



THE MIDDLE BRONZE AGE "GREEN JASPER SEAL WORKSHOP": NEW EVIDENCE FROM THE LEVANT AND EGYPT

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In 1986, Dominique Collon attributed a stylistic group of about 30 Egyptianizing Middle Bronze Age cylinder seals found in the Levant, Cyprus, Crete and Tunisia to the same workshop, the so-called Green Jasper Workshop, which she dated to the eighteenth–seventeenth centuries BCE.¹ They are generally—but not exclusively—made of green stones, and the majority display Egyptianizing iconography, which led her to the conclusion that Byblos is the most likely production center because of its close commercial and diplomatic relations with Egypt. This favorable position provided Byblos also with access to raw materials, as green jasper is not locally available. The subject was soon afterwards treated by other seal specialists,² proposing to locate the workshop or workshops rather in Alalakh, Megiddo or Qatna. The main arguments against Collon's theory are:

- 1) The absence of such cylinder seals in Byblos;
- 2) The fact that not all are Egyptianizing and that the stylistic details are not sufficiently uniform;
- 3) The popularity of other glyptic traditions in Byblos (namely, scarabs);
- 4) And the absence of traces of a seal workshop in the city.

It was Othmar Keel³ who noticed stylistic and iconographic similarities between these cylinders and a group of Canaanite green jasper scarabs, dated to the seventeenth century BCE based on their archaeological contexts. They share a predilection for iconographic motifs such as figures in a gesture of veneration, the comb-like branch, or standing falcons, and display similar stylistic features such as elongated limbs and beak-shaped mouths. Keel suggested that the compositions on these scarabs were possibly derived from the cylinders and, analogous to Collon's "Green Jasper Workshop," named them "The Green Jasper Group." He argued for a probable southern Levantine origin (Megiddo) because they are practically not found outside Palestine.

The issues surrounding the Green Jasper seal workshop(s) remain unresolved and have not been treated in the literature in

the past decade, but sealings recently discovered at Tell el-Dab'a and unpublished finds from Byblos, namely scarabs in green jasper and other dark-coloured stones, call for a re-examination of the material.

Especially since Byblos plays an important role in the discussions on both cylinder seals and scarabs, the excavated material from that site needs to be reconsidered. Published and unpublished scarabs excavated by Pierre Montet and Maurice Dunand were studied by the present author in the framework of a PhD dissertation.⁴ To what period do the green jasper seals from Byblos belong, and where did they come from? To what extent are they related to the aforementioned Green Jasper Group scarabs? Do they display similar designs and typological features?

Several are crudely cut and can be identified as unfinished scarab(oid)s, indicating that there was a local seal production in Byblos. However, the problematic stratigraphy of Byblos and the lack of morphological and stylistic details do not allow dating them to the Middle Bronze Age with certainty. Two semi-finished items can be attributed to the Bronze Age and suggest either that a seal-cutter was present in Byblos during that period or that the city at least served as an intermediary point in the distribution network of unfinished items. They raise the following research questions: Were raw materials imported, or were unfinished scarabs finished in Byblos? Were they dispatched from Egypt or from the southern Levant? Are the materials Levantine or Egyptian? Are they related to other types of Levantine glyptic?

The gathered material is evaluated and suggests that evidence for Byblos's role in the production of the Green Jasper Workshop cylinder seals and the Green Jasper Group scarabs remains lacking, but that it probably did play a part in the production of other types of Levantine glyptic in the early second millennium BCE.

Preliminary results were presented at a symposium on glyptic studies dedicated to Dominique Collon ("Current Research on Glyptic from Greater Mesopotamia," Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels, October 2013), and this paper was presented at the "Crossroads II: There or Back Again" conference in Prague (Charles University, September 2014).

NOTES

- ¹ Dominique Collon, "The Green Jasper Cylinder Seal Workshop," in Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati (ed.), *Insight through Images: Studies in Honor of Edith Porada*, Bibliotheca Mesopotamica 21 (Malibu: Undena, 1986), 57–70. See also Dominique Collon, "The Green Jasper Seal Workshop Revisited," *Archaeology and History in Lebanon* 13 (2001): 16–24.
- ² Beatrice Teissier, *Egyptian Iconography on Syro-Palestinian Cylinder Seals of the Middle Bronze Age*, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis Series Archaeologica 11, (Fribourg and Göttingen: University Press/Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht: 1996); Christian Eder, *Die ägyptischen Motive in der Glyptik des östlichen Mittelmeerraumes zu Anfang des 2. Jts. v. Chr.*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 71 (Leuven: Peeters, 1995); Othmar Keel, "Die Jaspis-Skarabäen-Gruppe. Eine vorderasiatische Skarabäen-Werkstatt des 17. Jahrhunderts v. Chr.," in Othmar Keel, Hildi Keel-Leu, and Silvia Schroer, *Studien zu den Stempelsiegeln aus Palästina/Israel II*, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 88 (Fribourg: Peeters, 1989), 213–242; Othmar Keel, "Cylinder and Stamp Seals in the Southern Levant Between 1800 and 1500 BC," in P. Taylor (ed.), *The Iconography of Cylinder Seals*, Warburg Institute Colloquia 9 (London and Turin: Warburg Institute/Nino Aragno: 2006), 62–81; Adelheid Otto, *Die Entstehung und Entwicklung der Klassisch-Syrischen Glyptik*, Untersuchungen zur Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie 8 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000).
- ³ Keel 1989.
- ⁴ Vanessa Boschloos, *The Geo-Chronological Distribution of Egyptian Scarab-Shaped Seals in the Northern Levant Syria and Lebanon from the Late Third Millennium to the Late Iron Age* (PhD dissertation, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, 2011-2012).