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Member in the Entourage of Yahweh: A Uraeus Seal from the Western Wall Plaza Excavations, Jerusalem

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A number of seals and bullae were discovered in the area of the Iron Age four-room house in the Western Wall Plaza excavations (see Ornan et al., this volume: Table 1, Plan 1).[1] Among them is a seal with an engraved uraeus. It was found during the wet-sieving of the fill that accumulated above the upper floor in Room 4 of the Iron Age building, together with an inscribed plain scaraboid (Ornan et al., this volume: Table 1:9 and 6 respectively; Plan 1: Section 1–1). Its findspot, about 0.5 m above the floor, puts its attribution to the Iron Age four-room building in doubt, suggesting that it may have originated in fills washed down from buildings upslope (see Ornan et al., this volume).

No. 9: The Seal (Fig. 1)

Sieving Find No. 71586, Room 4, L6160.
Tall, circular seal made of reddish limestone, 10.5 × 11.0 × 8.0 mm.
The drill-hole is unusually wide (Fig. 1:c, g) and runs diagonally in relation to the engraved motif of a four-winged uraeus hovering to the right. Note: throughout the description, 'left' and 'right' are as on the impression; Fig. 1:d, e. A single-line border encircles the image. The upright, S-shaped body of the reptile was gouged, but its four spread wings, head and tail, were incised, creating a linear style. The rendering is schematic: the wings terminate on the border line with a wide tip, rather than with a pointed or upward curling, as in other examples (e.g., Keel and Uehlinger 1998: Figs. 246–247, 274a–d). The small bars that indicate the feathers, either vertical as on the lower left wing of the impression (Fig. 1:d, e), or turned obliquely in opposing directions as on the other wings, add to the rudimentary appearance of the uraeus and emphasize the unsophisticated workmanship.

The more popular, two-winged version of the uraeus, is depicted on local Late Bronze Age and Iron Age I scarabs,[2] and is also found among the Egyptianized motifs on other locally made Iron Age II seals and sealings. Two ivory fragments depicting winged uraei from Samaria,[3] however, show that the motif was not restricted to glyptic and had wider dissemination in Israel/Palestine during Iron II. The Samaria ivory fragments accord well with seals depicting winged uraei (alongside other Egyptianized motifs) from various sites in northern Israel, such as Megiddo, Bet She'an, Shekhem and Akhziv.[4] In northern Israel, alongside the winged versions of the uraeus, the reptile was also depicted wingless: e.g., on another ivory from Samaria (Crowfoot and Crowfoot 1938:30, Pl. 13:5), and on scarabs from Megiddo and Samaria (Keel and Uehlinger 1998:254, Figs. 254a, 255), Tell Abu Hawam (Keel 1997: No. 2), Akhziv (Keel 1997: Nos. 37, 59, 75, 82, 137, 155) and Dan (Keel 2010: Dan No. 25). In the last-mentioned example, a wingless uraeus is flanked by two griffins.

A composition similar to that of the seal from Dan, but with a two-winged uraeus, on a seal from Tell en-Naṣbeh, Judah (McCown 1947:

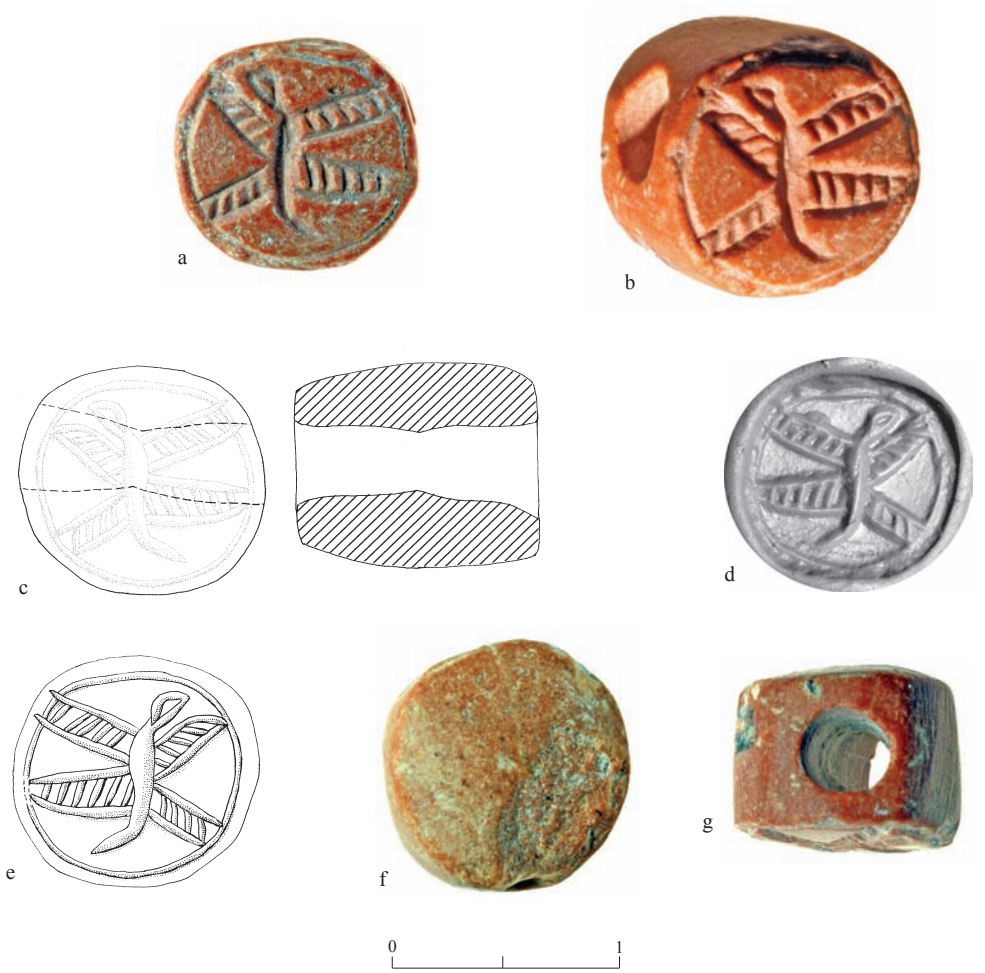

Fig 1. (a) sealing surface, C. Amit; (b) sealing surface and perforation, B. Sass; (c) sealing surface and perforation, N. Ze'evi; (d) modern impression, B. Sass; (e) modern impression, N. Ze'evi; (f) back view, C. Amit; (g) side view, C. Amit.

Pl. 54:12; Keel and Uehlinger 1998:251), sheds light on the common iconographical conventions of the two Hebrew kingdoms and other contemporary political entities in the country. The Tell en-Naṣbeh seal and others from Judah,[5] together with a seal of an official of King Aḥaz of Judah (c. 733–722 BCE; *WSS* 5) that bears an Egyptianized theme of two pairs of wingless uraei flanking a solar disc with ram's horns and three Osiride crowns, indicate contemporaneous use of both winged and wingless uraei in Judahite, as well as in non-Judahite, sites.

The four-winged uraeus on the Western Wall Plaza seal joins quite a few similar representations from Judah of the late eighth or seventh century BCE (e.g., Tel Ḥalif, Wolff 1994:501). Although not uncommon outside Judah (Keel 1977:103–105; Sass 1993:213, 215; *WSS* 796; Keel and Uehlinger 1998:273), the tendency of the local Judahite imagery to make use of it, is manifest in impressions on excavated jar handles from Lachish (three items), the City of David and Tell el-Judeidah (*WSS* 689A–E). On these handles, the hybrid is shown with the legend *lsmk/smky Ṣpnyhw*.

Unprovenanced Hebrew seals inscribed with the four-winged uraeus (*WSS* 11, 82, 104, 194, 381) complement this sample.

The provenance in, or the attribution to, Judah of these last examples, in conjunction with their late-eighth- or seventh-century date, hints at an association of the four-winged uraeus with Yahwistic symbolism. Its representation as a sole motif on the Western Wall Plaza seal (cf. Eggler and Keel 2006:49:70)—comparable to its location in the upper register on inscribed seals and handle impressions (Sass 1993:213)—further points to its relatively high status in the local imagery (cf. anepigraphic bullae with a uraeus above a palmette tree, Avigad 1986:110, Nos. 200, 201; *WSS* 170).

Unlike the interpretation of the sole motif of the lion on the seal of Nawa (Ornan et al., this volume), there is no indication that the uraeus should be considered as a stand-in for Yahweh. However, based on its identification with the black-necked cobra (*naja nigricollis*) that projects its venom by spitting or biting, as well as on the meaning of the uraeus in Egyptian iconography, Keel identified the upright winged snake in Judahite glyptic with the biblical שָׂרָף "the one that burns", as a protective divine hybrid in the service of Yahweh (Keel 1977:70–124; 2001:273–274; Keel and Uehlinger 1998:273; see also below).

The addition of a second pair of wings, as on the Western Wall Plaza seal, may have been understood as a visual means to empower the protective hybrid (Keel and Uehlinger 1998:273), as was probably the case for other four-winged beings, such as the beetle (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: Fig. 258a), or standing human forms (see below, n. 12). Indeed, the depiction of the four-winged beetle both in Samaria and on the *lmlk* impressions (e.g., Keel and Uehlinger 1998: Figs. 275, 277) demonstrates the tendency in both northern Israel and Judah to emphasize the wings by doubling them.

Concurrently, the addition in local Judahite imagery of a second pair of wings to the original Egyptian motif may be linked to contemporary Levantine and Assyro-Babylonian artistic trends. Various four-winged beings are depicted in Assyrian wall reliefs,[6] bronze and clay figurines,[7] bronze bowls,[8] ivory carvings,[9] Assyrian and Babylonian cylinder seals,[10] and Syrian and southeast Anatolian wall reliefs (Orthmann 1971: Pls. 8b, 12f, 15d, 48a, 50c). Although four-winged images are frequently found on Phoenician-style artifacts with Egyptian and Egyptianized traits,[11] various four-winged figures devoid of Egyptian inspiration, such as the ones found on West Semitic inscribed seals[12] and on bone and ivory carvings,[13] support the Mesopotamian and Syrian connection. Tracing Assyrian affinities in Judahite imagery during the late eighth and seventh centuries is not surprising, since this is the period of Assyrian hegemony. Other such local borrowings are the winged disc, one of the divine emblems found on the official *lmlk* impressions (Ornan 2005:231–234), or the Assyrian-like soldier depicted on the seal of Ḥagab from the Western Wall Plaza excavations (Ornan et al. 2008:122–123; cf. Ornan 2001).

In his account of crossing the Sinai desert on his campaign to Egypt, Esarhaddon describes two-headed snakes deadly to the touch, and yellow snakes with spreading wings (Radner 2008:306–307, rev. lines 5–7 with bibliography). These images, which were probably inspired by Egyptian concepts, may serve as an example for the diffusion of fantastic snake imagery beyond Egypt into the Assyrian literary tradition of the seventh century and the southern Levantine pictorial imagery. Snake hybrids, similar to those described by Esarhaddon, probably found their way into biblical literature, where they likewise served to describe the perils of the wasteland, in particular with regard to the Israelites' wanderings in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 8:15; Numbers 21:6; cf. Isaiah 14:29, 30:6; cf. Jones 2011: 672–673 with bibliography). Such imaginary snakes may be related to the שְׂרָפִים mentioned alongside other snakes and scorpions (Keel 1977:72–73; Rollinger 2004:933 with n. 31, 935). It is the contemporaneity of the winged snakes in Esarhaddon's account and in

Judahite imagery that permits speculation about a link between the Assyrian textual description and the Judahite images of four-winged snakes.

As suggested by Keel (1977:74–79) and accepted by many (e.g., *DDD*:743; Botterwec, Ringgren and Fabry 2004:223–228), Isaiah's vision of the שְׂרָפִים that stand close to the Israelite god (Isaiah 6:2), and have a face, legs and six wings, but no snake features, are probably the same or related to the serpentine שְׂרָפִים mentioned in other biblical references. The שָׂרָף hybrids of Isaiah 6:2 differ from the other biblical descriptions in their corporal affinities as well as in their role and character; they must have been considered positive creatures, or else they would not have been deemed worthy of accompanying Yahweh. The process in which the hazardous שָׂרָף turned into a benevolent being can be followed in Numbers 21:6–9, where after snakes and שְׂרָפִים had bitten to death many Israelites, Moses made an image of the שָׂרָף (termed נָחָשׁ הַנְּחֹשֶׁת in v. 9), whose role was to cure those who were bitten. A transformation of an evil creature into a protective being, which in turn becomes a servant of a major deity or a member in its entourage, is a well-known ancient Near Eastern trope expressed in both text and image (Wiggermann 1994:226–227). Such a transformation may elucidate the role of the winged uraeus, like the one on the Western Wall Plaza seal, as a protective being, member in the entourage of Yahweh as described in Isaiah 6:2.

NOTES

[1] IAA Permit Nos. A-4604, A-4710, A-5002, A-5432, A-5568.

[2] E.g., Keel 1977:101, Figs. 80–83; 1997: 'Akko No. 20, Tell el-Far'ah South Nos. 495, 572–574, 634, 852, 864; 2010: Bet Shemesh No. 15, 'Eqron Nos. 4, 22, Tel 'Erani No. 2; Keel and Uehlinger 1998:251; Eggler and Keel 2006:367:1, 395:6.

[3] Reisner, Fisher and Lyon 1924:368, Pl. 56f; Crowfoot and Crowfoot 1938:30, Pl. 13:4; Keel and Uehlinger 1998:251, Fig. 245.

[4] Keel and Uehlinger 1998:252–254, Fig. 246; *WSS* 1124, inscribed *'l'mr*; Keel 2010: Bet She'an No. 37; Horn 1966: Fig. 1.54; Keel 1997: Akhziv Nos. 35, 117.

[5] Some further two-winged examples from Judah are: Keel 2010: Bet Shemesh Nos. 14, 54; Bet El No. 17; *WSS* 385 from Tel Lakhish (*šptyhw 'śyhw*); Reich and Sass 2006:314–316 from Jerusalem, Mamilla tomb. Contemporaneous winged and wingless uraei outside of Judah: Keel 1997: Ashqelon No. 94; Keel 2010: Be'er Sheva' No. 15, 'Eqron Nos. 40, 57.

[6] E.g., Barnett and Falkner 1962: Pls. 126, 127; Albenda 1986: Pl. 38, Figs. 9, 11.

[7] Heessel 2002: Nos. 2–7, 9, 10, 12, 15, 17, 21, 30; Curtis and Reade 1995:115.

[8] Markoe 1985:242 Cy1.

[9] Mallowan and Herrmann 1974: Pls. 12, 13; Herrmann 1986: Pl. 17:78; Herrmann and Laidlaw 2008: Pls. 127 (top), 131, 134 (TW9.ND3506).

[10] Collon 2001: Nos. 155, 156, 180, 327–329, 331–333, 336, 337, 341, 343, 347–349, 354, 357, 358, 364–367, 371, 373, 376, 378, 381–384, 386.

[11] E.g., *WSS* 715, 730, 1020, 1036, the last two with Moabite inscriptions; Herrmann 1992: Pls. 45:207, 103:496; Markoe 1985:256 Cy8.

[12] Tel Dan, Amman, Nimrud and Tell Ṣafuṭ (*WSS* 1165, 973, 1154; Eggler and Keel 2006: Tall Ṣafuṭ No. 4), as well as unprovenanced examples (*WSS* 112, 791, 844, 1087).

[13] A find from northern Israel with northern inspiration, is the carved bone handle from Ḥaẓor Stratum VI, dated to the first half of the eighth century. The artifact is included among locally made objects with combined Syrian and Egyptianized affinities (Beck 2000:176–177), considered a subgroup of the South Syrian ivory style (Winter 1981:115, n. 108; Fischer and Herrmann 1995:152, 162). The handle depicts a standing anthropomorphic figure with four spread-out wings, touching a branch of a schematized tree. Although this figure reveals Egyptianized traits such as the hairdo and the wraparound kilt, the yoked bib and the patterned wings recall the workmanship of other locally made bone objects, such as the one from Tell Abu al-Kharaz (Fischer and Herrmann 1995:152, 162). The South Syrian attribution is reinforced here by the very theme of the 'figures holding trees' and their four spread wings, which firmly associate the scene with contemporary Mesopotamian imagery.

[14]The rare application of six wings to other protective figures, found on a conoid seal from Deve Hüyük (Buchanan and Moorey 1988:11, No. 73) and on a relief from Tell Ḥalaf (Orthmann 1971: Pl. 10e) implies that the description in Isaiah 6:2 was embedded in broader ancient Near Eastern concepts.

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