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A Clue to a Puzzle: The Assyrian Provincial Seal of Surkh Dom-i Luri, a pattern for Darius I's Seal

Abstract

This short article examines the iconographic origins of the famous seal of Darius I, for which an Egyptian provenance has been proposed and now in the British Museum (BM 89132). Although the influence of the glyptic art of the first millennium BC on Achaemenid seal-carving is well evident, scholars have paid less attention to this influence on the cylinder seal of Darius I. Among the Assyrian seals and impressions of the second and first millennia BC, there are important examples that are iconographically similar to the seal of Darius, but the provincial seal of Surkh Dom provides the most clues to the connection between the seal of Darius and the Assyrian style seals. This seal, which was found from the excavations of the Surkh Dom shrine, is more similar to Darius' seal than any other. It seems that the Assyrian provincial style of Surkh Dom-i Luri seal should also be added to the long list of influences of Neo-Assyrian art on Achaemenid and considered as a pattern for the seal of Darius I.

Keywords

Assyrian provincial Seal, Surkh Dom-i Luri, Luristan, Ellipi, Achaemenid glyptic art, Darius I's Seal.

Mots-clefs

Sceau provincial assyrien, Surkh Dom-i Luri, Luristan, Ellipi, art glyptique achéménide, sceau de Darius I^{er}.



The royal seal of Darius I the Achaemenid (BM 89132), for which an Egyptian provenance has been proposed (Yoyotte 1952; Porada 1965, p. 178; for a critical review see Garrison 2014a, p. 82), is distinctive among royal seals of the Achaemenid period (fig. 1). Mark Garrison believes that the seal shares little in common stylistically with what he calls “the central Achaemenid court style”. In his opinion, the British Museum Darius seal remains an enigma; he suggests a western Anatolian origin for the seal (Garrison 2014a, p. 84). A fragmentary impression on the obverse on an uninscribed tablet from the Persepolis Fortification archive, PFUT 1673-201, shows a scene very similar to that on the London Darius cylinder (Garrison 2014a, p. 104, fig. 7.28-7, 29, PFUTS 0603; fig. 2). The poor and fragmentary preservation of PFUTS 0603 makes it impossible to determine whether the seal is the famous London Darius cylinder or a seal that carries a very similar scene (ibid, p. 90).

There are various ideas regarding the visual antecedents of the scene on the London Darius cylinder. It is often compared to the lion hunting scenes on monumental reliefs of the Neo-Assyrian period, especially in the North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh (Almagor 2021, p. 25; Garrison 2014a, p. 84). A cylinder seal among the Iron Age seals of Western Iran offers, however, some intriguing compositional and iconographic parallels. This cylinder seal was discovered in the excavation of the Iron Age site of Surkh Dom-e Luri in Kuhdasht of Luristan, located in the middle of the Zagros Mountains in western Iran (fig. 3). The editors of the excavation report have considered the cylinder (fig. 4) to belong to “the Iranian provincial Neo-Assyrian style”, which developed as a parallel to the Neo-Assyrian linear style (Schmidt et al. 1989, p. 414, pl. 233, no. 43).

The Surkh Dom seal shows two individuals in a chariot, facing right, one grasping the reins of the draft animals, the other aiming a bow at a rampant horned bull. The chariot has two 7-spoke wheels and a square cabin, pulled by two horses and driven by a man. Under the horse’s feet is a small bull that appears to have been killed previously. Dead or wounded animals lying under the draft animals in chariot scenes is an Assyrianizing feature (see, e.g., Porada 1965, p. 178). The placement of the wheel, set back from the cart, is also in the Assyrian fashion (Albenda 1972, fig. 1, 3, 13; Layard 1853, pl. 10, 13- 14, 18; Rawlinson 1880, pl. XCII; Paterson 1912, pp. 12, 42, 100; Wallis Budge 1914, pl. XII, XIV). Behind the figures in the cart is a trilobed floral element on a pole, probably part of the chariot or its equipment (standard, spear, etc.).

Some unprovenanced Assyrian-style seals, attributed generally to Mesopotamia and Syria (Pittman and Aruz 1987, p. 75, no. 82 [here fig. 5]; Muscarella, 1981, p. 133 [here fig. 6]; fig. 7), and a seal impression from Assur (Moortgat 1944, p. 38, Abb. 39b; Porada 1992, fig. 22. 4 [here fig. 8], depict a similar compositional format; These seals are each rendered in a different carving style; their compositions and certain aspects



of iconography are², however, similar to the scene on the Surkh Dom seal. Like the Surkh Dom seal, these unprovenanced seals are Assyrian or Assyrianizing.

A cylinder seal dating to the Achaemenid period found at Gordion shows a chariot scene that offers a different perspective (Seal SS 199; Dusingberre 2005, cat. no. 34 [here fig. 9]). Dusingberre (2005, pp. 55–56) suggests that the seal is “Achaemenidizing,” rendered in a style with “Neo-Hittite, Phrygian, and Achaemenid antecedents.” The scene is markedly different from those on the London Darius cylinder and the Surkh Dom seal. The passenger in the cart holds upturned an animal (caprid?). The scene would appear to conflate the traditional Assyrian hunt from a chariot with a heroic encounter. Garrison (pers. comm.) reports that the glyptic from the PFA has many similar chariot scenes wherein the passenger grapples with animals (rather than aims a bow at an animal).

While the seals discussed above all show chariot scenes, they exhibit much variety in carving styles, iconography, and details of composition. They highlight, as the London Darius cylinder and the Surkh Dom seal, various influences from Neo-Assyrian seal art and monumental relief. This Assyrian influence is not surprising. Early Achaemenid glyptic as preserved in the PFA engages with Assyrian art in myriad and complex manners (see, e.g., Garrison 2014b; Garrison and Henkelman 2020; Garrison 2021).

The importance of the Surkh Dom seal lies in part in its secure, and excavated, archaeological provenance. Surkh Dom was one of the most important sites of the Iron Age in the Central Zagros, often considered to be part of the kingdom of Ellipi (Dolati and Mollazadeh 2018); Kuhdasht might be Ukuta, the royal city of Ellipi mentioned in the inscriptions of Sargon II (705–721 BC) (Shishehgar and Rouhangiz 2004; Rezaei et al. 2023). Ellipi/Luristan served as a borderland between the Assyrian and Neo-Elamite kingdoms. The Surkh Dom seal underlines the importance of Surkh Dom-e Luri, and Luristan in general, in the transmission of Assyrian visual traditions into the Achaemenid period.

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²

Also for same pattern see Porada 1981, p. 67; Feldman and Sauvage 2010; Keel-Leu and Teissier 2004, pp. 141, 404 and 435 no. 141.



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Fig. 1. A modern impression of Darius I's cylinder seal in the British Museum, no. 89132 (with thanks to the Trustees of the British Museum).

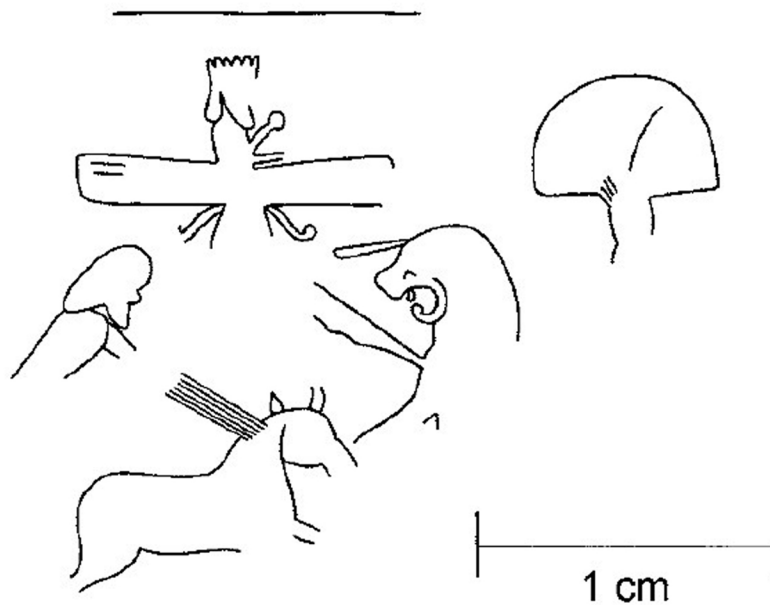


Fig. 2. Collated line drawing of PFUTS 0603, similar to Darius I's seal, from the Persepolis Fortification Archive (Garrison 2014, p. 104, fig. 7.28).

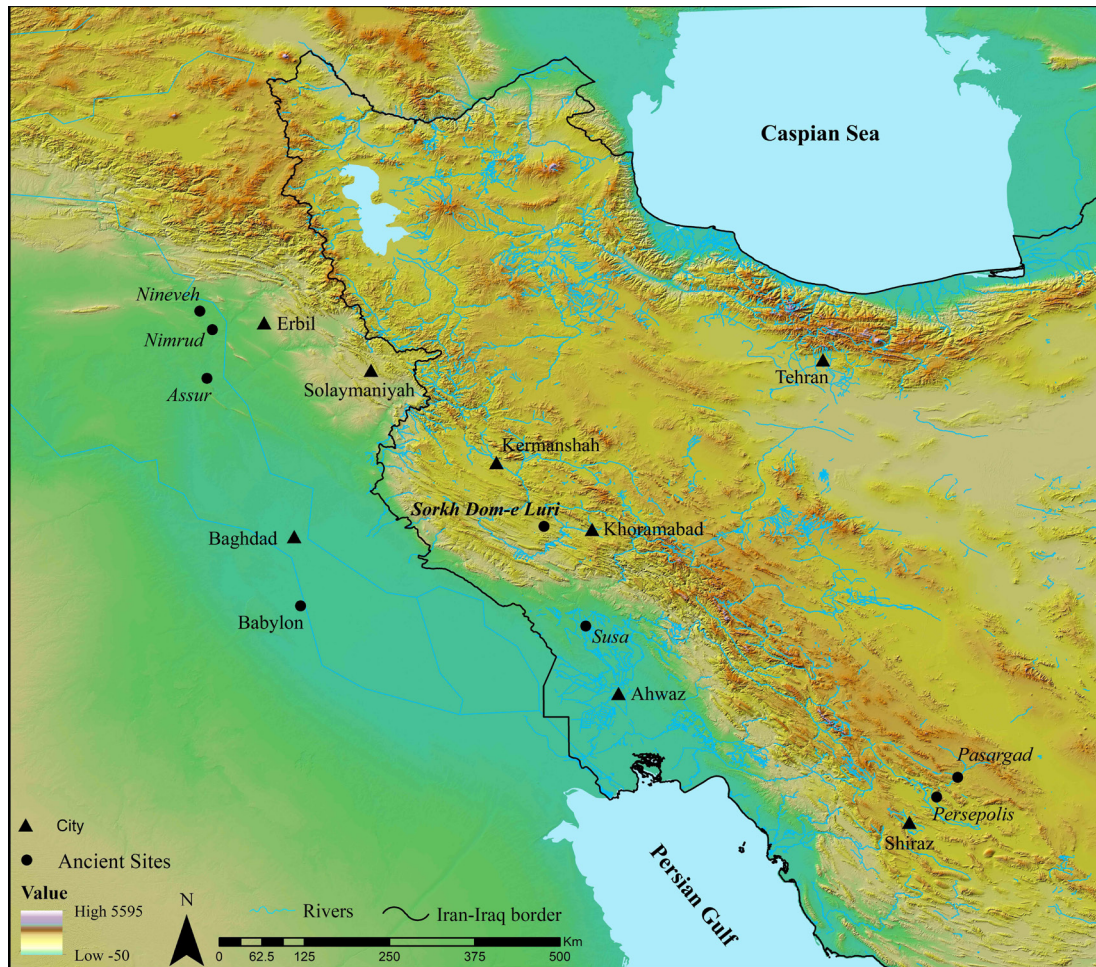


Fig. 3. The Location of Surkh Dom-e Luri (Map by Hamzeh Ghobadizadeh).



Fig. 4. A modern impression of the Assyrian style seal from the Surkh Dom-i Luri sanctuary (Schmidt et al. 1989, pl. 233, no. 43).



Fig. 5. A modern impression of the Assyrian Style Seal with the hunting scene (Pittman and Aruz 1987, p. 75, no. 82).

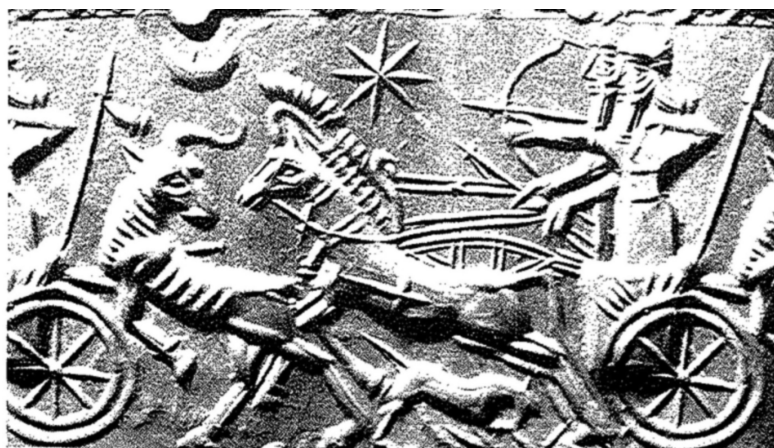


Fig. 6. A modern impression of the Assyrian seal (Muscarella 1981, p. 133).



Fig. 7. A modern impression of the Assyrian Seal with the lion hunting scene at the Walters art Museum (42. 741) (<https://art.thewalters.org/object/42.741/>).



Fig. 8. Drawing of the Assyrian seal impression from Assur (Porada 1992, fig. 22. 4).



Fig. 9. The Achaemenid Gordion seal with a related theme to the seals of Surkh Dom-i Luri and Darius I (Dusinberre 2010, p. 333, fig. 31.12).

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