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Uehlinger, Christoph

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MASTERING THE SEVEN-HEADED SERPENT: A STAMP SEAL FROM HAZOR PROVIDES A MISSING LINK BETWEEN CUNEIFORM AND BIBLICAL MYTHOLOGY

Abstract: The Stamp Seals from the Southern Levant (SSSL) project is based on a comprehensive corpus, big data, and complex historical scenarios. Sometimes, though, an individual artifact stands out as a highlight in its own right. Such is the case with a stamp seal discovered recently at Tel Hazor. It is unusual in several respects, but mainly because of its spectacular base engraving. The main scene represents a hero fighting a coiled, seven-headed serpent; it is enhanced by a series of mixed creatures and secondary motifs. This article offers a description and analysis of the object, situating its iconography in the long history of combat myths spanning from mid-third-millennium southern Mesopotamia through second-millennium northern Syria to first-millennium Phoenicia and Israel. Most significant for a historian of Near Eastern mythology, the seal provides a visual missing link in the main motif's literary transition from Late Bronze Age Ugarit to the Hebrew Bible.



Figure 1. Stamp Seal from Hazor, Area M, pillared building M4, constructional fill, Locus L22–017, Str. VII, early eighth century BCE. Photographed by Manuel Cimadevilla, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem; © Selz Foundation Hazor Excavations in Memory of Yigael Yadin; CSSL Hazor no. 121.

In memory of Amnon Ben-Tor (1935–2023)

The stamp seal published here for the first time is a rectangular plaque made of enstatite measuring 40.74 x 29.29 x 11.83mm (fig. 1). The seal is flat, with its back slightly domed, and it lacks a perforation channel. One of the narrow sides is damaged, and further damage occurred at the bottom of the base engraving. Discovered during excavations at Tel Hazor in July 2022, the object was found in Area M on the citadel mound and assigned by the excavators to Stratum VII based on its retrieval from a construction fill associated with pillared building M4.¹ Strata VII and VI both date to the Iron Age IIB (ca. 840–732 BCE). Since it was only the latest phase of Stratum V that was destroyed (probably) in 732 BCE, it is plausible to situate Stratum VI in the mid-eighth century BCE. Consequently, the Stratum VI floor provides a *terminus post quem non* for the seal's production in the first half of the eighth century BCE. Entirely consistent with the seal's glyptic, stylistic, and iconographic analysis, this dating would situate its production during the reigns of Israelite kings Jehoash (ca. 800–785 BCE) or Jeroboam II (ca. 785–745 BCE) and their Phoenician contemporaries at Tyre and Sidon.



Figure 2. Enlarged photograph and line drawing of the engraved base of the Hazor stamp seal (drawn by Ulrike Zurkinden-Kolberg, Stamp Seals from the Southern Levant project).

DESCRIPTION OF THE BASE ENGRAVING

The base is engraved in “landscape” orientation, except for one motif to the extreme left (fig. 2). The main scene, occupying roughly the right half of the sealing surface, depicts an anthropomorphic hero facing right who fights a seven-headed, twice-coiled, erect serpent. With his forward-held arm and hand, the hero seizes the joint of the serpent’s closest two heads, holding the beast at some distance, while raising his more active arm behind his head to stab the enemy with a pointed spear, which he holds forcefully (if somehow unpractically) at the hind extremity of its shaft—the seal engraver probably intended to stress the movement’s irresistible strength.

On the left half of the sealing surface, three hybrid creatures are shown attending, gesturing, or moving towards the combat scene. Behind the hero on approximately the same ground-level, a crouching griffin seems to rise up towards the hero; its composite body is that of a modified lion (neck, chest, back, four legs and tail), enhanced by characteristics of a bird of prey (claws, crooked beak, a raised wing that stands for a pair). A uraeus emerges from its chest, adding to the creature’s dangerous potential, which is here put at the hero’s service. Above the griffin, roughly at level with the hero’s head and arms (and thus at the level where the combat is most

intense), an erect uraeus spreads out two wings in a gesture that is usually understood as one of protection. To the left of the two hybrids and perpendicular to the overall scene's orientation, a flying scarab is shown with its two wings spread full width; while the beetle's head (with marked eyes), forelegs (with marked tibial teeth) and back (with a dividing line between the elytra) are detailed in a close to naturalistic manner, the wings' interior design is stylized as if they were feathered (compare the griffin's wing and those of the uraeus). It stands to reason that the beetle is compositionally associated with the two other winged hybrids, as implied by its movement from left to right, and that the three hybrid beings all relate to the anthropomorphic hero, representing his subordinates, companions, and supporters of sorts. While they are not directly involved in the combat, their presence emphasizes the overall scene's numinous quality and the hero's superior power. Since the image of the flying beetle is traditionally associated to the rise and travels of the sun, our combat scene may have had an additional overtone, such as establishing cosmic order, perhaps even conceptualized in symbolic terms as a combat of light vs. darkness.

Four additional motifs seem less integrated into the combat scene (at least to us): One of two squatting monkeys gestures at the hero's feet, while the other behind the hero's back is turned down toward the griffin. There are two signs or symbols: an *ankh* placed between the two main antagonists, which probably qualifies the combat's meaning as an auspicious, life-enhancing action; another sign appears behind the hero's head. The latter sign's triangular head and downstroke suggest a West Semitic alphabetic letter (*bet*, *dalet* or *reš*), although the interior hatching would be unusual.

NOTES ON STYLE, ICONOGRAPHY, AND GENDER

This seal's base decoration is remarkable by the complexity and balance of its composition and the careful execution of physical and anatomical details of all major figures. Interior design features are enhanced by skillful use of interior carving, hatching and cross-hatching: note, for instance, the careful treatment of the hero's eye and ear alongside the cross-hatching of his hair; the detailed rendering of the hero's garments and of the serpent's body and coiling movement; and the rectangular cross-hatching on the griffin's chest and throat, in contrast to diagonal cross-hatching on the uraeus emerging from the griffin's chest. Clearly the seal cutter's intention was to depict all main characters in considerable detail.

Tradition-historically, the winged beetle and the winged uraeus are motifs originating in Egypt, while the particular type of griffin here depicted seems conspicuously non-Egyptian in spite of the uraeus emerging from its chest. The hybrids' unusual combination highlights a characteristic of Levantine visual culture, namely its capacity to reassemble figures from different geographic origin into new composites and compositions. The practice has often been labeled as typically "Phoenician", but we should not understand this qualification in an ethno-cultural sense, and perhaps simply extend it to "Levantine". On present knowledge we simply cannot tell whether the Hazor seal was carved by a Phoenician or an Israelite craftsman.

There are no clear indications with reference to the hero's gender. As secondary criteria of sexual distinction such as beard or breasts are absent; gender attribution thus relies exclusively on tertiary criteria, that is socio-cultural convention as visually depicted and translated into style. The absence of a beard does not indicate female gender, since unbearded males occur frequently in first-millennium Levantine art; it may however (but does not necessarily) indicate youth. Neither does the human figure's haircut (with locks, cut straight at the neck) provide an unambiguous clue. While such a hairstyle perfectly fits a male according to the stylistic standards of Israelite and Phoenician art, it would also fit a female, although female hair can be depicted considerably longer and fall down on shoulders and breasts. Given the seal cutter's sense of rendering anatomical and other features in considerable detail, one might perhaps have expected the indication of breasts were the figure to be unambiguously recognized as a female. The dress is similarly ambiguous: its length, for instance, would fit a distinguished male (although male heroes in active combat often wear shorter kilts or have their long robe opened up to allow vigorous stepping forward), as much as it would fit a female (but female robes often extend to the ankles). One detail may point to a male rather than a female hero, if correctly identified: a relatively broad belt, which occurs in first-millennium art with male warriors only and may resonate with a widely used metaphor (attested in non-biblical and biblical literature alike) that associates the act of girding oneself with preparing to and engaging in combat. Whether that metaphor is only used with male fighters remains to be studied (although one might argue that even when used with females, male warriors' equipment might have provided the model). With all these ambiguities considered, I tend to identify the hero depicted on the Hazor seal as male.

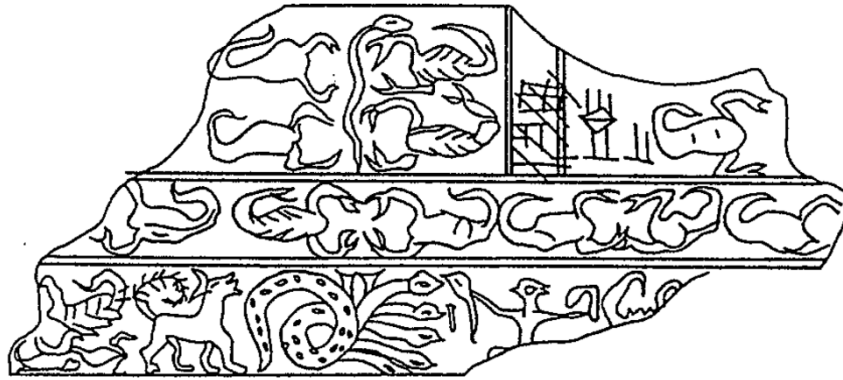


Figure 3. Nude hero fighting a seven-headed coiled snake. Early Dynastic cylinder seal impression from Tall Asmar/Eshnunna, 25th c. BCE (Frankfort 1955: no. 497, Pl. 47:497).

The seal's main subject matter, a hero fighting a seven-headed snake, is first attested pictorially in Early Dynastic III Mesopotamia (mid-third millennium BCE on the impression of a cylinder seal from Tall Asmar, ancient Eshnunna (fig. 3). In this earliest known version of the motif, the hero is both nude and male. Literary references to a divine hero slaying a seven-headed snake appear slightly later in Mesopotamian mythology. The canonical epic *Lugal ud me-lám-bi nir-ġál* relates the combat of god Ninurta against a monster named *Azag/Asakku*. While the latter is the god's major opponent in this narrative, Ninurta is praised for having slain dozens of other opponents, among whom a hybrid creature called *muš(-maḥ) saġ-imin*, literally "seven-headed (great) serpent" (he is mentioned alongside the famous Anzû bird, another of Ninurta's famous adversaries). The seven-headed serpent also figures in a list of Ninurta's trophies in an-*ġim dim-ma*, a poem relating the god's victorious return to Nippur after the defeat of the Anzû bird (Cooper 1978: 80–81, cf. 154–162). Other gods beside Ninurta (e.g., Ningirsu, Tishpak) were credited in Mesopotamian tradition south and north to have defeated a (or the) seven-headed snake, the theme serving well the reputation of any major divine warrior claiming supremacy. Not surprisingly thus, it also travelled west, perhaps as early as the third millennium BCE. It might have been known at Ebla (Fronzaroli 1997a and b) and would have become part of Haddu's, the storm god of Aleppo's, heroic record by the eighteenth century BCE at the latest. From there it was transmitted further to reach the North-Syrian coast sometime toward the mid-second millennium BCE. The question to what extent this process related to a specifically Amorite connection (on which see Buck 2020) would deserve further study but cannot be pursued here.

Textbox 1. KTU 1.3 III 34–42. Speaks Anat:

³⁸Surely I struck down Yamm/Sea, the Beloved of El,

³⁹Surely I finished off Nahar/River, the Great God,

⁴⁰Surely I bound/muzzled Tunnan/Dragon and destroyed(? , bound?) him.

⁴¹I struck down the Twisty Serpent (*btñ 'qltn*; or: the serpent, the Twisty One),

⁴²The Powerful (or: Close-coiling?) One with Seven Heads (*šlyt d šb 't rašm*).

(Translation adapted from Pardee 1997: 252; see Smith and Pitard 2009: 53, 72, 204; Wilson-Wright and Huehnergard 2022: 158–159)

Ugarit: Anat and/or Baal?

So far the mythical combat against a seven-headed snake monster had always been considered the feat of a major male warrior god. This seems to have changed in thirteenth-century Ugarit, where extant mythological literature refers to goddess Anat more often than to Baal (i.e., the storm-god at Ugarit) as the one who killed the seven-headed snake.³ It is Anat, not Baal, who in KTU 1.3 III 34–47 unambiguously claims her own exploits in fighting a long range of adversaries, among whom our seven-headed monster alongside dragon Tunnan and a foe called "Twisty Serpent" (see textbox 1). Scholars have long debated the precise identity of these adversaries, and whether they should be considered as opponents in their own right or representatives of ultimately two major

(and seasonal) adversaries, one maritime (Yamm), the other chthonic (Mot). I find it plausible to think that, on the one hand, such lists of adversaries draw on a centuries-old tradition attributing the successful deity numerous victories against many distinct opponents, which are then listed catena-like as a literary-rhetorical trophy collection (see above for Ninurta); while, on the other hand, narrative and ritual logic would have favored highlighting one emblematic combat between two major characters, the exalted deity and his or her most conspicuous adversary. There are good reasons to think that in lines 38–40 of KTU 1.3 III, the three names Yamm, Nahar, and Tunnan designate one and the same opponent; and that in lines 41–42 “Twisty/Coiling Serpent” and “Powerful (or: Close-coiling) One with Seven Heads” are epithets of Tunnan/“Dragon” (see Smith and Pitard 2009: 246–258 for a detailed argument).⁴

Textbox 2. KTU 1.5 I 1–3 // 27–30. Speaks Mot:

^{1//27}When you (i.e., Baal) struck down ²⁸Litan, the Fleeing Snake (*bṭn brḥ*),

²Annihilated the ²⁹Twisty Serpent (*bṭn ‘qltn*),

³The Powerful (or: Close-coiling) One ³⁰with Seven Heads (*šlyṭ d šb’t rašm*),

^{4//31}The Heavens ⁽³⁰⁾withered and ⁽³¹⁾went slack

^{5//31}Like the folds of your tunic.

(Translation adapted from Pardee 1997: 265)

A similar, if shorter list of adversaries is given twice in KTU 1.5 I 1–3 and its partly broken parallel a few lines later (lines 27–30; see textbox 2). Here the speaker is Mot (“Death”), who challenges his rival Baal in boasting terms (“that *I* may indeed pierce *you* through!”); but rhetoric demands that he also recounts the storm-god’s long-established reputation as a powerful dragon-fighter. When comparing this text to the previous one, two major differences strike the attentive reader: not only has the victor’s identity changed (Baal instead of Anat), but also the opponent’s (Litan instead of Tunnan), although the combat is still fought against one or several snake monsters. Again we must ask whether the three snakes mentioned are different characters, or whether the various epithets refer to a single character, here called Litan. Etymologically, Litan’s name implies a movement of twining, winding, looping, or coiling (on which see most recently Wilson-Wright and Huehnergard 2022, who translate “the great winding one”), so the option preferred above for KTU 1.3 could work here as well. We may then ask whether Tunnan and Litan represent two distinct mythological serpents, or whether they might after all be one and the same. Hotly debated by scholars, that question will not be pursued here for reasons of space, but it does seem probable to me that whether Tunnan and Litan would have been considered two or the same depended on tradition and context. They would not always have been imagined both as seven-headed, but there is no reason to exclude that the image of the seven-headed serpent monster could at times have been taken to represent either Litan or Tunnan, or the two when identified as a single entity.

Textbox 3. KTU 1.6 VI 45–53.

⁴⁵Šapšu, ⁴⁶you rule the Rapi’uma (the deified ancestors),

⁴⁷Šapšu, you rule the divine ones (*ilm*);

⁴⁸In your entourage are the gods (*ilm*), even the dead (*mtm*),

⁴⁹In your entourage is Kôṭar your companion

⁵⁰and Ḥasis whom you know well.

⁵¹In the sea are (or: In the days of) Arišu/Demander and Tunnan/Dragon.

⁵²May Kôṭar-and-Ḥasis drive (them?) out/banish!

⁵³May drive (them?) away/expel Kôṭar-and-Ḥasis!

(Translation adapted from Pardee 1997: 273; cf. Smith and Pitard 2009: 259)

Yet another reference to Tunnan⁵ occurs at the very end of the Baal cycle in KTU 1.6, when the conflict between Baal and Mot has reached its climax: Šapšu, the sun-goddess, rebukes Mot, who capitulates and admits that a palace be built for the storm-god. After which Šapšu herself is celebrated as an instance of supreme authority, and Kôṭar-and-Ḥasis (the craftsman god) mentioned as her companion who should drive out and away Arišu (“Demander”) and Tunnan (textbox 3). Clearly then, Tunnan and other monsters had not been vanquished once and forever, whether by Anat or by Baal, but they are imagined somehow alive and still associated to Yamm/the Sea. That being said, scholars at Ugarit did not consider Kôṭar-and-Ḥasis (“skillful and cunning”) to be a warrior god fighting enemies of cosmic order: the reference here is to a musician, whose entertainment may

chase away monstrous spectres from the (perhaps slightly hung-over) minds of those celebrating Baal’s victory and Šapšu’s authority.

Textbox 4. Psalm 74:13–14

It was You (Yahweh) who destroyed/divided the Sea (*ha=yām*) with your might;
You shattered the heads of Tannin (*rā’sē *tannîn*, MT pl. *tannînîm*, “dragons”) upon the waters.
It was You who crushed the heads of Leviathan (*rā’sē liwyātān*);
You offered him as food to the creatures of the sea (**le=’amlašē yām*).

Yahweh Fighting Tannin and/or Leviathan in the Hebrew Bible

Let us move on to ancient Israelite mythology of the first millennium BCE. The relevant data are so far attested only in the Hebrew Bible (most recently discussed by Ayali-Darshan 2020: 159–203). Several texts depict Yahweh as the divine warrior battling against the Sea (*ha=yām*), the Dragon (*ha=tannîn*) and/or Leviathan (lit. “the Coiler”). Scholars have long acknowledged that these passages creatively reinterpret Ugaritic or Canaanite Bronze Age tradition. Consider Psalm 74:13–14 (textbox 4), where the plural *rā’sîm* attributes several “heads” (if not explicitly seven) to both Tannin and Leviathan, who are mentioned within a partly chiasmic parallelism. As Tunnan and Litan in Ugaritic poetry, Tannin and Leviathan may here be representatives of the Sea, or two names of a single entity (Smith and Pitard 2009: 258). In contrast, “Sea” and “Dragon” (*tannîn*) are referred to clearly as a menacing pair in Job 7:12.

Textbox 5. Job 26:12–13

By his power He (Yahweh) stilled the Sea (*ha=yām*);
By his skill He smote Rahab.
By his wind He ‘put wind in his net’(?);
His hand pierced the fleeing serpent (*nāḥāš bārīah*).

Textbox 6. Isaiah 51:9–10

Awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of Yahweh!
Awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago.
Was it not You (i.e., Yahweh’s arm, f.) that hacked Rahab in pieces,
that pierced Tannin (or: “a dragon”)?
Was it not You that dried up the Sea,
the waters of the great deep (...)?

Textbox 7. Isaiah 27:1

In that day Yahweh will with his hard and great and strong sword (*be=ḥarbō*) punish
Leviathan, the fleeing serpent (*nāḥāš bārīah*),
Leviathan the twisting serpent (*nāḥāš ’aqallātôn*),
and he will slay the dragon (*ha=tannîn*) that is in the sea.

Biblical tradition adds yet another name (Rahab)—whose probably Mesopotamian origin and meaning needs not retain us here—to designate Yahweh’s snake-monstrous adversary. In Job 26:12–13 (textbox 5) the combat theme is linked not only to primeval creation, but also (an exclusively biblical development) to the Exodus from Egypt. In Isaiah 51:9–10 (textbox 6), Yahweh is not directly addressed, but his “arm” functions as a hypostatic power, expressing the deity’s superior strength (consider the visual rendering in figs. 1–2). Moreover, the reference to a mythological combat in the past is used as a reminder to call Yahweh to hoped-for action in the near future. Such action is asserted in Isaiah 27:11 (textbox 7). The terminological proximity with names and epithets of one or several monstrous snakes known from Ugarit is again stunning. That said, it has recently been argued that “despite the close affinities between the Israelite and Ugaritic versions—evinced primarily in their shared terminology—the former is not an heir of the latter nor has it been influenced by it. They both rather draw on common Levantine tradition” (Ayali-Darshan 2020: 219). Indeed, the stream of tradition could not have flown directly from the second-millennium northern to the late first-millennium southern Levant, or from Ugarit to Jerusalem. We must assume a more complex chain of transmission.

Occasionally some details may have got lost in the process. For instance, no text in the Hebrew Bible explicitly mentions the snake monster’s *seven* heads. That tradition survived, however, through other channels,

since it surfaces centuries later in early Christian literature (Revelation 12:3, where the beast is fought by Michael and an army of angels) and still later in the Babylonian Talmud (Qiddushin 29b, where mythological combat is replaced by the prayers of righteous Rav Acha; see Smith and Pitard 2009: 251). Scholars usually call on oral tradition to explain such stupendous *déjà vu* effects. I suggest that we should consider visual tradition as a complementary channel for myth as cultural memory.



Figure 4. Heracles and Iolaos fighting the Lernaean Hydra. Attic amphora, ca. 540/530 BCE. Musée du Louvre, Collection Farman, Accession # CA 7318 (Wikimedia Commons).

A MISSING LINK

That Heracles fighting the Lernaean Hydra in Greek vase painting (fig. 4) should have its best visual prototype in an image from third-millennium Mesopotamia has long been a puzzle to scholars. The monsters of the Apocalypse or late-antique reminiscences to the seven-headed snake monster raise a similar question: How is it possible that an image could retreat into literature only to resurface almost unchanged many centuries later and in different regions? Part of the answer is to acknowledge that we know only fragments of the tradition's pictorial trajectories during the second and first millennia BCE. For this very reason the Hazor seal—as a new and truly spectacular piece of evidence—occupies a special place in this long and largely unknown history of myth transmission. It provides undisputable evidence—the only evidence so far—that the theme of a divine hero's victorious combat against a seven-headed snake monster associated to the Sea (a typically Levantine development) was again (or had remained?) pictorially productive during the early first millennium BCE. The seal's documented provenance from eighth-century Hazor makes it all the more interesting, since it supports the hypothesis that in the transmission of storm-god mythology from Ugarit to Israel, from Baal to Yahweh, Phoenicia (or more specifically: scholars *and* artists along the Levantine coast) must have played a major role. It was they who transmitted the theme to their fellow neighbours in Israel, from where it would subsequently travel to Judah and Jerusalem to find several outlets in the Hebrew Bible and beyond.

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NOTES

1. Igor Kreimerman, Institute of Archaeology, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, personal communication 13 September 2022.
2. I discussed dragons and dragon-combats in ancient Near Eastern tradition long ago in Uehlinger 1995a, and addressed Leviathan in Uehlinger 1999; more recent scholarship is summarized in Theis 2019, 2020, 2022a and b. Space constraints demand to concentrate on multi-headed snake-monsters and do not allow to explore other variants of the combat theme, such as the *bašmu* or *labbu* mythology in Mesopotamian tradition.
3. For the sake of brevity, the following does not refer to KTU 1.13 and 1.82. See Ayali-Darshan 2020: 107–111 for a recent discussion of Anat’s and Baal’s struggles with monstrous creatures.
4. Yamm, Tunnan, and Nahar are mentioned, most probably as a single opponent, in KTU 1.83, a notoriously difficult text masterfully discussed in Pitard 1998, who suggests no less than three translation options for ambiguous verb forms: translation A (interpreting the verb forms as 3rd f. sg.) considers Anat (unnamed) to be the heroic combatant; translation B reads the verb forms as 2nd m. sg. and direct addresses of a male divine hero (possibly the storm-god Baal); while translation C renders several verbs as plurals.
5. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who reminded me to include this important reference.

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Christoph Uehlinger is a professor in History of Religions/Comparative Religion at the University of Zurich, Switzerland, since 2003. Trained in biblical studies, some Egyptology and ancient Near Eastern studies, he specializes in the study of ancient Levantine visual culture, media economies, and interregional contact and knowledge transfer. He has published several monographs and edited volumes, among them *Gods, Goddesses and Images of God* (1998, with Othmar Keel), *Images as Media* (2000), and *Crafts and Images in Contact* (2005, ed. with Claudia Suter), as well as numerous articles and book chapters. Senior editor of the *Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis* series, he currently serves as the co-ordinating director of *Stamp Seals from the Southern Levant*, a Sinergia project funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation.