

# The Ibex, the Triangle and the Lentoid: A Sixth-Fifth Millennium BCE Stone Stamp Seal from Khirbet Harsis, Judean Shephelah, Israel

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## Introduction. Horned Animals in Glyptic Art from the Ancient Near East

Horned animals were very commonly depicted in glyptic art of the Ancient Near East from the 7<sup>th</sup> to the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennia BCE. These animals include both domesticated and wild species and were often accompanied by additional elements *e.g.*, other animals, human figures and various emblems that were often called “space fillers”. The current paper discusses a stone stamp seal that was found during a salvage excavation at Khirbet Harsis (Sha‘ar Ha-Gāy) in the Judean Shephelah of Israel. The seal depicts a crouching ibex and associated lentoid and triangular emblems. We believe they represent the symbolic realms of the Late Neolithic-Early Chalcolithic with their cultural and social aspects.

Horned wild animals, such as gazelles, antelopes, and ibexes, are the stamp seals’ main features at sites

like Tepe Gawra (Schmandt-Besserat 2006: Fig. 2.123, 103). These animals appear in the centre of the seal, being the main element, and sometimes they are accompanied by various objects that were defined in literature as “space fillers” (see *e.g.*, Ben-Tor 1992: 157-158).

Horned animals can also be found alongside human figures. A human figure is depicted in a Pre-Literate seal impression from Tepe Gawra, dated between 5500-4000 BCE. Its broad shoulders and narrow hips may point to a man, possibly masked, flanked by a horned quadruped and a bird. His arms are bent at an obtuse angle and in a way that the spread fingers of the open palm don’t rise above the shoulder line (see in Schmandt-Besserat 2006: Fig. 3.94).

In another seal impression from Tepe Gawra, dated between 4000-2900 BCE, a human figure of an unknown gender is seen, flanked by a horned quadruped and a schematic bird. In this case, the figure’s legs are

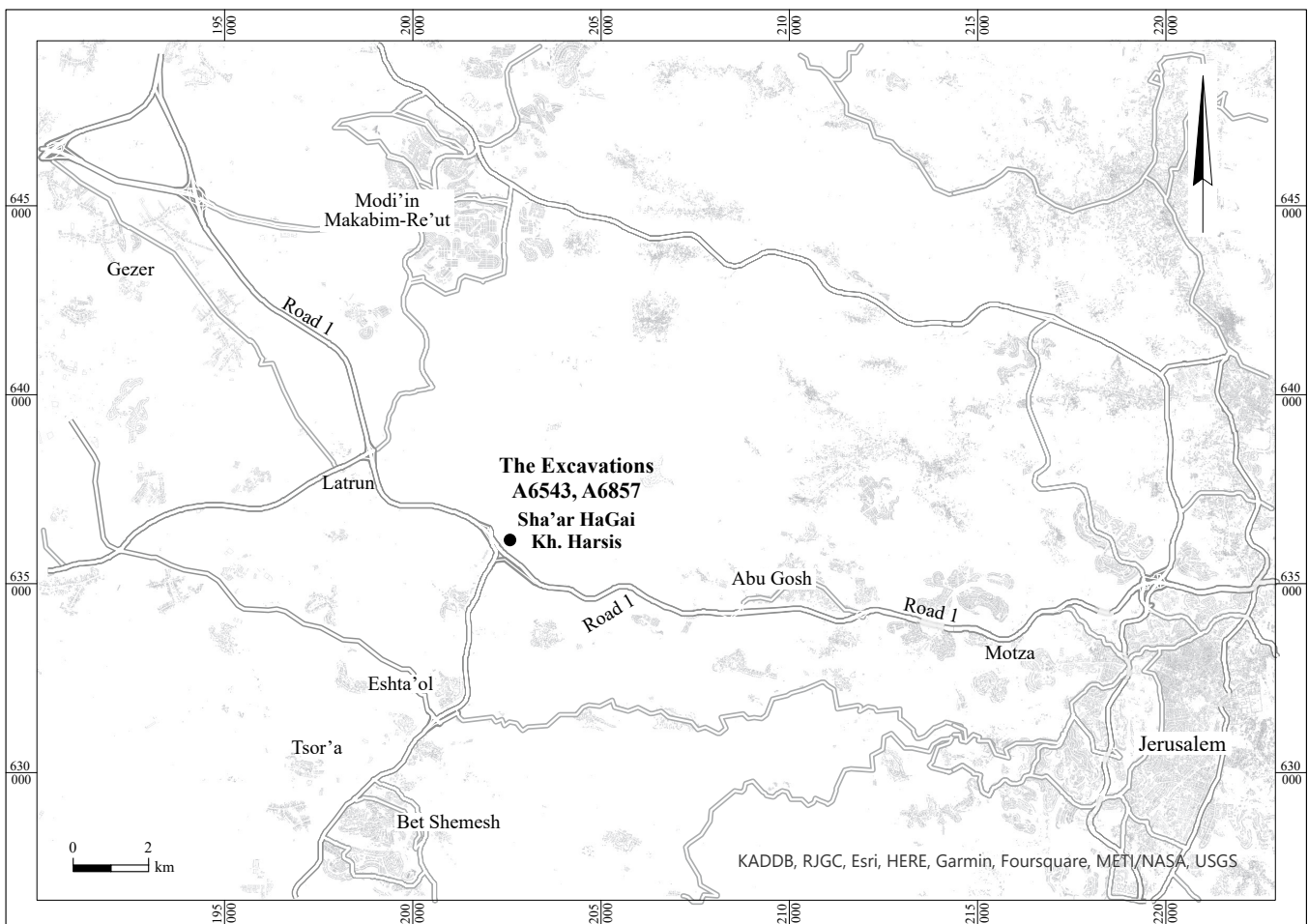


Fig. 1 Location map of Khirbet Harsis and sites in Israel discussed in this paper (Map: I. Delerson)

bent in a motion that looks like a walk or a dance. The hands are bent in the orant posture, palms open, and fingers spread; however, in an upper elevation above the shoulder line, but not above the forehead line (Schmandt-Besserat 2006: Fig. 4.96).

The connection with horned animals is well attested in further references (Matthews 1990: nos. 55, 64, 78, 138; see here Fig. 6.4). Generally, the horned animals described are wild antelopes, deers, or other undomesticated quadruped horned beasts.

During the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> millennia, domesticated horned animals and human figures or other animals can also be seen in glyptic art (see *e.g.*, Matthews 1990: No. 156).

The stone stamp seal from Khirbet Harsis (Sha'ar Ha-Gāy) can be cautiously dated between the 6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> millennia BCE based on its glyptic style. We will focus on stamp seals in which wild horned animals are the main feature, and, as will be demonstrated below, this composition accompanied by meaningful emblems appears continuously from the 6<sup>th</sup> through the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennia BCE.

### The Site

The seal discussed in this paper was discovered in 2012 during salvage excavations at Khirbet Harsis (Sha'ar Ha-Gāy) due to installing a fifth waterline to Jerusalem (Landes-Nagar 2013, 2020a).<sup>1</sup>

The site is located within the Judean Shephelah-Nahal Ilan National Park, on the edge of a slope extending northwest, right to the north of Sha'ar HaGay Interchange on Highway 1 (Fig. 1). About 700m northwest of the excavation is the dry spring of 'Ein Ayub. Khirbet Harsis is situated along an ancient main road leading from Jaffa to Jerusalem via Emmaus, upper Nahal Nahshon (Wadi 'Ali) and Abu Ghosh. Another ancient main road that led to Jerusalem along the Neve Ilan Ridge to Abu Ghosh, paved in the Roman Period, has been documented to the north of the site (Fischer *et al.* 1996: 87-98; Landes-Nagar 2020b).

The excavations unearthed settlement remains of the Iron Age II (late 8th-6th centuries BCE) and the Byzantine period (4<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries CE).

The seal, which we suggest to date to the 6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> millennia BCE, Late Neolithic-Early Chalcolithic, was found in the topsoil south of the built remains from the Byzantine period (Fig. 2) along with flint artefacts scattered throughout the site dating generally to the Neolithic period. These finds attest to activity in Khirbet Harsis or nearby sites within the Shephela region during these periods, such as Motza (Khalaily and Vardi 2020; Milevski *et al.* 2020), Abu Ghosh (Milevski *et al.* 2015), Eshta'ol (Golani *et al.* 2016; Ben-Ari and Golani 2021), Tluliot Zora (Brailovsly and Milevski, Permit No. A9030; pers. comm.) and Gezer (Macalister 1912).

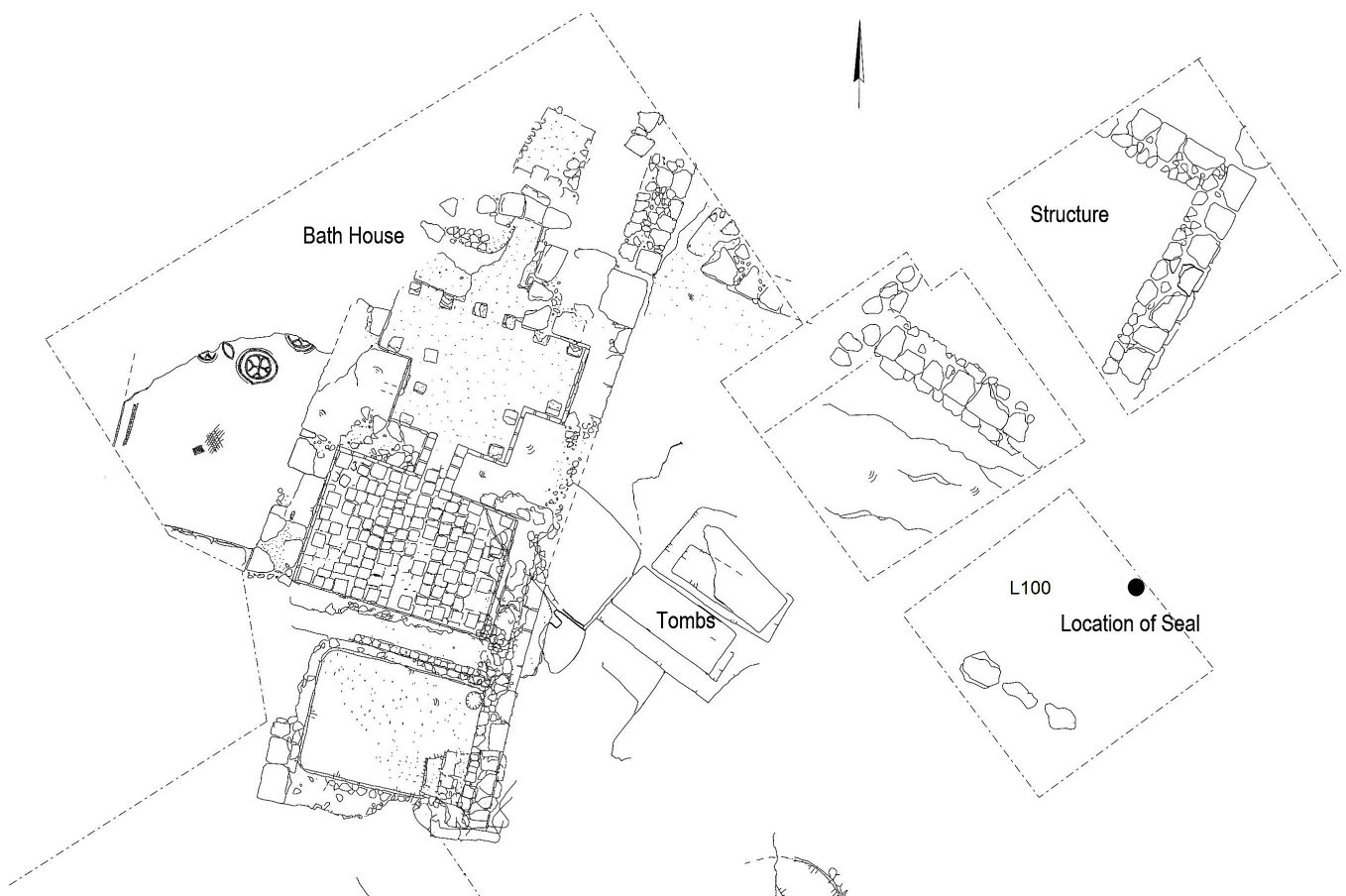


Fig. 2 Location of seal from Khirbet Harsis. (Plan: M. Kunin, A. Hajian and N. Zak)

### The Stamp Seal. General Traits

- Shape: A complete flatted hemispheroid-shaped stone seal (Fig. 3a-e; Reg. No. 33776, Basket 1034, Locus 100)
- Material: black stone (steatite or hematite)
- Dimensions: diameter 27 x 26mm, height 9mm

The seal is perforated and drilled to its full width through the sides. The hole was plausibly used for threading a string and hanging it around the neck.

The rounded back of the seal and one of the sides are slightly defective. The base was engraved with a relief depicting a horned animal. The rounded shape of the horns may indicate a wild animal rather than a domesticated one. The exact species cannot be determined (e.g., gazelle, antelope, ibex), but we prefer to identify it as an ibex. The latter is seen crouching with its forelegs bent and with rounded horns and ears pronounced.

Three emblems are seen floating within: one lentoid-shaped element between the ibex's legs, another in front of its chest and one triangular shape above its back.



Fig. 3 a-d seal and seal impression from Khirbet Harsis; e modern clay impression. (a Drawings: C. Hersch, b-d photos: C. Amit, e modern clay impression: A. Landes-Nagar)

### The Composition of the Various Elements in the Seal

As described above, the ibex seems to cover most of the round seal's area. The three emblems are located

in open or "empty" spaces; the triangular is the largest and therefore covers the larger open space.

The whole composition of the motifs within the seal integrates well into the generally round shape of the seal in what appears to be a round fluidity: the horns and legs of the ibex follow and go parallel to the contour line of the seal. Moreover, the hovering emblems (two lentoids and a triangular object) follow the same pattern and create an impression of continuous fluid and round movement.

This composition seems to be related to what was termed as *vacui horror*, the fear of empty spaces that dictated their filling with various elements known as "space fillers", especially during the Pre- and Proto-Literate Periods (6<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> millennia BCE). Accordingly, artistic designs on seals were arranged in rounded compositions rather than in a straight, continuous, narrated way that was common during the Literate Period (3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE; Schmandt-Besserat 2006).

As will be demonstrated below, while we generally agree with Schmandt-Besserat that the rounded arrangement of the various elements in the seal belongs to the Pre-/ Proto-Literate Period in Mesopotamia, we disagree with her identification of the emblems that accompany the ibex as "space fillers". We believe they had significant meanings commonly understood between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> millennia BCE.

The crouching ibex is well-known in the glyptic art of the 6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> millennia BCE in the Ancient Near East. A similar stamp seal was found at Tepe Gawra (Speiser 1935: Pl. LVII:17-19), and various emblems that float above the ibex are also known in similar seals (Speiser 1935: Pl. LVII.17; Buchanan 1967: Figs. 7-9).

### The Triangular Emblem and its Relationship with Horned Animals

The triangular emblem is seen hovering below the ibex's head, located right above its back. The emblem is not a geometric triangle, its ribs are not straight but slightly curved in a way that it creates a continuous line with the ibex's horns, the general round shape of the seal and the other lentoid emblems, as mentioned below.

While we cannot establish the exact meaning of the triangular emblem, we can at least suggest several possibilities, that derive from the common occurrence of similar emblems with horned animals in the glyptic art of the Ancient Near East.

The triangular element is described as a bird; the inner lines within the triangle are probably its spread wings. In another seal, from the same period, found at Tepe Gawra, two wild horned animals are depicted and right above their backs, well-illustrated birds with spread wings indicating flight (Schmandt-Besserat 2006: Fig. 2.173).

Birds, whether schematically or detailed depicted, continue to be shown in glyptic art with a clear relation to wild horned animals, located above their back or right below them in 4<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE Tepe Gawra

(Buchanan 1967: Figs. 7-9) well into the late 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE (Felli 2015: Pl. 10.4,8). While Felli (2015: 216) tends to see the depiction of these birds as mere filling motifs, their consistent relation to wild horned animals and the exact location in the seal between the two components (horned animal-bird) calls for another explanation.

Another interpretation for the triangular shape relates to cylinder seal impressions found in northern Syria, dated to the early 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE and considered to be inspired by the late Uruk style. One of the impressions depicts two horned animals, and several lentoid and triangular objects found between their legs and in front of them. Felli identifies the triangular objects as ladder motifs employed as space fillers (Felli 2015: 205-206).

The combination between horned animals and triangular motifs may also be seen in the iconography of the “composite female”, depicted on various objects. In this case, the horned animals seem to be directly connected with a female figure, represented by a schematic body with large eyes and a representation of the vulva, depicted as a triangle (see in Milevski *et. al* 2016: Figs. 2, 7, 10).

### Horned Animals and Oval Lentoid Motifs

Two motifs, known as lentoids, oval shapes, or eye motifs, can be seen in the seal from Khribet Harsis. One is located between the ibex’s legs, the other is in front of its chest.

The lentoid emblem is known in Eastern glyptic styles throughout southern Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Syria (see *e.g.*, Collon 1993: 16, 19). A catalogue of ancient Near Eastern cylinder seals from the Ashmolean Museum, Buchanan (1966) presents Jemdet Nasr and post-Jemdet Nasr seal impressions, depicting a row of running antelopes. These antelopes are separated by oval shapes resembling an eye or mouth, known as lentoids (Fig. 5:1; Buchanan 1966: Pls. 4.34,38, 7.83). Although the composition of these lentoids suggests that they are decorative elements (Space Filler Type 1; see above and Fig. 1.1), there is also a relationship between this shape and the horned animals (see below).

A seal impression found in Tomb U-134 at Abydos, Egypt (Naqada IId, c. 3510-3370 BCE) features horned animals with the same oval motif. This motif is depicted between the horns and backs of the animals (Hill 2004: Figs. 7b, 5.2). Horned animals and the oval motif are frequently depicted together in seal impressions from Tell Gubba (late 4th-early 3rd millennia BCE; located in the Hamrin Basin, eastern Iraq, adjacent to the border with Iran; Li 1988). The oval motif occurs between the horns. It seems significant that horned animals depicted alongside the oval motif are usually wild animals such as gazelles, antelopes, or ibexes.

Animals that may be identified as domesticated, such as goats, are rarely depicted with this motif. As Hill (2004: 25) emphasised, the animals depicted with the oval motif may signify wild forces and chaos,

especially when confronted with symbols of order (see below).

Another interpretation of the lentoid and its angular lozenge form is focused on its general resemblance to the female vulva, which was considered a fertility symbol. Its relation to horned animals, plough scenes and “Sacred Marriage” scenes (see below) may lend credence to this possibility (see Gohde 2000: 405). Gohde himself (2000: 404-407) suggested a somewhat different interpretation of the lozenge. He related it to the astral constellation Lyra, associating it with the Babylonian goddess Gula, or with the healing capacity of the Assyrian goddess Ishtar.

The lozenge, or its simplified shape as a lentoid or “eye motif”, was, most likely, an emblem that symbolised a deity or a divine quality of this deity. It was incorporated into the “cultic” scenes engraved on stamp and cylinder seals. The information encoded in these seals reached great distances after the seals were rolled or stamped into clay (pottery vessels of *cretulae*, see *e.g.*, Frangipane 2016).

### Discussion: Socio-Political-Cultural Implications

The stamp seal from Khirbet Harsis is a rather unique find in the local southern Levantine sphere, and its characteristics may help cautiously date it according to shape, composition and artistic style to the 6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> millennia BCE, with close parallels at Tepe Gawra (see Schmandt-Besserat 2006). The glyptic style reflected in the seal generally accords with what Schmandt-Besserat described as a “joyous chaos” that was created by the circular rotating composition of the elements engraved in the seal. (Schmandt-Besserat 2006: 187). The social-cultural implication for this notion is that the various components of the seal (the animals and accompanying emblems) may have had meaning, but they did not reflect a coherent story or narrative. For this reason, Schmandt-Besserat’s asserts that during the Pre-Literate and Proto-Literate periods (6<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> millennia BCE), stamp seal glyptic art reflects social perception of world circularity and all-inclusiveness (Schmandt-Besserat 2006: 192).

Having said all this, the view reflected by Schmandt-Besserat (2006), Felli (2015: 216), and shared by other scholars, that interpret the various emblems that accompany horned animals as mere “space fillers”, inserted as a result of *horror vacui* should be rejected. The thorough discussion explaining how the whole perception of “space fillers” should be changed and that these motifs were meaningful symbols is found elsewhere (Porada 1948: 60; Collon 1995; Paz 2011). Here, we would like to stress that the combination of the lentoid and triangular motifs with wild horned animals depicted in glyptic style is of no coincidence, and furthermore, it is continuously represented in glyptic art until the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BCE.

Therefore, we suggest that lentoids and triangular motifs, alongside horned animals, had a close affinity to

fertility cult that may have also been manifested in the “composite female figurines” during the Late Neolithic-Early Chalcolithic 6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> millennia BCE at sites in the Southern Levant and Mesopotamia (see Milevski *et. al* 2016). During the 4<sup>th</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> millennia, BCE, this cult was best reflected in the “Sacred Marriage” ceremonies and festivities (*e.g.*, de Miroschedji 1997; Paz *et al.* 2014).

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## Endnote

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