity with naked upper body, oriented to the left in the same kneeling manner, and flanked by diagonally-undulating serpents covered with a scaly imbrication; the garment that covers his lower body is likewise covered with a snake-scale pattern as if conjoined with the serpents as a single image (fig. 12). On a circular copper alloy stamp seal attributed to Bactria serpents are likewise seen to spring from the shoulders of a horned genuflecting superhuman figure with flaming “wings” with his torso rendered *en face* (fig. 13) (cf. Azarpay, 1991. P. 4, fig. 2).²³ However, here the serpents replace his arms curving upwards to end in open-jawed ophidian heads; a third serpent being conceptualised as a girdle around his hips.²⁴ In the light of subsequent religious concepts in the Iranian world, Guitty Azarpay tentatively interprets the mythical anthropomorphic figure with serpentine arms as a prototypical Azhi dahāka (Azarpay, 1991. P. 6; cf. the East Iranian statuettes identified by Francfort as anthropomorphised dragons [Azarpay, 1994. Fig. 3–5]), whose name is explained as “snake man” or “hominoid serpent” (Schwartz, 1980. P. 123–124),²⁵ the anthropomorphic manifestation that derived from the earlier Indo-Iranian serpent-dragon, Azhdahā, who in a much later development of the Iranian myth blocks the passage of heavenly waters and causes drought (Boyce, 1975 [repr. 1996]. P. 64, 91–92).²⁶

As Henri-Paul Francfort emphasises there is no male snake deity in the Oxus pantheon (Francfort, 1994. P. 408). Hominoid serpent-

²³ Related postures are known throughout Central Asia, the Iranian Plateau, Elam and the Indus Civilisation (cf. Azarpay, 1991. P. 3, N 12; Sarianidi, 2008. P. 307, fig. 176). A striking similarity exists with an anthropomorphic mask-like head with closely comparable horizontally-projecting bovine horns rendered on a two-sided Murghab-style seal. It shows a split representation or two opposing profiles of the massive quadruped body (perhaps bovine) joined at the head and “engendering” serpents with menacingly open mouths in confronted arrangement (see: Sarianidi, 1986a. P. 262, fig. 122; 2002. P. 270, centre). Analogies to the mask-like head are further shown in another two-sided Murghab-style seal featuring only a head characterised by round bulging eyes, inflated nostrils, windswept hair and “whiskers” (Sarianidi, 1986a. P. 259, fig. 110; cf. Francfort, 1994. P. 414).

²⁴ The seal has been discussed by G. Azarpay (1991. P. 1–10).

²⁵ However, the traditional connection of Avestan *dahāka* may be with the Pashto *lōy* “big, huge” and hence Azhi dahāka would come to mean “huge serpent” (cf. Skjærvø, 1998. P. 194; Christensen, 1941. P. 20–22).

²⁶ The gradual “debasement” of the dragon in the Indo-Iranian conception led to it becoming an antagonist of true religion in Zoroastrian sources, identified with Zāhāk (Dahāk), the tyrannical and illegitimate ruler of Iran. In later Zoroastrian Pahlavi sources, the Avestan demon Azhi Dahāka is transformed into an early Iranian historicised mythological foreign usurper, called Azhdahāk or Zāhāk (Skjærvø, 1998. P. 194). The pair of serpents that spring from his shoulders are a reminiscence of his once reptilian body (Khāleqi-Moḩlaq, 1998. P. 199).



Fig. 14. Large compartmented stamp seal featuring intertwined serpents from the tips of which spring small caprids (detail).

Silver. Diameter 8 cm. Putative origin: Northern Afghanistan, Bactria. Germany, private collection. Photo by the author.

dragons are however known from the Eastern Iranian world, dated to the late third to the beginning of the second millennium BC. These unprovenanced composite stone statuettes represent an anthropomorphic being with a scarred bearded face entirely covered with a scaled ophidian skin, which have been discussed by Francfort, who suggested that on the basis of small holes which could be used for insertion, at least one of the statuettes might have been furnished with attached metallic horns and wings (a composite statuette, now preserved in the Musée du Louvre, Paris, Département des Antiquités Orientales, inv. no. AO 21.104 – Francfort, 1994. P. 406–418, 414; *Art of the First Cities*, 2003. P. 344–45, Cat. N 244).

The gigantic reared coils of two closely intertwined mythical serpents, chthonic animals *par excellence*, form the dais on which the goddess is “enthroned” serving to divide the scene horizontally into upper and lower registers (fig. 14). The column thus created splits the seal vertically into left and right sides. Recognisable by all of the known features of serpents in nature the reptiles’ coils are accentuated by a tiny, dotted pattern. Yet their upward-curving reptilian heads, near-identical to those of the dragon heads, are likewise punctuated by large bulging eyes, horned and bearded with open jaws and projecting tongues. At the base of the column, small hoofed animals spring from the tips of the



Fig. 15. Seal impression of cushion-shaped two-sided stamp seal of rectangular outline with kneeling bird-headed figure holding serpents from which spring small caprids (obverse). Putative origin: Northern Afghanistan, Bactria. After: Sarianidi, 2000. P. 208, fig. 6.

serpents’ outward-curving tails. Possibly representing wild caprids, their heads are distinguished by raised pointed ears, elliptical eyes, squarish muzzles with slightly opened mouths and projecting goatee beards topped by large, backward-curving horns with numerous ridges along their length. Known for their speed and leaping abilities, the agile and lively animals also represent strength and power, often interpreted as symbolic of virility. Within the thematic content of this seal, these animals seem to posture as symbols of material bounty. To this may be added an important composition on a Murghab-style cushion-shaped stamp seal²⁷ which shows a genuflecting raptorial bird-headed figure holding the necks (?) of upright writhing serpents

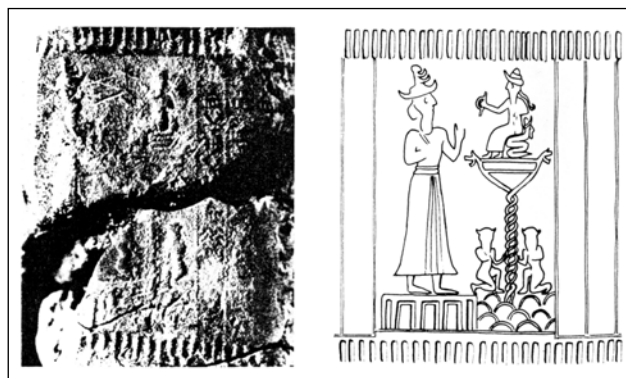


Fig. 16. Drawing of a seal impression on a clay tablet with deity before a god on a serpent throne and dais supported by entwined serpents.

Tablet. Clay. Height c. 3,9 cm. Iran, Haft Tepe. Old Elamite period, c. 1700 BC (Period IVg). Iran Bastan Museum, Tehran. After: Harper, Aruz, Tallon, eds., 1992, p. 118, fig. 40.

²⁷ These comprise a great variety of intaglio carved stone seals, frequently of square or rectangular outline with lentoid or three-edged section, classified as “Murghab-style” seals (named after the Murghab River which is associated with the settlements in Margiana) and drilled for the most part with one string hole through the longitudinal axis. Some of these seals were found near the neck or wrists of the deceased in burials excavated at Margiana and thus are thought to have been worn as amulets (Sarianidi, 1986a. P. 223). However, imprints of these seals have also been discovered on oval and round bullae, suggesting the further possibility of some form of utilitarian function (Hiebert, 1994. P. 152).

in his outstretched hands. These emerge from under the armpits of the figure and from their jaws (or tails?) seem to spring small caprids (fig. 15). The serpent's role is hereby clearly associated with the engendering of herds, an essential ingredient for the continued prosperity of the Oxus civilisation.

A notable point of resemblance with the serpent-dragon column is found in a probably somewhat later cylinder seal impression of the judge Ishme-karab-ilu from the Elamite city of Kabnak (Haft Tepe) in southwestern Iran, dated *c.* 1700 BC (fig. 16) (cf. Amiet, 1973. P. 37, N 48; Pl. IX, N 48; a fragmentary tablet with the same seal impression was exhibited in 1978 at the Museum of Haft Tepe, Iran [cf. de Miroschedji, 1981. P. 3, N 7; Pl. II, N 5; Collon, 1987. P. 169–170, Cat. N and fig. 795; The Royal City of Susa, 1992. P. 118, fig. 40). The impression shows the god seated on the canonical Elamite coiled serpent-throne. It stands on a dais held in place by an upright column formed of the bodies of two tightly entwined mythical serpents, their open-jawed heads projecting to either side of the foundation of the throne. The entwined serpent column issues from a cluster of stylised mountains flanked on either side by kneeling mythical figures. Facing the enthroned divinity is a large standing god wearing the distinctive divine headdress of the Elamite pantheon. According to Pierre de Miroschedji's translation of the long accompanying inscription, the serpents are identified as the deities Napirisha, the human-faced serpent, and Inshushinak, probably a god of fertility, the horned and bearded serpent (Amiet, 1966. P. 320, figs. 239A, B; P. 378-379, fig. 286 ABC; de Miroschedji, 1981. P. 15–17). The serpent-throne motif is also known from the greater Mesopotamian tradition but seems to have developed in Elam and thence to have been appropriated in neighbouring Mesopotamia (de Miroschedji, 1981; Negahban, 1991. P. 79). In the Oxus Civilisation, it is only the goddess who is enthroned on a recumbent quadruped dragon and not on a coiled bearded serpent. An exception is represented on a



Fig. 17. Circular compartmented loop-handled stamp seal with winged raptor-headed and -taloned figure of a deity enthroned on a coiled serpent.

Silver. Diameter 4.6 cm, height including loop handle 0.9 cm. Putative origin: Northern Afghanistan, Bactria. Late III–early II millennium BC. Collection Le Berre, Paris, inv. N 11.

After: Amiet, 1986. Fig. 182.

Bactrian circular compartmented silver seal featuring what appears to be her winged anthropomorphic likeness but with raptorial head seated sidesaddle, a position generally reserved for the goddess, on a huge coiled serpent (fig. 17) (cf. de Miroschedji, 1981. P. 20, Pl. 11, fig. 2; Sarianidi, 1983. P. 518, Pl. 36, fig. 5; 1986. P. 284, schematic drawing bottom left, 286; Amiet, 1986. P. 147, 197, fig. 182). The hands are not held according to the common convention at the waist but are bent at the elbows and outstretched to hold onto the seal's simple rim. Moreover, the arms terminate in what appear to be talons that also demarcate the feet. It is significant though that this deity is seated on a coiled serpent but *not* on a quadruped dragon.²⁸

The vivid expression of the animal nature of all the creatures reflects the immediacy of the Oxus Civilisation visual symbolism. Extraordinary attention has been paid to the definition of the individual figures on the compartmented silver seal. This may naturally be referred to the observation of the apparent phenomena of animal life, whose reproductive processes were of vital economic significance for the intensive subsistence practices associated with the oasis-based irrigation agriculture of Bactria-Margiana. As Francfort points out “this cycle was widespread in Eurasia before the advent of the Indo-Iranian or Indo-Aryan speaking peoples,

²⁸ On a the above-mentioned cylinder seal excavated at Gonur Depe in Margiana (in grave 23 at the Large Gonur necropolis) the goddess portrayed with vegetal stalks springing from her body is seated on a horned serpent (Sarianidi, 1998b. P. 324, N 1785; 2002. P. 278, lower figure; 2007. P. 105, fig. 180; Francfort, 2010. P. 69, fig. 3).



Fig. 18. Seated female figure with knees tucked up and heels raised cast in the form of the loop handle of a large compartmented stamp.

Silver. Diameter 8 cm. Putative origin: Northern Afghanistan, Bactria. Germany, private collection. Photo by the author.

who later adopted and adapted various parts of it” (Francfort, 2010. P. 80). Embodying those animal powers that humans lack, the mistress of dragons and wild beasts the “divine” power that creates, sustains and manifests itself in a variety of life-forms within the earth and its cycles. The placement of the animals on either side of the central axis formed by the entwined serpent column and the body of the standing goddess dragons reaffirms the location of the cyclical process at the axial centre portraying a pictorial account of of continuous and ongoing process.

It is interesting to note that at the very centre of the seal a plastically modelled statue of a seated presumably female figure with knees tucked up and heels raised (fig. 18). The figure, cast in the round replacing the conventional loop handle, marks the appearance of a unique feature, apparently unrecorded before this time. Situated on top of the lower body, more precisely the pelvis region, of the goddess, the body of the sculpted figure is oriented towards her upper body thus forming part of the central vertical axis of the overall seal composition. In particular the head rendered with shoulder-length hair covering the ears shows signs of use-wear. The miniature cast figure is wrapped in an ankle-length garment, the hands placed above the knees. The identifica-



Fig. 19. Seated male figure with knees tucked up and wearing boots, upturned at front, cast on the butt of a flat triangular-bladed axe with concave sides and splayed shaft hole.

Bronze. After: Ligabue, Salvatori, 1988. Fig. 102.

tion of the figure as female is supported by an analogue representation in the same posture cast on the butt of a flat triangular-bladed axe with concave sides and splayed shaft hole (fig. 19).²⁹ The bearded and moustachioed, hence manifestly male figure sits on a low pedestal clad in a garment draped over his left shoulder but leaving his right shoulder bare and wearing boots, upturned at front, the distinctive footwear of male figures in the Oxus Civilization and beyond. His right hand is clenched on his right knee, while his left arm is completely hidden by his garment. The butt of the axe around the shaft hole, beneath the sitting figure, is engraved with geometric motifs comprising hachured lines along the edges terminating in a large blossom; the interstices are covered by a scale-like pattern which have been interpreted as symbolising the stylised representation of mountains (cf. Salvatori, 1988. P. 181).

²⁹ In a conversation Prof. H.-P. Francfort remarked upon the notable similarity between this figure and the male figure sitting on an axe (Bactria an Ancient Oasis Civilization, 1988. Fig. 102–103) whom he tentatively proposes to have analogies with the figure of a “priest”, akin to the Mohenjo-Daro sculptural figure named “priest-king” by Sir John Marshall (Karachi, National Museum of Pakistan. Inv. N 50.832; Marshall, 1931. P. 356–357, Pl. 98). It is of note that in neighbouring Elam the title of “high-priestess” existed and was used in the same manner as that of her male colleagues (Akkadian *paschischu rabu* with the addition of “female”) (see: Koch, 2007. P. 154).

What was the function of the female figure on the silver seal? What was her social position? It seems reasonable to think that she was accorded a special status and must in some way be in rapport with the standing female deity who appears to be associated with bringing forth all kinds of living animals. Patently and directly associated with the procreation of the animal world, as source of fertility-fecundity and the elemental mysteries of life and nature, the goddess seems to be linked with maintaining the eternal cycle of life.

The iconography makes abundantly clear that she is the great goddess who ranks first before all in power and authority in the hierarchical pantheon of the Oxus civilisation (Francfort, 1992. P. 197; 1994. P. 407, 410; 2008. P. 3–4; Kuehn, 2010. P. 64).³⁰ The lions, caprids, serpents and dragons that appear in scenes with the BMAC goddess characterise her as protectress and “mistress of animals” representing her mastery over nature in the widest sense³¹ as is evident in the configuration on this seal. Expressing a sense of close relation to the life that sustains animals and humans alike, she appears to represent the as experienced in the relationship of the people of Bactria-Margiana to animals and mythical creatures. Her celestial aspect underlines the mysterious connection between unapproachable distance and creative powers/fecundity. The consistency with which this symbolic structure reasserts itself indicates that significance was accorded to vertical axial balance, to bilateral symmetry, visual stability and to a hierarchy within a mythic order. It appears as if the transformation within this order is facilitated through the figure of the goddess as well as the ophidian and quadruped serpent-dragons.

The seal is framed by an elaborate interlace cable border which is worked in the same manner as the bodies of the intertwined mythical serpent supporting the standing goddess. Yet instead of the tiny, dotted pattern that accentuates the intertwined reptiles, the coils that compose the frame are enlivened with fine parallel lines. Since in the Oxus civilisation, coiled interlaces were sometimes interchangeably used with entwined serpents on which ophidian characteristics (such as the heads and tails) were clearly identifiable, it is conceivable that the guilloche frame might be semantically equivalent to sinuously intertwined serpents coiling around the seal. In this iconographic representation the coils would thus encircle a “cosmic setting” encapsulated in the seal. Moreover, the latter could possibly in some form be related to the element of water, perhaps comparable to the concept of the “waters” of *apsû* (Sumerian *abzu*), the great sweet water ocean and subterranean source of fresh water, hence life (“apsû” – CAD, Vol. A/2, 1968; cf. Galter, 1983. P. 80–84), surrounding the world, the primal monster made of fresh water depicted in the *Enûma Elish*, the Babylonian epic of creation which had achieved canonical status in Assyria by the late second millennium BC (cf. Lambert, 1966).³² The giant undulating serpents with dragon heads, one covered with scales, the other with a dotted pattern, which coil up the sides of the monumental fourteenth-century-BC stele of king Untash-Napirisha, identified by an inscription on his arm, dedicated to Inshushinak, “the lord of Susa [the ancient Elamite capital],” may possibly convey an associated *Weltanschauung* (fig. 20) (Amiet, 1966, P. 374, fig. 282; de Miroschedji, 1981. P. 15–17, pl. 8; Amiet, 1988b. P. 95, figs. 53, 54;

30 In neighbouring Elam the feminine element, in the human as well as in the divine world, enjoyed a prominent position (Vallat, 1989. P. 46–49). In a treaty between Khita and Naram-Sin from the third millennium (2300 BCE) invoking the gods of Elam, the goddess Pinengir (later probably called Kiririsha, “Great Goddess”) appears in first place as the highest deity of the Elamite pantheon at the head of the thirty-seven male and female divinities whose names were preserved on the tablet (Koch, 2005. P. 568; *eadem*, 1995, P. 1960–1961; *eadem*, 2007. P. 154. While parallels with the Mesopotamian goddesses, Inanna/Ishtar or Nana, have been proposed, these goddesses did not attain such a high rank (Francfort, 2008. P. 4).

31 See the definition of “mistress of animals” by Keel, Uehlinger, 1998. P. 116, 140, 182–184.

32 Based on close parallels between the serpents and flowing water, P. Amiet (1980. P. 151. N. 153) has made such a suggestion with regard to ancient Mesopotamian glyptic representations. As confirmation he cites the association of the serpent-dragon serving as throne with the god holding the vase with flowing water on the Elamite rock reliefs in the highland region of Fars, at Naqsh-i Rostam and Kurangun (cf. Herzfeld, 1935. Pl. III; Seidl, Skjærvø, 1986; The Royal City of Susa, 1992. P. 130).

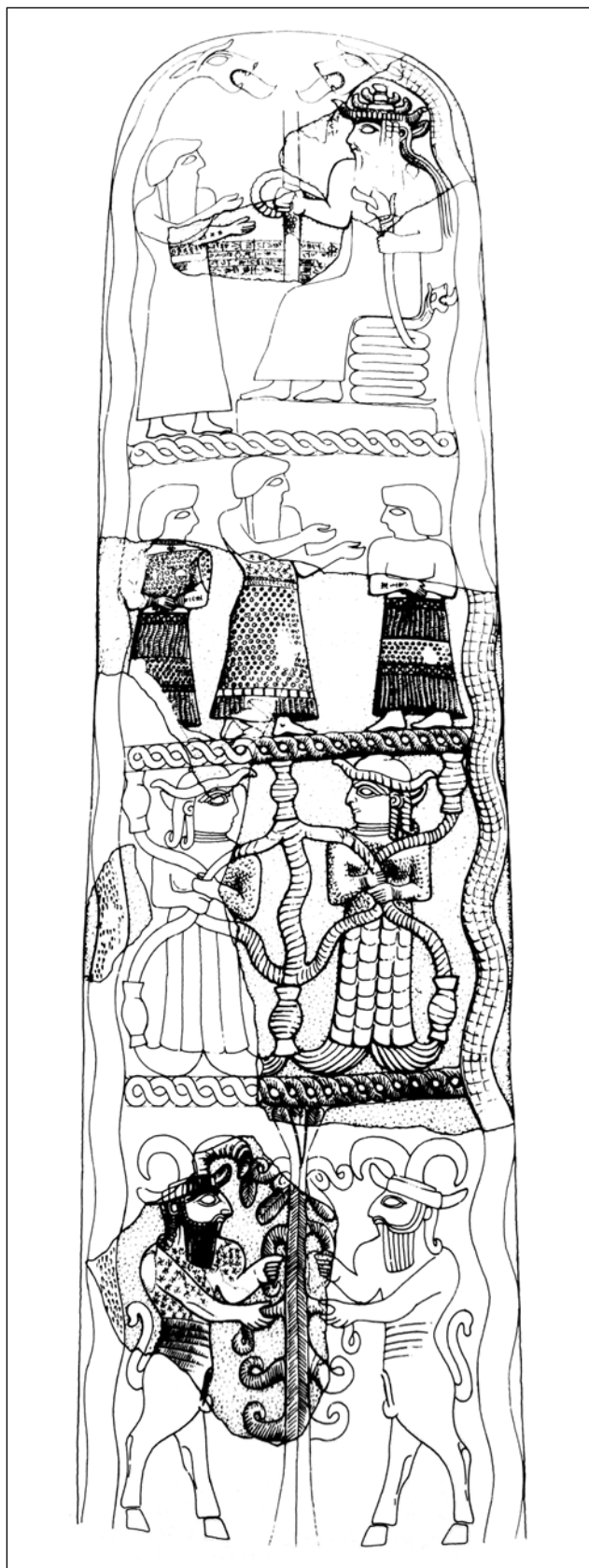


Fig. 20. Reconstruction of the stele of Untash-Napirisha. Sandstone. Reconstructed height 262 cm, width 80 cm. Middle Elamite period, 14th century BC. Southwest Iran, originally set up at Chogha Zanbil (Elamite Dur Untash) and later brought to Susa, Acropole. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités Orientales, inv. N Sb 12. After: de Miroshedji, 1981. Pl. 7.

The Royal City of Susa, 1992. P. 127–130, fig. 80; Kuehn, 2008. P. 64, fig. 32).³³

That both the ophidian and the quadruped serpent-dragons are figured on the seal underlines their centrality in the iconography of the BMAC.³⁴ Ophidian creatures are known to move both above and below the surface alluding to an inevitable dislocation between the spheres of the living and the “other side.” Both are articulated within the larger structure, one which perhaps postulates the vertical axis and bilateral symmetry as a sign of necessary and coherent order and appears to express the desire for an essential balance in nature, and, consequently, in the life and death cycle.

The seal thus may be seen to represent a powerful metaphor of duality. The chthonian aspect of the mythical serpent is expressed through its position as entwined chthonian axis, not only supporting the feminine deity but forming one single axis with her body marking her as both a creator and potential destroyer simultaneously. These boundaries are constantly transgressed.

At the same time its celestial aspect appears to be emblematised by the potent drag-

³³ The top register shows the king standing before the great god associated serpents and flowing waters. In one hand the latter holds a fire-spitting horned serpent-dragon sceptre-like in his hand and in the other the traditional emblems of divine power, a scaly-textured rod and ring. Crowned by a multiple-horned headgear he is seated on an interlaced serpent-throne with coils terminating in dragon heads. P. Amiet (1973. P. 17) believes the god’s attributes to be more evocative of the mountain god Napirisha, sometimes considered the highest god of the Elamite pantheon; P. de Miroshedji (1981. P. 15–17) identifies him with Inshushinak who is named in the inscription (cf. The Royal City of Susa, 1992. P. 118 and 130). F. Wiggermann (1996. P. 46) associates the god on a serpent-throne with the older Akkadian snake god Ishtaran with the significant difference that the anthropomorphic and theriomorphic parts have split into two separate entities whereas on 19th–to 17th-century depictions the serpent was still represented with a human head.

³⁴ They both may be relatives of the Akkadian giant serpent *bašmu*, a mythological horned viper living in the sea and its swamps (Pientka-Hinz, 2009. P. 205). Probably the characteristics of the genus *cerastes* stood model for this creature, but the real habitat of these extremely dangerous venomous vipers is the desert or vegetated oases (Wagner, Wilms, 2010. P. 297; for instance P. 301, N 5; on its life-threatening venom – see: Warrell, 2004). The *bašmu* length is sometimes described as sixty ‘double miles’ that is six hundred kilometres. It is probably related to the great mythical dragons, *ušumgallu*, *mušhuššu* or *mušmahhu* (Wiggermann, 1994. P. 166–169; 1997. P. 34–35; Pientka-Hinz, 2009. P. 205; Collon, 1987. N 195).

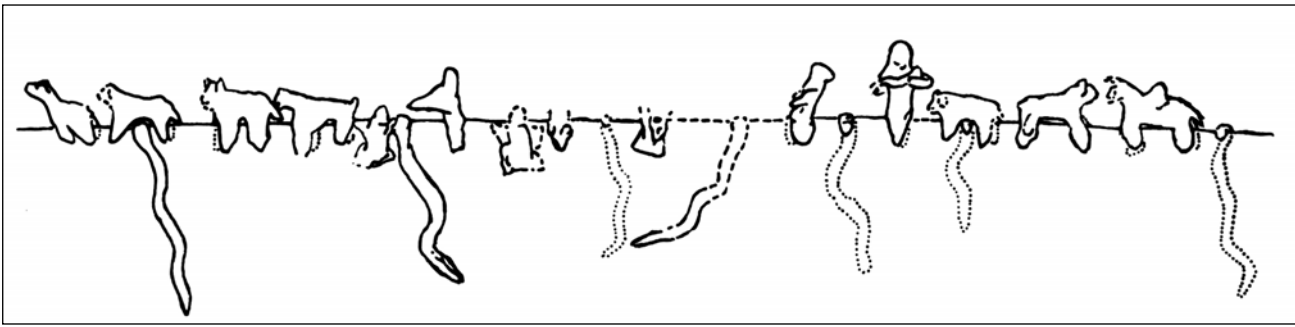


Fig. 21. Vessel with frieze of standing anthropomorphic figures, quadrupeds, birds and serpents. Clay. Southeastern Turkmenistan, Margiana, Togolok 1, "Temple". After: Sarianidi, 1986a. P. 138, central schematic drawing.

ons issuing from the shoulders of the goddess, serving her as wings and, it is tempting to suggest, symbolising the of the quadruped dragon through the body of the goddess. Hence, instead of small caprids, as featured on the Bactrian silver seal (fig. 3), or the raptorial birds, as on the Bactrian copper alloy seal (fig. 8), here emits dragons. She herself is "enthroned" on, or rather seems to arise from, intertwined mythical serpents from which, in turn, spring small caprids, akin to the imagery exemplified in the above-discussed Murghab-style seal (fig. 15). By association, the dragon may also be conceived as a benign being that fulfils a protective function or, by extension, one may hypothesise, the engendering of the dragon through the body of the goddess may allude to its creation.

The BMAC material culture clearly shows that the dragon is in some way linked to a hypothetical axis both with and through the goddess. The symbolic association of the dragon with ideas of transformation, and hence with passages from one season, stage or realm to another, suggests the possibility that the iconography of both the serpent and the quadruped dragon may also serve as vehicle symbolising some form of order.

In contrast to humans and animals, the goddess seems to have access to an inexhaustible abundance.

Of importance is her close association with serpents and its close relative, the dragon. In the basic repertoire of religious iconography guarded with extreme conservatism, even archaism, over millennia, the serpent is the representative par excellence of life and immortality and eternal life (cf. Heidel, 1949. P. 10).

This notion may perhaps be elucidated through a modelled frieze applied to the rim of cultic clay vessels from the area commonly known as the "Temple" at Togolok 1 oasis south of Gonur in Margiana. The frieze is composed of standing anthropomorphic figures (one figure holding what appears to be a child in the arms), quadrupeds, birds and serpents. The latter are writhing up the outer and inner walls of the vessel, their heads projecting above the rim. Some of the serpent heads seem to press against the bellies of the standing quadrupeds (fig. 21).³⁵ The frieze was interpreted by Sarianidi as a symbolic composition, possibly a kind of *imago mundi*, which reflects mythological beliefs of the Oxus Civilisation with serpents below and mammals and birds above (Sarianidi, 1986a. P. 141–142; cf. Francfort, 1994. P. 414).

The archaic nature of these conceptualisations is reflected in the depiction of a serpent on a steatopygous female clay figure from Kara Depe, dated by Masson and Sarianidi to the Namazga III period (early III millennium BC), where it is represented as wriggling up towards

³⁵ Inside the large bowl five miniature vessels were stored comprising two open vase-like containers, a small bowl, a stem bowl and a pouring vessel (Sarianidi, 1986a. P. 119, fig. 32; 1998. Fig. 10.1; 2006. P. 266, fig. 120; 2008. P. 274, fig. 160), which, according to Sarianidi, might have been used in a ritual context, perhaps in connection with the ephedra twigs and poppy seeds discovered in the so-called sanctuary of Togolok 21 in Margiana which might be indicative of the use of hallucinogenic beverages (Sarianidi, 1986a. P. 119–123, fig. 32–34; P. 138–142 with schematic drawings; 2002. P. 180–181, and figures; 2006. P. 263, fig. 117; 2008. P. 133, fig. 55). Two further clay bowls with similar compositions but featuring only quadrupeds and serpents were discovered at the same site (Sarianidi, 1998. P. 36, fig. 10.2 and 10.3 – Togolok 21). Similar vessels are known from Bactria (Sarianidi, 1981a. P. 180).

the seated figure's belly (fig. 22) (Masson, Sarianidi, 1972. P. 213).

It is thence not impossible that the overall iconography of the seal is not only associated with the parturition of animals but also of humans.

The underlying mythological nucleus may point to the conception that there is an intimate connection between the goddess, and—perhaps through the serpent—the source of life. Based on the above, we can hardly avoid the conclusion that she is a serpent and dragon goddess. Her association and sharing of characteristics with serpent deities, her overall association with fertility-fecundity, and, by extension, regeneration and “life-giving,” all point in that direction.



Fig. 22. Seated steatopygous female figure with serpent. Clay. Southern Turkmenistan, Kara depe. After: Masson, Sarianidi, 1972. Fig. 27.

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