

UT 68 and the Tell Asmar Seal *

Gary A. RENDSBURG

(Tab. XLVI)

The seal pictured on Pl. XLVI is one of the most famous glyptics ever discovered, and rightfully so. For one of the great values of ancient art – beyond its value as art *qua* art – is to illuminate ancient texts, especially mythic ones. And the present seal more than most works of art has done just that, giving us a pictorial representation of a widespread motif in ancient mythologies.

The motif is that of the god (or hero) vanquishing the 7-headed monster of evil¹. It occurs in Ugarit where Baal overcomes the 7-headed Lotan-Yamm²; in Greece where Herakles defeats the multi-headed Hydra³; in the

* I take this opportunity to thank my colleague, Thalia P. Feldman, professor of art history and classics, for her assistance. Her comments on an earlier draft of this paper were most helpful and are greatly appreciated.

¹ In actuality, this motif is but one variation of a more general theme of conquered dragons. See T. H. Gaster, *Thespis* (New York 1961) 137-153; and M. K. Wakeman, *God's Battle With the Monster* (Leiden 1973) 7-51.

² UT 67:I:1-3 (= CTA 5.I.1-3 = I* AB i, 1-3). The full account is in UT 68:11-27 (= CTA 2.IV.11-27 = III AB A, 11-27) to be discussed below.

In actuality, nowhere do the Ugaritic texts explicitly equate Lotan and Yamm. But note the following remark by J. Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan* (Leiden 1965) 32, "It must be frankly admitted that in the texts dealing with Baal's conflict with the Sea there is no mention of his victory over *inn* and *lin* such as the Ugaritic passages just cited and certain Old Testament passages imply. Here, of course, we must bear in mind that we are dealing with fragments of the whole Canaanite literature, so that the *lin* episode may yet prove to be connected with the fragments concerning Baal and the waters". The Hebrew cognates of Ugaritic *lin* and *ym*, respectively *liwyātān* and *yām*, are parallel in Ps 74:13-14 and probably Job 3:8 (accepting the revalorization of *yōm* to *yām*; cf. M. H. Pope, *Job* [Garden City, N.Y. 1973] 30; and R. Gordis, *The Book of Job* [New York 1978] 34-35). Since the authors of Psalms and Job are so well acquainted with Canaanite mythology, we may invoke this parallelism as tacit evidence of the identification of Lotan and Yamm. See further below, note 13.

³ The number of heads of the Hydra varies in Greek literature and art from 5 to 100. In the Herakles cycle there are 9 heads, though on Greek coins there are usually 7 heads; cf. R. Graves, *The Greek Myths 2* (Baltimore 1955) 110; and Pauly-Wissowa, *Real-Encyclopädie* 9 (1914) 45-46, for further details. Since the Hydra's middle head is immortal (cf. *Bullfinch's Mythology* [New York 1970] 144), one wonders whether the slaying of specifically the middle head in our seal is not by design. Herakles' victory over the Hydra is narrated by Apollodorus, Hesiod, and others; cf. Graves, *Greek Myths* 109; and Pauly-Wissowa, 44-45.

Hebrew Bible where Yahweh smashes the heads of Leviathan⁴; and in the New Testament where the 7-headed Satan is destroyed⁵.

The seal, which comes from Tell Asmar (ancient Eshnunna) and dates from c. 2200 B.C., was first published by Henri Frankfort nearly a half-century ago⁶. Rachel Levy was the first to point out the similarity between the seal and the literary motif⁷. Frankfort echoed her discovery with the following succinct statement: "Leviathan is shown, by parallels in the texts from Ras Shamra, to have had seven heads; in the Ras Shamra texts he is, moreover, attacked with a lance, as on our seal"⁸. Since Levy and Frankfort, a number of scholars have also noted the parallel⁹; the result is a paradigm example of the interrelationship between art and literature.

Given the number of times this seal has been discussed, it is very odd that an even more specific parallel has gone unnoticed. In the Ugaritic version of this myth, we have a fairly detailed description of Baal's victory over Yamm. The lines read as follows:

Kothar fashions two clubs
 And proclaims their names.
 "You, your name is Expeller!
 Expeller, expel Yamm
 Expel Yamm from his throne
 Nahar from the seat of his sovereignty!
 You shall swoop from the hand of Baal
 Like an eagle from his fingers.
 Strike the shoulders of Prince Yamm
 Between the hands of Judge Nahar!"
 The club swoops from the hand of Baal
 Like an eagle from his fingers.
 It strikes the shoulders of Prince Yamm
 Between the hands of Judge Nahar.
 Yamm is strong
 He is not vanquished

⁴ Ps 74:14, where the plural "heads" is used. Presumably there are seven heads, though H. Wallace, "Leviathan and the Beast in Revelation", *BA* 11 (1948) 63, may have stated this too boldly when he wrote, "We know that Leviathan is a seven headed serpent connected with water". Cf. A. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (Chicago 1951) 108, n. 82.

⁵ Revelation 12; see especially verse 3.

⁶ H. Frankfort, *Iraq Excavations of the Oriental Institute, 1932/1933* (Chicago 1934) 49. The seal's official designation is As. 32:738. Cf. H. Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals* (London 1939) plate XXIIIj; and most conveniently J. B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures* (Princeton 1969) 221, no. 691.

⁷ G. R. Levy, "The Oriental Origin of Herakles", *JHS* 54 (1934) 40-53 and plate II.

⁸ Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals* 122.

⁹ Wallace, "Leviathan" 62; Heidel, *Babylonian Genesis* 107-108; C. H. Gordon, *Adventures in the Nearest East* (London 1957) 84-85; C. H. Gordon, "Leviathan: Symbol of Evil", in A. Altmann, ed., *Biblical Motifs* (Cambridge, Mass. 1966) 1-9; A. M. Bisi, "L'Idra; Antecedenti figurativi orientali di un mito greco", in *Mélanges de Carthage* (= Cahiers de Byrsa X; Paris 1964-65) 21-42; M. Dahood, *Psalms II* (Garden City, N.Y. 1968) 206; and Wakeman, *God's Battle* 68.

His joints do not fail
 Nor his frame collapse.
 Kothar fashions two clubs
 And proclaims their names.
 "You, your name is Driver!
 Driver, drive Yamm
 Drive Yamm from his throne.
 Nahar from the seat of his sovereignty!
 You shall swoop from the hand of Baal
 Like an eagle from his fingers.
 Strike the head of Prince Yamm
 Between the eyes of Judge Nahar!
 Let Yamm sink
 And fall to earth!"
 And the club swoops from the hand of Baal
 Like an eagle from his fingers.
 It strikes the head of Prince Yamm
 Between the eyes of Judge River.
 Yamm sinks
 Falls to earth
 His joints fail
 His frame collapses.
 Baal drags and poises Yamm
 Destroys Judge Nahar.¹⁰

In short, Baal defeats Yamm by using two clubs, one to strike his back and one to strike his head. The text, at 68:14, 16 actually reads *bn ydm*, "between the hands", but as the commentators have noticed this means on the back¹¹. The striking of the head is more explicit, with the word *qdqd* in 68:21-22, 24.

¹⁰ *UT* 68:11-27. The translation follows that of C. H. Gordon, "Poetic Legends and Myths from Ugarit", *Berytus* 25 (1977) 72-74.

¹¹ First noted by H. L. Ginsberg, "The Victory of the Land-God Over the Sea-God", *JPOS* 15 (1935) 327. See also H. L. Ginsberg *apud* J. B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton 1969) 131, n. 9; J. C. L. Gibson, *Canaanite Myths and Legends* (Edinburgh 1977) 5; Gaster, *Thespis* 164-165; B. Otzen, *Studien über Deuteriosacharja* (Copenhagen 1964) 266; S. E. Loewenstamm, "Grenzgebiete ugaritischer Sprach- und Stilvergleichung", *UF* 3 (1971) 96-97; Y. Avishur, "Expressions Such as *byn ydyym* and Their Parallels in Semitic Languages", *Beth Mikra* 69 (1976) 199-208 (in Hebrew); Y. Avishur, "Expressions of the Type *byn ydym* in the Bible and Semitic Languages", *UF* 12 (1980) 125-133; and D. Marcus, "Ugaritic *bn ydm*: 'Chest' or 'Back'?" in Y. Avishur and J. Blau, eds., *Studies in Bible and the Ancient Near East Presented to Samuel E. Loewenstamm* (Jerusalem 1978) 111-117.

The articles by Avishur and Marcus contain the most detailed treatment of Ugaritic *bn ydm* and parallels. The connotation "on the back" for *bn ydm*, "between the hands", is arrived at 1) through the parallelism with *kip*, "shoulders", which are more posterior than anterior, and 2) by comparison with Hebrew *bên zərō'āw*, "between his arms", in 2 Kings 9:24, where the context clearly means "in his back" because an arrow which entered Jehoram there exited *millibbō*, "from his heart".

The seal depicts these same two features. The 7-headed monster is being beaten by two clubs (?), one in the back and one in the head. Frankfort noted the first of these parallels, that both in the seal and in the Ugaritic myth clubs or lances or bludgeons are used¹². But no one, amazingly, has noted that the weapons are striking the very same parts of the body, the back and the head. Moreover, the lance to the back appears to have little effect, but the lance to the head(s) has met with success. Again this accords with the Baal myth¹³.

If this is the case, we may want to ask whether our seal depicts two deities attacking the monster at once, or whether we have one deity attacking the monster two times. Frankfort was of the opinion that the two figures in the seal are two gods, noting that "Just as Herakles was assisted by Iolaus, so here a second god supports the main combatant"¹⁴. Clearly this is possible, but if our above conclusions about the clubs to the back and head are correct then it is more likely that the two figures are the same god. The two figures appear to be exactly alike; both have the horned headdresses and wear kilts to the knee, and the lances are held in the same position.

Artistic representations such as this, depicting continuous narrative in one illustration, were common in the ancient Near East. They are best known from Egypt¹⁵, but are attested in Mesopotamia as well. Two instances from the art of the latter are the Siege of Lachish where in one scene Assyrian ammunition attacks the city and the local citizenry is marched away captive¹⁶, and the King and Winged Genius Beside the Sacred Tree where in one depiction the two figures tend to the tree from the left side and from the right side¹⁷. A good example from glyptic art of the third millennium is a Third Early Dynastic (Ur I) seal presently in the Louvre, where two men milk a goat and

¹² R. H. Boehmer, *Die Entwicklung der Glyptik während der Akkad-Zeit* (Berlin 1965) 52 and Abb. 292, considers the weapon wielded in the Tell Asmar seal to be a spear (Speer). The exact nature of Ugaritic *šmd* is difficult to determine. Gordon, *UT* 474, defines it as "a stick, war club", though in *Berytus* 25 (1977) 72-74, he translates it "club". Ginsberg *apud* Pritchard, *ANET* 131, also uses "club". Gaster, *Thespis* 163-168, translates *šmd* as "bludgeon"; and Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals* 122, refers to it as "lance". All of these terms are, for our present purpose, considered synonymous, since what we have here is a classic case of Wörter und Sachen.

¹³ The relationship between the Tell Asmar seal and the Ugaritic myth is further proof of the identification of Lotan and Yamm. For the seal combines artistically the two literary motifs of the seven heads of Lotan in *UT* 67:I:1-3 and the clubs to the back and head of Yamm in *UT* 68:11-27.

¹⁴ Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals* 122. Note that according to one Ugaritic tradition, recorded in *UT* 'nt:III:36-39 (= *CTA* 3.D.36-39 = V AB D, 36-39), Anat assisted Baal in defeating Yamm/Lotan. But this is lacking in the primary account of the battle. See further H. L. Ginsberg, "Did Anath Fight the Dragon?", *BASOR* 84 (1941) 12-14.

¹⁵ An excellent example is the Relief of King Amenhetep III for which see C. Aldred, *New Kingdom Art in Ancient Egypt* (London 1961) 69 and plate 94. In one scene the Pharaoh is depicted facing left triumphant over his Asiatic foes and facing right victorious over his African enemies.

¹⁶ R. D. Barnett, *Assyrian Palace Reliefs* (London n.d.) plates 44-45. The relief comes from Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh.

¹⁷ André Parrot, *The Arts of Assyria* (New York 1961) 14, plate 16. The scene comes from the 9th Century palace at Nimrud.

the master drinks the milk from a cup¹⁸. The Tell Asmar seal is but another example of the continuous narrative or linear sequence in ancient art. One god, not two, attacks the sea monster. Accordingly, the relationship between the seal and the myth, especially its Ugaritic version, is ever stronger.

Dept. of Religious Studies
Canisius College
2001 Main Street
Buffalo, New York 14208

¹⁸ Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals* plate XVd. The seal's official designation is S. 464 according to L. Delaporte, *Catalogue des Cylindres Orientaux (Musée du Louvre)*: I. *Fouilles et Missions* (Paris 1920) 57.



Cylinder Seal As. 32:738