THE LATE ASSYRIAN ROYAL-SEAL TYPE

By A. J. Sachs

This year is a particularly appropriate one in which to revive the subject of the Royal Assyrian Seal, for it is exactly a century since the publication of Austen H. Layard’s Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon, in which—among so many other things that remain vivid and delightfully instructive—the royal character of the type of stamp seal under discussion was first suggested. The most recently discovered example of an impression of the Royal Seal was found some months ago at Nimrud.

What are the common features found in the extant specimens of impressions of the Royal Seal? It is always a stamp seal, the outline of the engraved sealing surface being circular. The bearded king is shown standing, right foot forward, wearing the standard royal head-dress of the period, his clothing terminating slightly below the knees. His left arm is outstretched, the hand grasping the top of the head of a lion which faces him. The king’s right hand holds a dagger which he is plunging into the lion’s chest. The lion itself is rampant, left hind leg forward, left front paw hanging ineffectually close to the king’s right thigh; the lion’s right front leg is poised, ready to strike, behind the lion’s head. As in the vast majority of ancient Mesopotamian representations of lions, its mouth is wide open and its tail curls in.

Certain other features of the Royal Seal—for example, the dagger sheath projecting horizontally back from the king’s waist or the two “ribbons” streaming down the king’s back—are not visible on all the impressions. It is not clear whether or not such details were considered essential since their apparent absence on the impressions may be due to the coarseness of the clay or the fineness of the engraving.

In all other respects, a wide range of possible variation is displayed. Neither size nor depth of engraving is uniform. Some seals have a circular guilloche border, others lack it. The sealing surface may be flat or rounded.

The first impressions of the Royal Seal to come to light were excavated by P. E. Botta at Khorsabad and described in his Monument de Ninive V (Paris, 1850), pp. 160ff. Botta found them on lumps of clay (we shall henceforth refer to these as bullae, a term which is not quite accurate but which has become well established by long usage), which contain one or more narrow channels running through the clay. In these channels are still visible the impressions of a cord, which must obviously have been tied to some other object. The objects, to judge from the remains of impressions found on the backs of the bullae, were either cloth bags or cloth rolls or else wooden boxes or the like. It seems fairly clear today that the bullae were intended to
establish two facts: that the object to which they were attached was the property of the king and that it had not been tampered with. Botta, appealing to Daniel 14:13, thought that the bullae were used to seal doors, but the inscriptions—still undeciphered when Botta wrote—running around the sides of his bullae prove that he was wrong. Flandin's drawing of one of these bullae is published on Pl. 164 of Vol. II of Botta's work.

It remained for Layard (Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon, London, 1853, 153f.) to divine, correctly but without proof, that the device appearing on the bullae "appears to have been the royal, and, indeed, the national, seal or signet." Unencumbered, like Botta, with the meaning of the still undeciphered cuneiform inscriptions on the sides of the bullae, Layard concluded that there was little doubt that they "had been affixed, like modern official seals of wax, to documents written on leather, papyrus, or parchment." Drawings of three bullae are published on the title-page of Layard's book, and on pp. 154 and 161.

The decisive proof that Layard had guessed correctly that the bullae were impressed with the royal seal was finally furnished by J. Ménant, Les Pierres gravées de la Hante-Asie, Recherches sur la glyptique orientale, II (Paris, 1886), 75-78. As Ménant pointed out, impressions of the same type of seal were to be found on cuneiform tablets recording royal gifts and charters. At the same time, he investigated the inscriptions on some of the bullae and discovered that they are dated to the reigns of several different kings. Among

![A](image1.png) ![B](image2.png)

the seven drawings published by Ménant, I have been unable to identify two: his Fig. 80 which he dates to the twenty-third year of Sennacherib and his Fig. 81 which he places in the reign of Esarhaddon. These two drawings are repeated here as fig. 1, A and B.

Since Ménant's time, the Royal-Seal type was invariably recognized as such by Bezold, Pinches and King in their catalogues and guidebooks to the Nineveh collection of the British Museum and by Delaporte in his catalogues of the seals of the Bibliothèque Nationale and the Louvre. As an American writing for a journal published in London, I am delighted to report that the only two times in the last 75 years that the royal character of the seal-type was overlooked, it was in my country: the bulla found at Samaria (No. 40 below) and the numerous bullae (Nos. 14-20) excavated at Khorsabad.
Late Assyrian Royal Seal Impressions
Late Assyrian Royal Seal Impressions
The list which follows contains references to all the objects bearing the impression of the Assyrian Royal Seal known to the author. They are arranged chronologically wherever possible.  


11-13. Louvre, N 8293, 8294, 8295. Bullae found at Khorsabad by Botta, therefore from the reign of Sargon. Described by L. Delaporte, Musée du Louvre, Catalogue des cylindres . . . . I (Paris, 1920), 86, under K. 5. The photographs of N 8293 and N 8294 on Plate XIX, 5 and 6, are taken from Delaporte’s Pl. 57, figs. 10 and 14.

14-20. Seven bullae found at Khorsabad (reign of Sargon), described in G. Loud and C. B. Altman, Khorsabad, Part II: The Citadel and the Town (Univ. of Chicago Or. Inst. Publ. No. 40, 1938), 98: “Clay Seal Impressions” Nos. 113-118 and 120, with photographs and drawings on Pl. 58.


1 “Johns” means C. H. W. Johns, Assyrian Deeds and Documents (Cambridge, 1898-1923), the fourth volume of which is referred to as “Johns IV.” J. Kohler and A. Ungnad, Assyrische Rechtsurkunden (Leipzig, 1913) is referred to simply as “Ungnad.” Except for Nos. 1, 9-20 and 40, all the objects referred to in the list are in the British Museum. For further details about the British Museum texts, the reader should consult the Catalogues published by C. Bezold and L. W. King. Photographs of British Museum texts on Plates XVIII-XIX appear there with the permission of the Trustees of that Museum. Scale of the British Museum photographs: one to one.


39. BM 98663 = Th. 1905-4-9, 369. Bulla. Diameter of seal: 1 3/8 in., including the setting; 1 1/8 in., ignoring the setting.

40. Bulla found at Samaria. Published in G. A. Reisner, C. S. Fisher and D. G. Lyon, Harvard Excavations at Samaria 1908-1910, II (Cambridge, Mass., 1924), Pl. 36, a. This photograph is reproduced on our Plate XIX, 3. So far as I know, the royal character of this seal impression has never been pointed out.

The following notes, which refer only to the British Museum material, may be of some interest. Circular guilloche border visible: Nos. 1, 3, 5-7, 24-26, 28, 32, 33, 35, 37, 39. The bodies of the king and the lion are essentially parallel in Nos. 1, 5, 21-23, 26, 27, 29, 31, 32, 33-39. The composition of the bodies is more like an inverted V in Nos. 2, 3, 6-8, 33. The bottom of the king's dress is rather horizontal in Nos. 2, 26, 29, 31-33, 37; the front is lower than the rear in Nos. 1, 3, 5-7, 21, 22, 33, 39. The dagger sheath is visible in Nos. 1, 7, 8, 31, 33, 35, 37, 39. One or two "ribbons" streaming down the king's back can be seen on Nos. 1, 4-6, 8, 26, 29, 33, 35, 37, 38. The impression of the seal is rather flat in Nos. 2, 8, 22, 23, 28, 30, 32, 33, 35, 39; it curves into the clay in Nos. 1, 6, 24-27, 29, 31, 36, 37.