

## REPRESENTATIONS OF BATTERING RAMS AND SIEGE TOWERS IN EARLY BRONZE AGE GLYPTIC ART

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*Abstract:* Based on the textual evidence of the existence of battering rams and other siege engines in Early Bronze Age Syria (third millennium BC), the study suggests that the representations of tilt-wagons on Syrian cylinder seals and seal impressions from Tell Beydar (Syria) might be interpreted as depictions of battering rams, involved in war actions against castles, siege towers and schematic images of fortified settlements.

### BATTERING RAMS

In 1987, Steinkeller recognized the recurrence of the word  $gu_4$ -si-dili (Akkadian *yašibu*, *yašubu* = “battering ram”) in the texts from Ebla.<sup>1</sup>

The term occurs twice in the so-called Treaty between Ebla and Abarsal (TM.75.G.2420). The edition by Fronzaroli in 2003 (ARET XIII) gives a new translation of both segments integrating the text and accepting Steinkeller’s interpretation of the word  $gu_4$ -si-dili.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, references to battering rams also occur in two other texts from Ebla. These deal with the administration and delivery of textiles.

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<sup>1</sup> See also Waetzoldt 1990: 35; more recently see ARET XIII: 265; Pasquali 2004; Burke 2008: 39; ARES IV: 126-127, nos. 287, 293, and also ARM XXI: 346 and Scurlock 1989: 129-130.

<sup>2</sup> The two segments correspond, respectively, to ARET XIII 5: r. vii 20 – viii 6 and ARET XIII 5: r. ix 3-13. See also the previous editions and translation of the text by Sollberger (1980, in particular p. 137 and p. 138) and Edzard (1992, in particular p. 196 § 5 and p. 197 § 7). Also Edzard (1992: 211) refers to Steinkeller’s interpretation of  $gu_4$ -si-dili as “battering ram”, “Rammbock”. See also the considerations by Kupper (1997: 124-125).

ARET IV 2: r. viii 5-11 refers to a delivery of 30 (shekels of copper?) for the tongue (EME) of the battering ram of the city of Armi.<sup>3</sup> ARET IV 13: v. vi 12-16 registers the quantity of wool to produce one piece of felt as the cover or revetment of a battering ram.<sup>4</sup>

Early Bronze Age seals from Syria, and the recent seal impressions from Tell Beydar (Syria), represent four-wheeled vehicles. These have been interpreted as representations of tilt-wagons – that is to say wagons and chariots with an arched superstructure.<sup>5</sup> Clay models of wheeled tilt-vehicles have so far been found in archaeological excavations.<sup>6</sup>

1.

Cylinder seal divided into two registers: war and cultic scenes (Fig. 1).

Present location: Louvre AO 27210.

Find spot: Syria.

Date: Mid-third millennium BC.

Wagon: one four-wheeled tilt-wagon with a pole on the front next to a building. A man is represented on it.

Bibliography:

Amiet 1993: 263-264, fig. 2;

Collon 1987: 158 no. 722;

Jans / Bretschneider 1998: cat. no. 20.

2.

Cylinder seal with a war scene (Fig. 2).<sup>7</sup>

Present location: Brussels O. 437.

Find spot: Southern Mesopotamia (?).

Date: Early Dynastic IIIb.

Wagon: one four-wheeled tilt-wagon (?) next to a tall building. Three men are represented above it.

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<sup>3</sup> See Steinkeller 1987; Kupper 1997: 124. For the tongue of the battering ram, see Scurlock 1989.

<sup>4</sup> See Steinkeller 1987; Kupper 1997: 124. On the use of pieces of felt (túg-du<sub>8</sub>) to cover chariots and wagons, see Steinkeller 1980: 86-88.

<sup>5</sup> See for example Jans / Bretschneider 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Littauer / Crouwel 1974: 20-36; Strommenger 1990; Bollweg 1999: 28-31; Moorey 2001: 346-347; Oates 2001: 283-284.

<sup>7</sup> Collon 1987: 162.

Bibliography:

Collon 1987: 162 no. 749;

Jans / Bretschneider 1998: cat. no. 14.

3.

Seal impression with a war scene, probably a siege (Fig. 3).

Find spot: Tell Beydar (palace area).

Date: Early Dynastic IIIb.

Wagon: one four-wheeled tilt-wagon with three poles at the front next to a tall building. At the top of the building three men are represented. Above the tilt-wagon two soldiers with rounded convex shields advance to the right.

Bibliography:

Jans / Bretschneider 1998: 158-159, Beydar-1, Pl. I.

4.

Seal impression with a war scene (Fig. 4).

Find spot: Tell Beydar (palace area).

Date: Early Dynastic IIIb.

Wagon: one four-wheeled tilt-wagon without pole – four semicircular lines form the arched superstructure. Two four-wheeled square box wagons with cross-shaped decoration.<sup>8</sup>

Bibliography:

Jans / Bretschneider 1998: 179, Beydar-4.

5.

Seal impression with a war scene, probably a siege (Fig. 5).

Find spot: Tell Beydar (palace area).

Date: Early Dynastic IIIb.

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<sup>8</sup> On the square box “wagons” see Amiet 1963: 73, fig. 23; 1980: 167-168, pl. 102. Amiet speaks of wheeled braziers in relation to cultic activities (see in particular the seal of the Marcopoli collection Aleppo, Amiet 1963: fig. 23; Jans / Bretschneider 1998: 170-171). However, on the seal impression from Beydar, the presence of a tilt-wagon and bodies of the dead enemy lying on the ground suggests a different function of the square box wagons, probably related to warfare.

Wagon: one four-wheeled tilt-wagon with a pole at the front, next to a wheeled tower. The wagon has a door (?) on its side and it seems to be covered with thick felt (?).<sup>9</sup>

Bibliography:

Jans / Bretschneider 1998: 179, Beydar-7.

None of the tilt-wagons represented on the cylinder seals and seal impressions are pulled by animals. In fact, they sometimes seem to be pushed or pulled by human figures. At least on four occasions, those tilt-wagons are involved in war actions (cat. nos. 1, 2, 3 and 5). On these seals, in fact, the tilt-wagons are usually represented next to a building, their poles serve to destroy and dismantle the architectural structures. On cat. no. 1, the pole of the tilt-wagon clearly goes through the wall of the adjacent building (Fig. 1).

Thus, because no animals are harnessed to the wagons and the scenes of some seals seem to refer to war episodes, I would suggest that those tilt-wagons are in reality battering rams.<sup>10</sup>

Besides the position and function of the poles and the absence of yoked animals, further considerations and details of the representations seem to support the identification of tilt-wagons with battering rams, at least on the seals we are dealing with here.

1) Soldiers are usually represented while fighting above the tilt-wagons or in front of them, beneath the pole.<sup>11</sup> On cat. no. 3, two soldiers with rounded convex shields advance to the right marching above the battering ram – in fact the two soldiers may also be involved in the fight in the upper register of the seal.<sup>12</sup> On cat. no. 1, a kneeling man is represented between the battering ram and the building under attack, just above the pole. One might wonder whether this man and the one

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<sup>9</sup> Actually, the figure in the shape of a door may be the representation of the rear of the tilt-wagon, as if seen in multiple perspective – from the side and the back simultaneously.

<sup>10</sup> See also Hamblin (2006: 216, figs. 5f, 5g), who interprets the scenes of cat. nos. 2 and 5 as representations of sieges with battering rams, but declares that “our earliest texts about sieges do not mention these siege engines”. On the study of Hamblin, see the harsh considerations and remarks by Charpin (2006).

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the well-known representations of battering rams on the Assyrian palace bas-reliefs of Assurnasirpal II (Reade 1983: fig. 35) and Sennacherib (Barnett / Bleibtreu / Turner 1998: pl. 331).

<sup>12</sup> Schrakamp, in print.

represented beneath the pole on cat. no. 5 had the role of manoeuvring and directing the tongue of the machine. Sometimes, as on a seal impression from Tell Beydar (Fig. 6),<sup>13</sup> two people are represented inside the tilt-wagon. Indeed, their role of either leading the chariot or manoeuvring the pole can only be theorised.

2) The animal head protruding from the arched superstructure of the wagon on cat. no. 1 may be related to the reference in the texts from Ebla. This states that figures of human-headed bulls were used on battering rams as apotropaic symbols.<sup>14</sup>

3) On cat. nos. 1 and 3, the arched superstructure of battering rams has a crossed-pattern surface. It seems that the cover was made of leather, straw, or textile materials to protect the structure. For that reason, the besieged usually aim at setting the battering rams and siege towers on fire by launching torches from the top of the walls.<sup>15</sup> The use of covering battering rams with perishable materials is also documented in the texts from Ebla: ARET IV 13: v. vi 12-16 registers the quantity of wool necessary to produce a piece of felt for a battering ram.<sup>16</sup>

4) On the seals and seal impressions (cat. nos. 1, 2, 3 and 5), battering rams usually come with another siege engine – a tall wheeled tower with one man or two people inside or on it. According to the texts from Ebla, where battering rams (*gu<sub>4</sub>-si-dili*) are mentioned next to another siege

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<sup>13</sup> Jans / Bretschneider 1998: 159, pl. I: Beydar-2. In fact, the seal combines different situations: in the lower register, a combat scene is depicted; in the upper register, a seated man is drinking in front of the tilt-wagon. Texts from Beydar reveal the role of the city as a “way station” for people travelling, where people and animals were fed and, presumably, chariots could be repaired by specialised artisans (Ismail *et al.* 1996; Sallaberger 1998: 173-175; Oates 2003: 117). Consequently, the upper register of seal Beydar-2 could thus refer to this type of operation, representing a “way station” where a man is repairing and specialised workers are tending to his tilt-wagon.

<sup>14</sup> On the interpretation of the protruding object as an animal head, see Amiet 1993: 264; Jans / Bretschneider 1998: 170. On the use of human-headed bulls on battering rams at Ebla, see Pasquali 2004.

<sup>15</sup> See for example the well-known siege of Lachish by the Assyrians (Barnett / Bleibtreu / Turner 1998: pl. 331). The people of Lachish throw torches from the top of the wall. On each Assyrian battering ram, an Assyrian soldier pours water against the fire attack (Madhloum 1965: 10, pl. IV). See also the text from Mari (ARM XXVI 318 ll. 8-14): the king of Razamâ puts some pitch in front of the enemy siege tower and sets it on fire to destroy the siege engine (Kupper 1991: 129; Durand 1998: 296-297).

<sup>16</sup> Steinkeller 1987; Kupper 1997: 124.

device (giš-má-NE),<sup>17</sup> and the documentation from Mari in the Old Babylonian period, where the battering ram (*yašibu*) is mentioned together with the siege tower (*dimtum*),<sup>18</sup> the scenes on the seals depict the combination of using both siege engines during the attack of an enemy fortress.

## SIEGE TOWERS

The towers depicted on the seals are tall wheeled structures, sometimes divided into compartments. Men are usually represented inside the tower (cat. nos. 2 and 5) or on the top of it (cat. nos. 1, 2 and 5). On all seals, it is clear that towers are movable machines, provided with their own wheels, and are used in association with battering rams.

In fact, the representation of the seal impression cat. no. 5 is unclear (Fig. 5): it is impossible to ascertain whether the tower is involved, together with the battering ram, in a siege operation against an enemy target, or if it is itself the military target of the destructive action of the battering ram. The raised arms of the two people on the top of the tower – facing left towards the battering ram – might be interpreted as a gesture of submission and capitulation.<sup>19</sup>

The role of the tower on cat. no. 1 (Fig. 1) is also enigmatic: the wheeled machine – with two people depicted on the top – fills the entire height of both registers of the seal. It seems to be involved in a military operation, in accordance with the interpretation of the tilt-wagon in the lower register as a battering ram dismantling the nearby building, as previously suggested.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Steinkeller 1987; ARET XIII: 61.

<sup>18</sup> Sasson 1969: 33; ARM XXI: 348; Burke 2008: 38. For other associations of siege engines, see Abrahams 1990.

<sup>19</sup> Mayer-Opificius (2001: 285 Abb. 11) interprets the tower as a shrine, and the people as performing an adoration ritual. See also Oates (2001: 289-291; 2003: 116-117) who suggests that the scenes on Beydar sealings may refer to “ritual” conflicts or a combination of fight and cult.

<sup>20</sup> For a different interpretation, see Amiet 1993: 263-264; Collon 1987: 158, no. 722; Jans / Bretschneider 1998: 170. Both Collon and Jans / Bretschneider suggest that the building in the lower register could be a temple.

On the other hand, the tower depicted on cat. no. 2 seems to have a proper military role (Fig. 2).<sup>21</sup> Three men are represented – two inside, one on the top of the tower. The wheeled machine is represented on the right side of a tall building – divided into compartments, with a man in each compartment. On the left side of the same building, a wheeled tilt-wagon is depicted.

The seal impression from Tell Beydar (cat. no. 3) also shows the use of a wheeled tower together with a battering ram besieging an enemy fortress. As on cat. no. 2, the battering ram and siege tower are represented on either side of the enemy fortress. In fact, the tower on the Beydar seal impression (Fig. 3) does not bear comparison with other wheeled towers. In fact, it consists of a wheeled wagon with two “man-size” screens – a standing human figure between.<sup>22</sup> It seems to function as a movable protective chariot for just one person. One might ask oneself whether this wheeled machine was devoted to the transportation of a person with special and important roles – either the official or the king (?) leading the military operations?

However, cat. nos. 2 and 3 clearly show the use of both siege engines – battering rams and wheeled towers – in besieging a building. Both tall besieged buildings have people on the top fighting against the attack. The two buildings could be interpreted as the schematic representation of enemy fortresses attacked by means of battering rams and siege towers.

## CONCLUSIONS

Texts of Old Babylonian Mari clearly show the combined use of battering rams and towers during siege operations.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the seals and seal impressions here analysed depict this military combination of siege engines in the conquest of a fortified settlement.

Moreover, the texts of Mari also give information on the transport of those siege engines: when needed, they were transported on boats and moved on chariots.<sup>24</sup> The Early Bronze Age seals and seal impressions

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<sup>21</sup> Collon 1987: 162.

<sup>22</sup> Jans / Bretschneider 1998: 163, 166 (Type 4).

<sup>23</sup> See fn. 18.

<sup>24</sup> ARM XXI: 348; Yadin 1955: 30; Kupper 1997: 128.

show wheeled wagons and towers – thus provided with their own wheels to be easily transported and moved to the battlefield. The texts of Mari also specify that battering rams and towers were moved on earthen ramps to reach the enemy walls. In fact, the same texts also refer to the operation of piling up earth to build the ramps.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, in case of danger, towers and battering rams should be moved quickly away from the enemy walls to avoid their destruction.<sup>26</sup>

As said at the beginning, also the text from Ebla (ARET XIII 5: r. vii 20 – viii 6 and ARET XIII 5: r. ix 3-13) records two siege engines together: the *gu<sub>4</sub>-si-dili* – battering ram – and the *giš-má-NE*. As the Old Babylonian texts of Mari, the Eblaite document combines two siege machines. Although the text ARET XIII 5 does not concern military operations,<sup>27</sup> one might infer that the *gu<sub>4</sub>-si-dili* and the *giš-má-NE* are machines that were used simultaneously in the sieges, as well as the battering ram and the tower in the Old Babylonian texts of Mari. For that reason they are quoted together in both passages.

According to Steinkeller’s interpretation, the term *giš-má-NE* appears to refer to a type of siege engine.<sup>28</sup> However, we still ignore which form and structure the *giš-má-NE* had, and how it was used in siege operations.<sup>29</sup>

Notwithstanding the unclear meaning of *giš-má-NE*, the texts from Ebla and the Early Bronze Age seals of Syria document the birth and development of the siege military strategy to conquer enemy fortifications by means of siege engines. In fact, text ARET XIII 5, does not only prove the existence of battering rams and siege engines in the Early Bronze Age, but it also particularly shows that many cities were provided with that military equipment.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Sasson 1969: 33; Kupper 1997: 129, 131.

<sup>26</sup> See fn. 15.

<sup>27</sup> Text ARET XIII 5 is the famous treaty between Ebla and Abarsal. The terms *gu<sub>4</sub>-si-dili* and *giš-má-NE* occur twice in two clauses of the treaty.

<sup>28</sup> Steinkeller 1987.

<sup>29</sup> Recently, Fronzaroli (ARET XIII: 61) suggested the reading *giš-má-izi* with a possible meaning of “carro del fuoco”. A local denomination of an indigenous type of siege machine can not be excluded, as for some weapons of Mari (ARM XXI: 350).

<sup>30</sup> ARET XIII 5 speaks of the battering ram and *giš-má-NE* of conquered fortresses (*bàd*) without specifying their names. On the meaning of *bàd* as “small settlement surrounded by a wall”, see Otto 2006: 7.



As suggested by Durand,<sup>31</sup> the use of battering rams probably has a Western origin.<sup>32</sup> As a consequence, we should thus think that the Early Bronze Age cities were strongly and deliberately fortified to face a siege with battering rams and towers. As an example, Armanum in the Early Bronze Age was provided with three lines of fortifications – according to the Old Babylonian copy of an Akkadian text – and Naram-Sin had to resort to a siege to conquer the city and overcome its massive defensive system of fortification walls.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> ARM XXI: 347; Kupper 1997: 125.

<sup>32</sup> According to this theory, also cat. no. 2 can be considered to be a Syrian seal.

<sup>33</sup> Foster 1982; Abrahami 2008: 16-17. On the Early Bronze Age fortification system of Armanum and the possible identification of Armanum with Tell Bazi in Syria, see Otto 2006.

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Fig. 1. Cat. no. 1: modern impression of the cylinder seal Louvre AO 27210 (after Jans / Bretschneider 1998: Pl. V-Cat. 20).

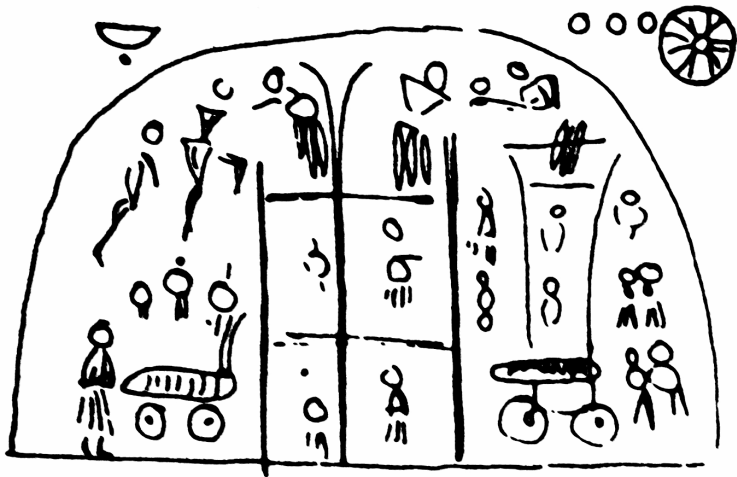


Fig. 2. Cat. no. 2: drawing of the cylinder seal Brussels O. 437 (after Jans / Bretschneider 1998: Pl. III-Cat. 14).

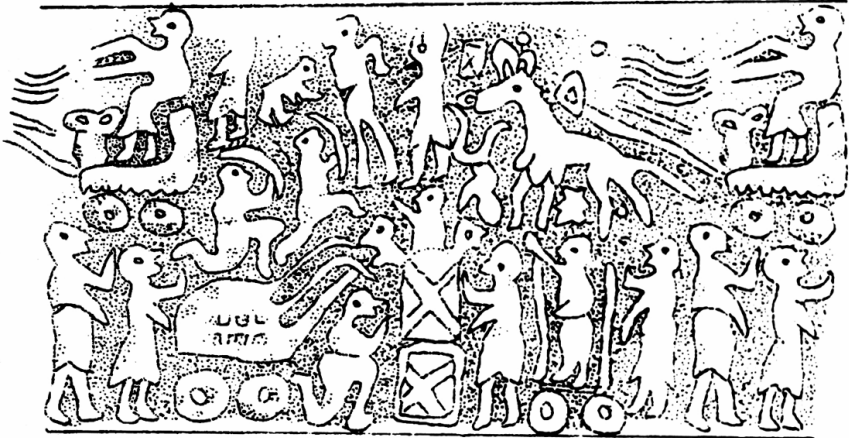


Fig. 3 . Cat. no. 3: drawing of the seal impression Beydar-1 (after Jans / Bretschneider 1998: Pl. I-Bey. 1).



Fig. 4 Cat. no. 4: drawing of the seal impression Beydar-4 (after Jans / Bretschneider 1998: 179, Beydar-4).



Fig. 5. Cat. no. 5: drawing of the seal impression Beydar-7 (after Jans / Bretschneider 1998: 179, Beydar-7).



Fig. 6. Drawing of the seal impression Beydar-2 (after Jans / Bretschneider 1998: 159, Pl. I-Bey. 2).