

Mythological-Religious Motifs of the Seals and the Effect of Cylindrical Seals in Ancient Ilam

Abstract

Ilam is the name of the oldest civilization and government formed on the plateau of Iran, which ruled a large part of southwestern and western Iran from the third millennium BC onwards. This civilization with the center of Susa as the center of trade of the Iranian plateau with other neighboring lands such as "Mesopotamia". One of the most important artistic elements of Ilam civilization can be considered as their cylindrical seals. The issue here is how and to what extent the seals relate to religion and mystical concepts. This research seeks to investigate the relationship between seals and the effect of seals of the Ilamite period with religion and elements of religion by descriptive and analytical methods and relying on library data. Findings indicate that the most important designs of cylindrical beads in Ilam are dedicated to mythological-religious motifs, which in most cases are the representation of gods, religious ceremonies or Ilamite kings. On this basis, it can be said that the Ilamites initially embodied their gods in the form of animals. From the end of the fourth millennium, the gods became popular in mixed forms of animals. In the middle of the third millennium, these forms gave way to the combined animal-human gods, and after the beginning of the second half of the third millennium BC, the gods were embodied in human form. Finally, during the first millennium BC, the first steps were taken to alternate the gods into a single and invisible deity; hence, they were depicted on the seals in this manner.

Research aims:

1. An analysis on the influence of the element of religion on the seals and the effects of the seals of the Ilamite period
2. Study of the evolution and development of religious seal designs in the Ilamite period

Research questions:

1. What is the reflection of religion and devout elements in the seals of the Ilamite period?
2. What was the evolution of the designs of seals and the effect of religious seals of the Ilamite period?

Keywords: Ancient Ilam, cylindrical seals, seal effect, mythological-religious motifs

Introduction

The name Ilamtu is derived from the Akkadian word meaning "high land". The empire of ancient Ilam with the center of Susa at the end of its historical expansion from the early third millennium BC to the middle of the first millennium BC, refers to a large part of the western and southern regions of Iran, including the present-day provinces of Khuzestan, Fars and Parts of Lorestan, Kurdistan and Kerman. Susa, as the main seat of the Ilamites, was very active in the field of trade and due to its special geographical and political position, it was the center of trade movements in different regions of the Iranian plateau and other neighboring lands. In addition to Susa, other commercial centers were active in Ilam, such as Choghaznabil, Haft-Tappeh, Jaghamish, and Milian Hill. "Choghaznabil" and "Haft Tappeh" belong to the Middle Ilam period and many seals and seal works have been found from them. One of the most important features of this civilization is considered to be the element of religion, which played a very imperative role in their daily lives. The oldest written record of the Ilamite religion comes from the excavations of Susa, which dates from the reign of Hita, the eleventh king of the Avan dynasty, who ruled from 2240 to 2270 BC. Signs of religiosity of the people of ancient Ilam can be seen on stone tablets, reliefs, sculptures, columns, inscriptions, utensils and especially cylindrical seals and the effect of cylindrical seals. The position of religion in the Ilamite civilization is so great that scholars have considered the number of Ilamite gods during the two thousand years of their rule to be very high and have identified seventy Ilamite gods so far. One of the most significant surviving artistic elements of Ilamite civilization are cylindrical seals that can play a main role in recognizing the religious course in Ilamite civilization.

Regarding the background of the present study, it should be said that no independent research has been done with this title so far, nonetheless, articles regarding cylindrical seals have been done in the Ilamite period. Ezatullah Neghaban during excavations in Haft Tappeh states: "The motivation for the emergence of this industry can be sought in the human interest in identifying themselves and showing the right of ownership" (Neghaban, 1372: 206). Talaei, in his book "Seals in Iran from the Commencement to the Foundation of Islam", wrote about this: in flat seals, the older style of geometric patterns is often used, but the patterns of cylindrical seals are a part of the beliefs. Beliefs show worldview and in general the spiritual aspects of Ilam civilization and culture. What attracts the most attention about the collection of seals of the Ilam period than any other subject is the variety of role elements and the subjects engraved on them. The motifs of various animals are prominent features that can be seen during the two thousand years of Ilamite civilization and culture, which undoubtedly revealed the secrets, beliefs, convictions and customs of the Ilamites. Apart from animal motifs on Ilamite cylindrical seals, mythological motifs have been used continuously from the beginning of Ilamite civilization to its decline (Talaei, 2005: 33-34). Regarding the patterns of Ilam seals, writers such as Piramieh (Amiet, 1972) about the seals of Susa, Choghaznabil by Edith Prada (Porada, 1970), Haft Tappeh (Neghaban, 1991), Demirushji (De miroschedji, 1981), Walter Hintz (1993), Jozi (1994) have left their works. Other scholars such as Malekzadeh Bayani (1985), Daniel Pats (2007), Yousef Majidzadeh (2008), Mohammad Rahim Sarraf (2013) and Talaei (2015) have written articles in this regard. Also, Mr. Roach from the University of Sydney, Australia, conducted a research entitled Ilamite Seals in 2008 in the form of his doctoral dissertation (Roach, 2008). Articles have also been written in this field, including the article on the mythological motifs of the cylindrical seals of Ilam (Mehrafarin, 2001) and the mythical scenes in the cylindrical seals of Ilam and ancient Mesopotamia (Ghaempanah et al, 2014). Although so far this research has been done on the religion of Ilam and mythical cylindrical seals, but so far no coherent research has been done on the evolution of gods and myths on cylindrical seals, this research is intended to be a descriptive method. Analytically and based on library data to identify religious-mythological cylinder seals and characters on Ilamite seals and study their evolution in the Ilamite period.

Conclusion

The ancient Elamites were a highly religious people who also enjoyed extraordinary urban and commercial progress. This has led to tremendous progress in the art of stamping in the field of cylindrical stamps and the designs engraved on them. The most important motif of cylindrical seals belongs to religious motifs. In the category of religious motifs, motifs of Ilamite and Mesopotamian gods and goddesses can be seen in abundance, which are always displayed separately or in groups with each other. This group of motifs includes mythological stories about the lives of gods or goddesses that existed among the people of ancient Ilam but are now unknown to us and only parts of them have been narrated. In ancient Ilam, goddesses such as Pi Nikir and Ki Ri Risha were important as the mother of Ilamite gods, but in late Ilam, male gods such as Humban and Inshushinak gradually became important. During this period, the religion and the art of sealing were greatly influenced by the Mesopotamians. Therefore, the motifs of various Mediterranean gods such as "Shamsh", "Ishtar", "Nargal" and "Sin" with their symbols such as sun, moon or star have been displayed. It seems that this multiplicity of motifs of the Mesopotamian gods was not merely a doctrinal aspect, but partly due to the political influence of the Akkadian and New Sumerian rule in the third millennium BC. The peak of sealing art in Ilam is in the Middle Ilam period, when religious motifs have become very diverse and most of the motifs have included mythological and hybrid animals. In this period, "Inshushinak" is introduced as the most important god of ancient Elam, who recognizes the motif of the serpent in a realistic way or in combination with the human head as the specific role of this god. Inshushinak has always been associated with the serpent during this period, and his position has risen to such an extent that it gives power to other gods and Elamite kings. In this period, sphinxes (human-animal) and griffins (animal-animal) with different and varied shapes are widely used on cylindrical seals as symbols of various gods and images of narrations. They tell different myths. Simultaneously with these developments, the amount of religious seals with Mesopotamian motifs decreases and, unlike ancient Elam, it is more dedicated to Elamite gods. Therefore, the peak of the art of cylindrical seals with religious-mythological motifs is related to the Middle Ilam period, and inscriptions are added on a large number of royal seals. These inscriptions usually represent the name of the king or the owner of the seal, who in many cases are in front of a god sitting on a throne. The Sphinxes, as half-human-half-animal beings, always have a protective and guarding role, and their importance becomes so great that even images of snakes with human heads are displayed. In the New Ilam period, the art of sealing was reduced in role and fewer cylindrical seals were scattered, due to the constant attacks of the Assyrians, but certainly the art of sealing still flourished and was less followed. The art of sealing has been the middle of Ilam. Therefore, regarding the art of sealing, it can be said that the evolution of the gods was initially influenced by the "Mesopotamian" gods with human appearance, and at the same time in the ancient Elamite period, with less importance, mythological-hybrid animals as the original Elamite gods. The role is closed. During the Middle Ilam period, with the importance of "Inshushinak" and other symbols, the Mesopotamian gods were significantly reduced and the number of mythical animals was increased. This process continued in the New Ilam period with less importance due to political and economic problems.

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