

The contest scene in EDIII Mesopotamian glyptic art



Abstract: There are four main protagonists in Early Dynastic III contest scenes: two heroes, a bull-man and a human-headed bull. They are usually involved in guarding herbivores against predators. Contrary to common opinion, the protected herbivores are identified apparently as wild rather than domesticated species. The paper explores the role of the depicted beings, the interactions between them, and the secondary motifs that accompany them in the contest scenes. Despite the many composition variants and some intricacies of interpretation, the scene as such is considered consistent and imbued with a deeper mythological meaning, rather than being a purely ornamental arrangement of random decorative elements.

The author observes the association between specific participants and certain elements of the contest scene and the god Utu/Shamash or else the mountainous region east of Mesopotamia. In both instances, the association points to the eastern horizon—a liminal location where the Sun-god rises, a region with the symbolism of rebirth bestowed upon it, where fates are determined and judgments passed—which is the setting suggested for the perpetual contest depicted in Mesopotamian glyptic art.

Keywords: Early Dynastic period, bull-man, human-headed bull, Utu/Shamash, heroes, Anzu bird, "Star-spade"

Dorota Ławecka

Faculty of Archaeology
University of Warsaw

INTRODUCTION

The most common theme depicted on Mesopotamian Early Dynastic (ED) and Akkadian period cylinder seals is the contest—essentially, a scene of struggle between carnivores and herbivores, commonly involving human heroes and some hybrid creatures [Fig. 1]. It goes back a long time, being popular from the initial phase of the Early Dynastic period. Some of the component motifs trace their roots to Uruk and proto-Elamite art (Collon 2005: 193–197; on the evolution of Early Dynastic glyptics see Martin 1998: 69–80; for a short description of the evolution of the contest scene see Pittmann 2013: 330–331; see also Dittmann 2017 for the early levels at Ur and the Diyala region sites; Marchesi and Marchetti 2011: 203–207; Zettler 2007: 11–14). In the EDIII period, an enriched iconography of the subject led to a new, distinct, and fairly coherent stage of evolution, with various motifs, symbols, and *dramatis personae* either being introduced or gaining in popularity.

The present study is based on a published assemblage of southern Mesopotamian seals and seal impressions, drawn from catalogues of major and minor seal collections, archaeological reports, articles etc., and large museum databases. In the case of multiple representations of a given detail, references to particular issues are cited by way of example, without claiming to be comprehensive. References to drawings in Pierre Amiet's *La glyptique mésopotamienne archaïque* (1980a) facilitate following pictorial parallels (checked against photographs of sealings whenever the author had such an opportunity).

Although the essential meaning and form of the contest scene appear to have remained stable during the entire EDIII period (about 2600–2340 BCE), some perceptible variations, which will not be discussed here, can be attributed to chronological or regional variation. Given that the scene demonstrates both continuity and evolution in Akkadian glyptic art, retaining still many elements of Early Dynastic iconography, the occasional citing, with due caution, of Akkadian contest scenes (predominantly from the early Akkadian phase) as hypothetical parallels for the EDIII data seems justified. The scene (rarely the entire motif, rather only its elements—animals, and human and fantastic participants shown separately) was often depicted in other contemporary media, as amply attested by finds from the Royal Cemetery at Ur, which, however, will not be referenced here as a matter of principle.

According to Adelheid Otto (2018: 421–422), “[e]very single motif depicted on a seal bore a specific meaning. In general, seal images were meant to be powerful symbols or icons representative of the seal owner. They rarely included narrative scenes, but were densely packed statements, encoded in a complex manner and not always easy to decipher today”. The author concurs with the view that allowances should be made for occasional lapses of the seal maker or our own ineptitude in working out all of the details of the intended message, as indicated later in this article. The following discussion will concern all elements of the contest scene, including for the

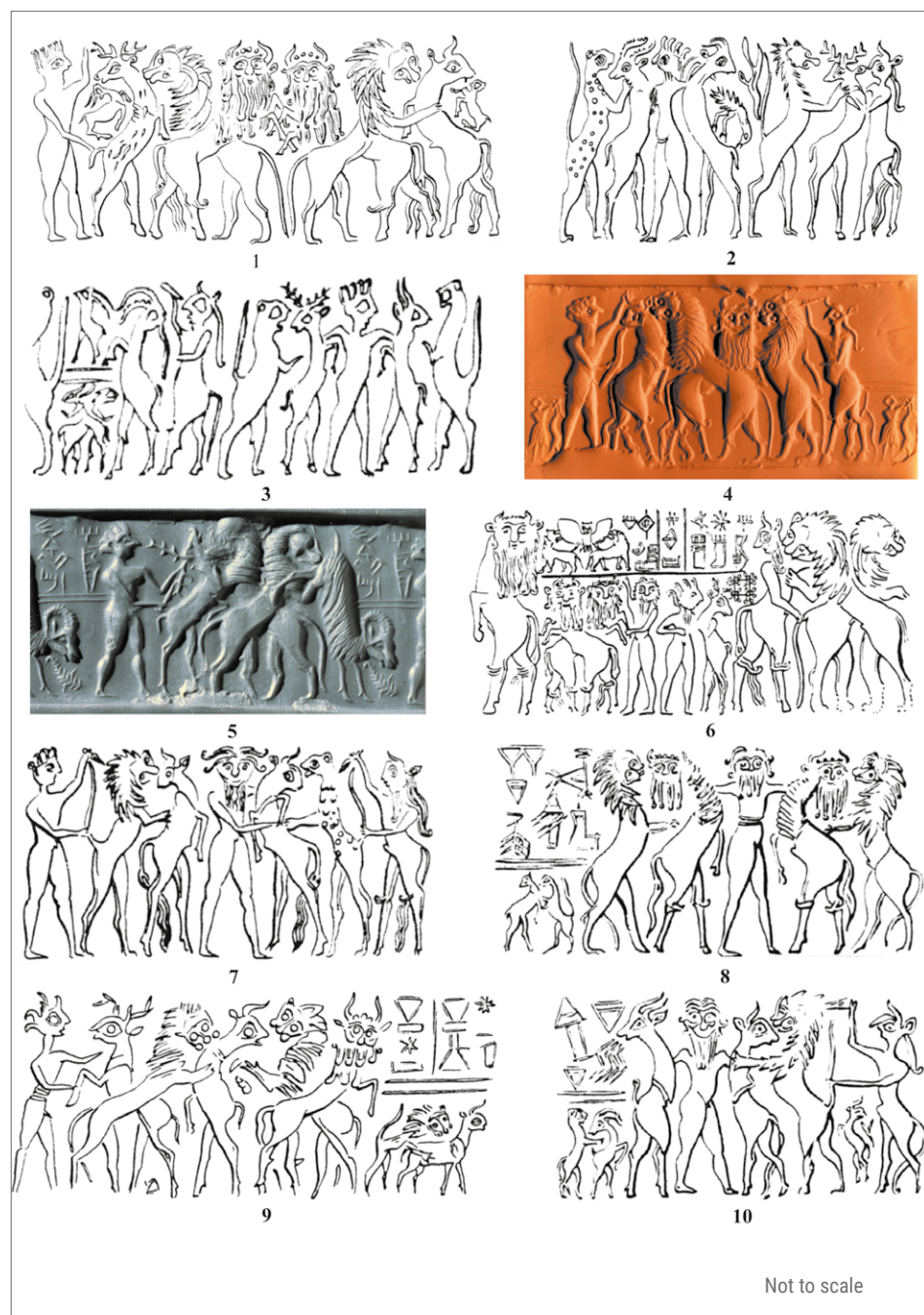


Fig. 1. Examples of a typical contest scene on Early Dynastic III seals: 1–3 – Amiet 1980b: Nos 1112, 1121, 1123; 4 – BM 119427 (© The Trustees of the British Museum); 5 – Penn B16747 (courtesy of Penn Museum, image #152083); 6–10 – Amiet 1980b: Nos 1100, 1046, 1078, 1008, 1074. Nos 1–3, 6–10 (© Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris 1980)

first time secondary motifs in addition to the main protagonists, affording a deeper understanding of the meaning of the theme and its significance in the context of the assumed association with the Sun-god Utu/Shamash and location of the scene.

Recurring discussion of the contest scene theme since the earliest days of ancient Near Eastern glyptic research has yet to lead to agreement on its meaning. It has commonly been interpreted in publications (all early theories were collected and reviewed in Keel 1992: 1–59) in relation to the epic and liturgical texts, the goal being to associate the depicted figures with the main characters of the Gilgamesh epic (the “frontal” hero with Gilgamesh, the bull-man with Enkidu), or else, to equate the “frontal” hero with Tammuz/Dumuzi. However, the idea was generally discounted because of the inability to convincingly establish a match between images and texts (Hansen 1987: 61; Black and Green 2004: 49, 73; Collon 2005: 197; Rohn 2016: 7–8). It was recently revived by Douglas R. Frayne (2010: 174, 176–177) in the context of Akkadian glyptics. To refute Wilfred G. Lambert’s observation that literary texts do not provide any indication of the bovine aspect of Enkidu, Frayne claimed that Lambert’s statement downplays the animal nature of Enkidu, who—according to the epic—was the son of a gazelle and a wild ass. He concludes by remarking: “Would we expect a human offspring of this unusual coupling? It seems unlikely to us” (Frayne 2010: 176). Even should this account be taken literally, it is just as unlikely, in the present author’s opinion, for the offspring of a gazelle and a wild ass to be half-bull,

half-human. Moreover, Frayne does not present any new arguments for this identification. While a reference to Akkadian iconography is out of place here, the idea that the bull-man represents Enkidu does not go far enough to explain the complex EDIII imagery. For instance, how are we to understand a seal design [see below, *Fig. 6:2*], in which a presumed Gilgamesh (a “frontal” hero) is shown together with two fighting bull-men? How can this hypothesis be fitted in with the multiple renderings of heroes (for an Akkadian-period seal featuring several bull-men see Boehmer 1965: *Fig. 22*)? What about the Sun-god restraining the bull-man in Akkadian glyptics (see below)? Why is the bull-man in a text from a hoard found in Assur (see below, note 2) described as ^dGUD.DUMU.^dUTU?

Ruth Mayer-Opificius (2006: 57–61) offered a different interpretation, namely that contest scenes were meant as a symbolic representation of actual scenes of combat between human parties in conflict or between warring towns. This idea appears disputable in view of its conjecturality and lack of solid supporting evidence. Among other new interpretations one should also mention Sarah Kiehl Costello’s (2010) study of the assumed evolution of a frontally shown hero from the Neolithic Master of Animals through the Uruk-period Priest-king, regarded as a conceptual precursor of the Nude Hero as a royal allegory, and Diana Stein’s theory associating the scene with shamanistic practices and ritual spirit possession techniques (Stein 2020; on Akkadian contest scenes see Rakic 2014).

Recent interpretations of the contest scene concentrate on the idea of perpet-

ual strife between order and the forces of chaos.¹ According to Holly Pittman, “[w]hile it [the scene of combat] began as a depiction of an actual event probably symbolizing the competing forces in nature, by the Early Dynastic period its meaning no longer referred to the actual struggle between felines and horned quadrupeds but rather it was elevated to a symbolic plane that was probably associated with the assertion of control over cosmic and real forces of nature and society” (Pittman 2013: 330; see also Sonik 2014: 282 who also located the scene “on a mythical rather than natural plane”). This statement is corroborated by the occurrence of hybrid creatures and their close ties with the divine world; it is also cogently illustrated by a seal featuring a contest

scene involving heroes and gods (note the absence of carnivores) [Fig. 8:9]. Divine tiaras are rarely depicted in Early Dynastic glyptic art, but a few seals of the EDIII period seem to portray gods either assisting with or involved in combat (see also Amiet 1980a: Nos 1370, 1373; Beyer 2007: Fig. 6a–c and, most probably, Keel-Leu and Teissier 2004: No. 38) [Fig. 5:8]. Of interest is also a seal, where, besides a typical contest scene, a person without divine attributes is depicted sitting above a scorpion and touching the head of a bull being attacked by a lion (Woolley 1934: Pl. 200, No. 108). The recurring presence of fantastic, hybrid creatures and (occasionally) gods suggest references to the mythical world as the stage for the contest scene.

HERBIVORES: WILD OR DOMESTICATED?

For several decades, the subject of the contest scene was widely regarded as an illustration of the struggle between domesticated animals and wild predators (Lambert 1979: 4; Collon 2005: 193; Pittman 1998: 76; Azize 2002: 3, 11; Costello 2010: 29; Rakic 2014: 189). Although it is conceivable that the scene evolved from an early motif depicting the defence of domesticated animals against beasts of prey (Green 1997b: 574; Pittman 1998: 76),

this view may be challenged in relation to EDIII glyptic imagery. Some of the animals attacked by lions and leopards belong to species that are undoubtedly wild and have never been tamed or domesticated—as, for instance, the often-depicted antelopes [Figs 1:3; 3:5; 5:1, 3; 7:4, 6], or antlered deer [Figs 1:1–3, 5, 6, 9; 3:1, 2; 4:2, 7; 5:1, 3; 7:4, 10], such as the easily discernible spotted fallow deer and possibly also a stag. Occasionally, the scene features only apparently

1 For instance, Zettler and Horne 1998: 50: “This grouping of figures reflects the eternal and cyclical battle against chaos, between civilized and uncivilized man, between domestic animals and beasts of the wild, between periods of peaceful fecundity and the vagaries of nature, between the known and the unknown”; Dittmann 2017: 167: “In short, to a certain degree, the Contest Scene symbolizes the longing for cosmic order and, on the other hand, following Wiggermann, it protects the owner from evil: the old dream of peace at home and around – as we know, in vain”; Otto 2013: 51: “Ich möchte behaupten, dass das Tierkampf-motif den abstrakten Begriff von Recht und Ordnung symbolisiert. Gezeigt wird, wie diverse positive, entweder reale oder übernatürliche Mächte die Feinde dieser Ordnung bezwingen”.

wild herbivores or fantastic creatures [Figs 1:2, 3, 6, 8, 9; 3:1-3; 4:1-3; 5:3; 6:6]. Among the other assailed animals, bulls are the most frequent [Figs 1:1, 4, 7, 10; 3:4, 6; 4:4; 5:1, 4, 6, 8; 6:1, 2, 4, 5; 8:2], but due to their sketchy and simplified depictions, it is impossible to say whether they are wild or domesticated. A similar uncertainty remains in the case of some images of sheep(?) and goats [for example, Figs 1:5; 4:7; 7:2], although many among the latter resemble wild goats and are occasionally interpreted as such (e.g., animals described either as

ibexes or mouflons: Buchanan 1966: Nos 184, 186; 1981: Figs 298, 306; Porada and Buchanan 1948: Nos 64, 68, 80[see here Fig. 3:1], 92, 93, 94). If we assume that the depicted scenes are continuous, forming a reasonably coherent narrative, it would be difficult to explain why occasionally the same episode engraved on one seal features both wild and domesticated herbivores (see also, for instance, Amiet 1980a: Nos 1038, 1073, 1066, 1092, 1112, 1119, 1124; for a review of the native fauna of the ancient Near East see Gilbert 2002) [Figs 1:1, 5; 5:1].



Fig. 2. Gaming-board from the Royal Cemetery of Ur: PG/580, U.9776 (Courtesy of Penn Museum, image #295557, object # B16742). Not to scale.

Further arguments can support the interpretation of these animals as wild creatures. If we take into consideration the animal imagery depicted in art, especially on the inlays from the Royal Cemetery at Ur (mostly the gaming boards and the sound boxes of musical instruments), it is apparent that the thematic range of depictions is similar, obviously related to that of the contest seals' iconography. For example, on a gaming board from PG/779, there are 11 small inlaid panels with zoomorphic decoration (Woolley 1934: Pl. 97, U.11162). On six of them lions are shown attacking deer, antelopes, or wild goats. The remaining five feature bulls or antelopes flanking a plant growing on a small hillock, indicative of a mountainous region where wild goats, deer, and wild bulls used to roam. Panels from a poorly preserved gaming board found in PG/789 are of a similar character (Woolley 1934: Pl. 96, U.10557). On a board from PG/580 [Fig. 2], bulls are again set between wild animals (with two human-faced bison added in this instance). The imagery that

is associated with the glyptic contest scenes is ever-present in the art of the Royal Cemetery, and it seems to comprise only wild animals (see, for example, Woolley 1934: Pls 104, 105, 108, 110, 115, 119 shell plaques from the sound boxes of musical instruments, Pl. 98:b gaming pieces, Pls 99a, 100 engraved shell pieces, Pl. 217 design on gold leaf with embossed design; Aruz and Wallenfels 2003: 100, Cat. 52 end-panel of the Standard of Ur). Finally, one should mention a few scenes of the contest type with no herbivores represented (see also Boehmer 1965: No. 7; Amiet 1980a: No. 1726; Rohn 2011: No. 94) [e.g., Fig. 4:1]. Furthermore, on a unique seal from the Yale Babylonian Collection, there are no natural animals of any kind; instead, it features two bull-men, four human-faced bison, one frontal hero in a horned crown, and a diminutive hero shown in profile (Buchanan 1981: Fig. 303; see also an early Akkadian? seal No. 398, on which two heroes or gods wearing horned tiaras were depicted as engaged in a typical contest scene).

SCENE COMPONENTS

HEROES

EDIII glyptic contest scenes feature two distinct types of human heroes—one with a frontally depicted face and the lower body in profile, and the other silhouetted entirely in profile. Although these representations are not fully consistent within each category, the two types of heroes are significantly different, both in their appearance and their actions. However, Eva A. Braun-Holzinger (1999: 162) entertained the possibility that the two heroes were just different versions of the same being.

The “frontal” hero is almost invariably shown naked, only occasionally wearing a belt (Amiet 1980a: Nos 1078, 1259; Martin 1988: No. 554; Beyer 2007: Fig. 14c) [see Fig. 1:8]. Examples of images, in which he might be wearing a skirt or a kind of trousers are extremely rare and somewhat problematic [Figs 3:1(?); 8:1=photo: Doumet 1992: No. 70]. He is bearded and often has two or three locks of hair marked on either side of his face [e.g., Figs 1:7, 10; 4:1; 5:4, 6–8; 6:1, 4]. As a rule (with a few exceptions, such as Fig. 3:1, and Amiet 1980a: Nos

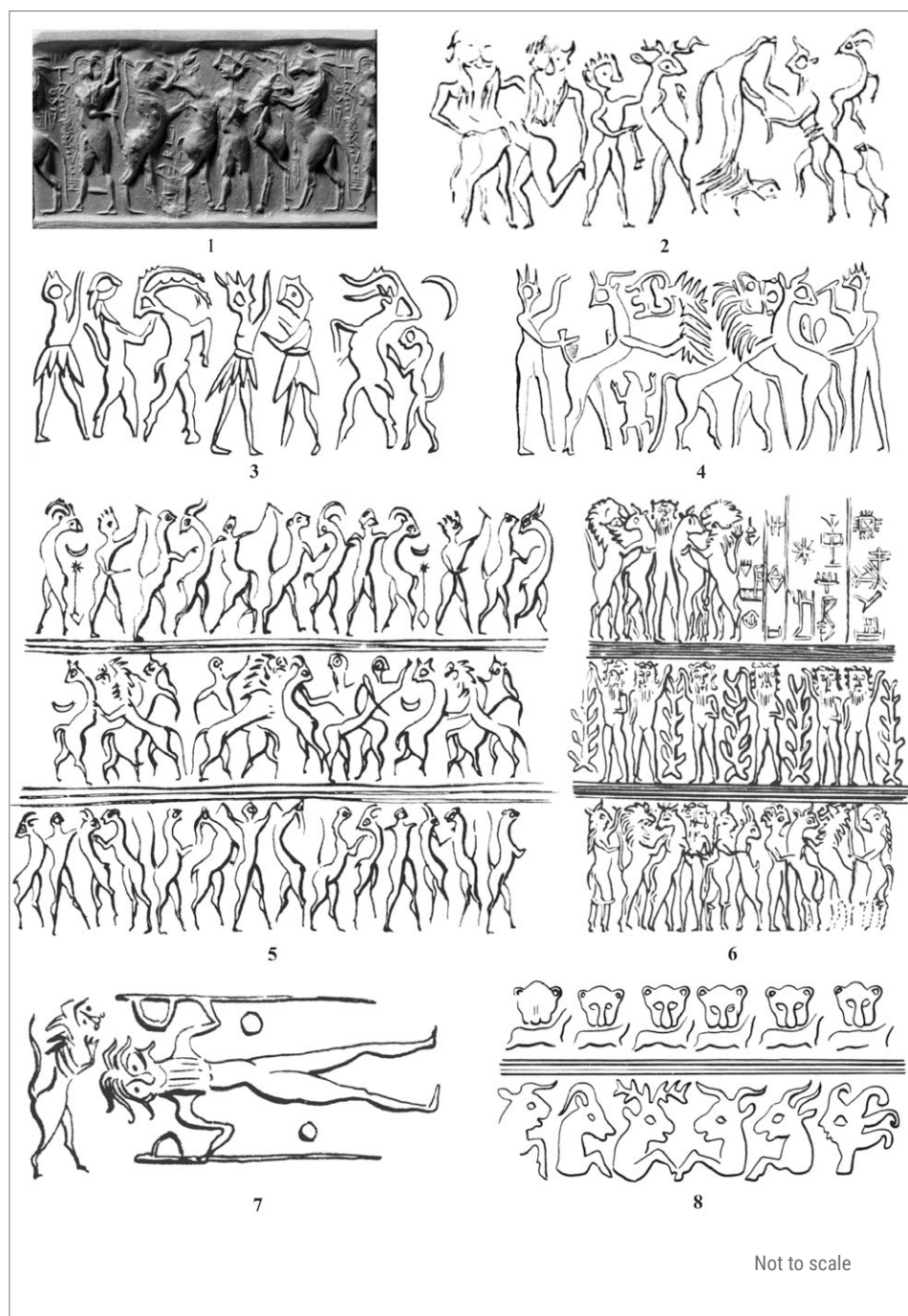


Fig. 3. Examples of depictions of heroes in EDIII glyptic: 1 – Morgan Seal 80 (© The Morgan Library & Museum); 2–8 – Amiet 1980b: Nos 1075, 1306, 1084, 1127, 1102, 288, 988 (© Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris 1980)

1069, 1259; Martin 1988: No. 495; Moortgat 1988: No. 114; Beyer 2007: Fig. 7a–c), he is unarmed, protecting herbivores and human-faced bison, holding them with his hands [Figs 1:7, 8, 10; 3:6; 5:4, 7, 8; 6:1, 2, 4] or trying to pull them away from the reach of the attackers [Fig. 4:1, 4(?)]. Occasionally, he is himself attacked by a lion or leopard (Amiet 1980a: Nos 1063, 1311) [see Figs 5:8; 8:1] or strikes an attitude of the “master of animals”, restraining predators placed symmetrically on either side of him (Amiet 1980a: Nos 1037, 1071 in a somewhat atypical version, 1077, 1450 with one carnivore, 1759) [Fig. 4:3]. He is also shown on seals of the king of Ishqi-Mari and of Iddin-Eshar from Mari (Beyer 2007: 254, Figs 17–19). On another, unusual seal known from impressions from Mari (Beyer 2007: Fig. 6a–c), the frontal hero is shown horned (as in Buchanan 1981: Fig. 303).

Rarely, two (von der Osten 1936: No. 39; Amiet 1980a: Nos 1108, 1118, 1726; Moortgat 1988: No. 114) or more figures of the “frontal” hero are represented in a single design. One such exception is the remarkable seal of Barnamtara, the wife of Lugalanda, the upper and lower registers of which depict a “frontal” hero in a typical contest scene, while the middle register features six heroes adoring plants or trees [Fig. 3:6]. Another noteworthy seal is an early Akkadian specimen featuring a line of frontally shown heroes, one carrying a “star-spade” symbol in his hand [Fig. 8:10]. Multiple renderings of particular heroes and hybrid creatures in the same scene might indicate that they were representatives of a certain class of beings rather than independent and well-defined individuals; see, for instance, a seal featuring multiple Anzud render-

ings (Amiet 1980a: No. 1263) or an early Akkadian seal with multiple bull-men (Boehmer 1965: Fig. 22).

A group of Early Dynastic seals features the “frontal” hero placed horizontally, either with a gate-post emblem in each hand, or often with the animals or symbols which populate the contest scenes (such as the snake, scorpion, antelope, “star-spade”, lion, combat between the hero and a quadruped), or in the “master of animals” attitude, flanked by carnivores (Amiet 1980a: Nos 1284, 1287–1295, 1450, 1759; Buchanan 1981: Fig. 351) [Fig. 3:7]. A gatepost, either shown separately or held by the hero or the bull-man in contest scenes, is extremely rare (Amiet 1980a: Nos 1035, 1281–1283, 1305; on the gatepost in Early Dynastic art see van Dijk 2016: 75–94; in Mesopotamian art in general see During Caspers 1971–1972).

The appearance of the hero shown in profile is less coherent, to the point that one might wonder if the figure was not meant to represent more than one individual. These variances might perhaps be caused by a chronological or regional differentiation, or by the lack of a popular and well-defined graphic model accessible to seal makers; for example, the hero in profile in the EDIIIb period is always, except on common-style seals, shown naked (Marchesi and Marchetti 2011: 206). Nonetheless, both the way this individual acts and his posture are recurrent and distinctive.

The most common depiction is that of a naked, usually bearded hero with a peculiar coiffure of hair raised in thick, backward-curling locks [Figs 1:1–7, 9; 3:1, 6; 4:1, 7; 5:3, 4, 6, 8; 6:3; 7:1, 2, 7, 10], sometimes wearing a belt [Fig. 1:9]. Depictions

of a naked hero in profile wearing a belt are rare (Porada and Buchanan 1948: No. 73; Amiet 1980a: No. 1001; Martin 1988: No. 448). Occasionally, belts are also worn by hybrid creatures: bull-men (Porada and Buchanan 1948: Nos 76, 83E; Buchanan 1966: Nos 185, 186; Amiet 1980a: Nos 1027, 1035, 1042, 1075, 1119, 1122, 1259, 1373; Martin 1988: No. 563) [Figs 5:2, 4, 6; 6:1, 3], human-faced bison (Amiet 1980a: Nos 1096, 1109, 1122, 1375) [Fig. 5:6, 8], or bulls (Amiet 1980a: Nos 1007, 1406). Another variation is the representation of a bald, generally beardless man (see also, among others, Porada and Buchanan 1948: Nos 86, 87, 92; Frankfort and Jacobsen 1955: Nos 374, 385, 386, 515, 528, 633; Amiet 1980a: Nos 1002, 1011, 1026, 1111, 1128, 1180, 1250, 1305, Pl. 77bis C, L; Martin, Moon, and Postgate 1985: Pl. 31a; Martin 1988: No. 453; Kist et al. 2003: No. 78) [Figs 4:6; 7:4, 6, 9]. Regardless of the hairdo, the hero shown in profile, although usually naked, can be occasionally dressed in a short, tasselled, or wrapped-over skirt (Porada and Buchanan 1948: Nos 71, 86, 87, 92; Frankfort and Jacobsen 1955: Nos 374, 385, 436, 479, 508, 576, 633; Buchanan 1966: Nos 174–176; 1981: Figs 292, 294; Amiet 1980a: Nos 1026, 1030, 1250, 1274, 1281, 1343; Martin, Moon, and Postgate 1985: Pls 31–32) [Figs 3:3, 4:6, 6:6, 7:4]. He is either barehanded, protecting herbivores and a human-faced bison just as the “frontal” hero might [Figs 1:2, 3, 4, 6; 2:1, 2, 5:4, 7:4, 10; 8:2, 5], or he can be aggressive, armed with a weapon of some kind, usually a knife or a dagger [Figs 1:7; 3:5; 4:4, 6, 7; 6:3–6; 7:1, 7; 8:1, 4]. He might be regarded as a wild-man, a stranger, possibly an inhabitant of a mountainous

region. The figure of a hero in profile with raised locks of hair has been discussed elsewhere (Ławecka 2017: 339–343). According to Braun-Holzinger (1999: 162), naked heroes with strange coiffures are wild foreigners and barbarians; what distinguished them from the civilized city-dwellers of Sumer, apart from their peculiar hair-do, was also their nudeness. The hero in profile would fit well with a folk story about a character similar to Enkidu—as described in the later *Epic of Gilgamesh*—a brave hero living in the wilderness, the defender of animals, with heart tried and tested in combat, someone who knows the mountain passes, who removes traps set by hunters (George 2000: 5–6: I 1105–1112, 1122–1133, 19: II 237–240, 28: III 220–223). In the lower register of the seal (shown in Fig. 3:8), the head of the hero with a strange hairdo is placed among the heads of herbivores, as if he were included among the representatives of these gregarious, phytophagous animals. Multiple renderings of the hero in profile occur (Frankfort and Jacobsen 1955: No. 386; Amiet 1980a: Nos 1087, 1089, 1128, 1180, 1258, 1318, Pl. 77bis C) [Figs 3:3–5; 7:4]. In a few cases, heroes are shown in different ways on the same seal: one is kilted and the other naked (Buchanan 1966: No. 204) [Fig. 7:4]. In such cases, they are also distinguished by their hairdos (Amiet 1980a: Nos 1065, 1117; Moortgat 1988: No. 113, one bald or with raised hair, the other with a lock at the back; Frankfort and Jacobsen 1955: No. 386, one bald, the other with raised hair). Whether they were meant to represent distinct characters is impossible to decide, but such seals are quite rare. More frequently both types of heroes are

shown in the same scene [Figs 1:6, 7; 3:1, 6; 4:1, 4; 5:4, 6, 7, 8; 6:4; 8:5].

The identity of the heroes and their names (if they ever had any) remain a mystery for the Early Dynastic period. Frans Wiggermann associated the frontally depicted, naked hero with six locks of hair with *lahmu*, “the hairy one”, but in the opinion of Richard S. Ellis, this identification (based mostly on data later than the 3rd millennium BCE) seems problematic and unsound (Wiggermann 1981–1982; 1992: 164–166; compare R.S. Ellis 1995); According to Renate M. van Dijk (2016: 92), “the figure’s [the nude hero’s] origin and original meaning are therefore obscure and unknown, and assigning him the name *lahmu* and its associated meaning and functions for this early period is problematic”. Also, in the Early Dynastic period there is no recurrent association with water and Enki/Ea (but, see a seal illustrated in Amiet 1980a: No. 1293, where a horizontally placed hero is shown with streams of water on either side) as posited for later times, starting with the Akkadian period. Be it as it may, both heroes can be regarded as “wild men” of human form but with supernatural qualities (especially the “frontal” hero who is fighting lions barehanded), of mythological or fabulous origin, inhabitants of distant lands.

HUMAN-FACED BISON

In glyptic contest scenes, the human-faced bison made his first appearance in the EDIII period (about 2600 BCE, Collon 2005: 27). Although the first regular, frequent attestations are clearly correlated with the EDIII period, the creature might have originated in the Fara period,

as demonstrated by a seal dated to EDII (Thorn and Collon 2013: 137, No. 116). The hybrid strikes a posture typical of later depictions and seems to have hooves rather than hands. Our creature is depicted with a human face, shown frontally, but with the horned head, bovid ears, and body resembling that of a bison. According to Dominique Collon (2005: 187), “[a] creature referred to as a human-headed bull is probably a bison from the Zagros mountains”. The existence of bison (an animal with a shaggy mane and beard, short, sharply curved horns, and tufted tail) in the Iraqi forested hills is presumptive, but compelling due to the realistic representations of the animal in art (Hatt 1959: 22, 68–69). The human-faced bison is usually upright, and commonly appears in pairs; he is always inert, never active [Figs 1:1, 4, 6, 8, 9; 4:1, 2, 4, 5:3, 4, 6, 7, 8; 6:2, 3; 7:5, 8, 9; 8:9]. Occasionally, he is shown being attacked by predators or protected, and perhaps restrained, by a hero or a bull-man.

It is generally agreed that the human-faced bison, often represented in 3rd millennium BCE art, should be identified with the mythical creature *gud-alim/kusarikku* (Boehmer 1978: 19; Lambert 1985: 447–448; Wiggermann 1992: 174–179; 1997: 243; Woods 2009: 189; for a detailed discussion on *kusarikku* see M. Ellis 1989). It is also beyond doubt that this creature is associated with the god Utu/Shamash (Wiggermann 1992: 150, 174; 1997: 226, 243). This linkage between the god and the hybrid may be also inferred from an EDIII A mace-head from Ur dedicated to the god Utu, decorated with images of human-faced bison (Wiggermann 1992: 176).

An animal designated as ÉRIN+X/



Fig. 4. Gud-alim/*kusarikku* on EDIII seals (1–9) and on an Akkadian seal showing the rise of the Sun god (10): 1, 2 – Amiet 1980b: Nos 1104, 1043; 3 – Louvre AO22299 (photo © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée du Louvre)/Christian Jean; 4 – Alotte de la Fuyé 1908: Pl. IX, DP15-16-17-18a; 5 – BM22962 (© The Trustees of the British Museum); 6 – Morgan Seal 85 (© The Morgan Library & Museum); 7–9 – Amiet 1980b: Nos 1034, 1425, 1260; 10 – redrawn from Boehmer 1965: Fig. 397. Nos 1,2,4, 7–9 (© Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris 1980)

ÉREN+X is mentioned several times in the *Hymn to Shamash*, known from copies found in Ebla and Abu Salabikh. This composition is written down in an archaic Akkadian dialect, but its content goes back to a southern Mesopotamian literary tradition (Krebernik 1992: 63, a tentative translation of this challenging text: 81–86). The animal seems to be closely associated with Shamash, and according to Piotr Steinkeller (1992: 260), it is more than likely that ÉREN+X denotes *gud-alim/kusarikku*. This relation is further corroborated by a passage from the *Hymn to Shamash* asserting that “the bison (ÉREN+X) of Shamash makes visible (his) divine radiance” (Steinkeller 1992: 266). Manfred Krebernik (1992: 83, C.4.6) translates this passage: “Divine splendour lightens the ÉREN+X of Šamaš”. This creature is also mentioned in an incantation from Ebla (“the ÉREN+X animal(s) recline(s) in the courtyard of Shamash”, Steinkeller 1992: 259). Figurines of reclining human-faced bison were quite common in the 3rd millennium BCE, not only in southern Mesopotamia but also on Syrian sites like Tell Brak or Ebla (Aruz and Wallenfels 2003: 230–231, Cat. Nos 157a, 172–173, and 111; see Hansen 2001 for the Tell Brak statuette, with ample parallels, including southern Mesopotamian ones). They are rarely shown in EDIII glyptic art [see *Fig. 4:3*]; however, there is a rather astonishing and unique seal from Lagash featuring the two types of heroes described above, each holding a statuette of a reclining human-faced bison in one hand [see *Fig. 4:1*]. This seal is one of the very few instances of the contest scene lacking any kind of herbivores. The lions attack the two *gud-alim* and

both heroes. On a few other seals, two recumbent creatures are depicted lying on either side of a hillock topped with a plant or a tree. Another seal features two reclining human-faced bison, both being harassed by a lion-headed Anzud bird, one stabbed by a hero and the other by a bull-man [*Fig. 4:5*]. There is a scorpion in front of the bull-man, while a snake is placed between the hero and the bird (see also Amiet 1980a: No. 1268 – two human-faced bison on two sides of a hillock with a plant, harassed by a lion-headed eagle and a winged quadruped, and Ravn 1960: No. 10 – a similar arrangement of human-faced bison, a hero attacking[?] a lion-headed eagle above the first one and a scorpion above the hindquarters of the other one).

Several dozen late EDIII and Akkadian seals display the so-called “God-boat” motif—a boat with the prow in the shape of an anthropomorphic deity, carrying a divine traveller, and surrounded by a recurrent set of secondary motifs, animals, and objects arranged around the protagonists (on seals with the “God-boat” motif see Amiet 1980a: 177–181; Steinkeller 1992: 256–267; Hempelmann 2004: 7–92; Ławecka 2009: 131–141). Most of the seals are dated to the late EDIII period, but there is a remarkable continuity into the Akkadian period. The identification of the passenger of the boat as a Sun-god is equivocal for EDIII (but see Amiet 1980a: Nos 1430, 1431) but confirmed for the Akkadian period (Amiet 1980a: Nos 1504–1506). According to Frayne, this iconography is most probably associated with the *Hymn to Shamash* referred to above (in Steinkeller 1992: 257–259). The range of secondary motifs in some cases partly

overlaps with that of the contest seals; some also depict a human-faced bison (Amiet 1980a: Nos 1411 featuring only a head, 1413, 1416) [Fig. 4:8]. Among the shared motifs, besides the gud-alim, there is the scorpion/scorpion man and/or lion-headed eagle (e.g., Amiet 1980a: Nos 1421, 1423, 1431) [Fig. 7:3] which, however, do not constitute an indispensable part of the “God-boat” scene. Of interest is also a picture featuring motifs typical of the “God-boat” seals (a plow, a vessel, and a quadruped) accompanied by two human-faced bison, three images of Anzud, a scorpion, and a scorpion hybrid [Fig. 6:8].

Evidence of close ties between the hybrid and Utu might also be found in later 3rd millennium BCE art and texts. In Akkadian glyptics, the Sun-god is commonly shown rising from the eastern horizon between two hills (the Twin Mountain of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Boehmer 1965: 71–76; Heimpel 1986: 140–141). However, on a few seals, Shamash is depicted either emerging from between two *kusarikku* instead of the traditional peaks of the eastern mountain [Fig. 4:10] (see also Boehmer 1978: Fig. 1 and Aruz and Wallenfels 2003: No. 157) or shown against them. According to Steinkeller (1992: 266), these images are “strikingly reminiscent” of the passage from the *Hymn to Shamash*, which he translates: “the bison of Shamash make visible (his) divine radiance”. Although these examples come from the subsequent period, the motif of two antithetic, reclining human-faced bison with their hind parts resembling a scaly hillock is present already on an EDIII seal [Fig. 4:9]. Close ties of gud-alim with the Sun-god

may also be inferred from the text of the Gudea cylinder A, which describes the king as: “[F]acing the sunrise, where the fates are decided, he erected the standard of Utu, the Bison head [sag-alim a], beside others already there” (Black et al. 1998–2006: t.2.1.7, *The building of Ningirsu's temple <Gudea, cylinders A and B>*, 705–707=A.263–265). A bison head is depicted on a seal [Fig. 4:6], but whether as an apotropaion or an emblem of the Sun-god one cannot really say (see also a human-faced bison's head on a stamp in Amiet 1980a: No. 1261 and on a “God-boat” seal in Amiet 1980a: No. 1411).

BULL-MAN

The second hybrid creature with bovine components associated with the Sun-god is the bull-man (Wiggermann 1992: 150, 174; 1997: 226, 230). On EDIII contest seals, there is an obvious difference between the bull-man and the human-faced bison. The bull-man's head and torso are human, while the lower part of the body, ears and horns are bovine. Therefore, he has hands in which he frequently carries a weapon and, in contrast to the four-hooved hybrid that is always weaponless and inert, he is depicted as active, even aggressive. He appears in Mesopotamian glyptic since about 2700 BCE, and may have originated in Proto-Elamite glyptic, where animals often adopt human postures (Green 1997a: 249–250; Collon 2005: 197); in this context, the bull-man has been interpreted as a personification of elementary forces stabilizing the world order (Green 1997a: 250; Black and Green 2004: 48).

The bull-man frequently carries a knife or a dagger [Figs 1:3, 4, 7, 10; 5:1–3; 6:2; 8:1, 3]. He is usually shown either at-

tacking predators or trying to restrain or protect herbivores and human-faced bison [Figs 1:2, 4, 7, 10; 5:8; 6:5], and sometimes he is himself depicted attacked by a lion [Figs 1:6, 6:1]. He is almost invariably shown in profile, although several exceptions exist [see Figs 3:2; 6:1], mostly, but not exclusively, in scenes where he is wrestling another bull-man or a hero with a frontally shown face (see also wrestling in Amiet 1980a: Nos 1095, 1721 and other scenes, Porada and Buchanan 1948: No. 76; Amiet 1980a: Nos 1071, 1259; Martin 1988: No. 448; Beyer 2007: Fig. 15a–c). Even when similar to the human-faced bison, in each case, the creature performs an action that requires the use of hands. In Akkadian-period glyptic, both forms are present, the bull-men shown in profile being more popular in earlier scenes (Collon 1982: 35, 37). Just once is the bull-man depicted with his hands raised, in his cosmic function as an atlantid, similarly to scorpions [Fig. 7:7].

The bull-man is also present in the iconography of subsequent periods, frequently in association with the Sun-god (Lambert 1985: 448; Black and Green 2004: 48–49).² A scene illustrating a god grasping a bull-man from behind by the tail and horn is shown on over a dozen (mostly early) Akkadian seals; the god is usually depicted with rays protruding from the shoulders, which qualifies him as a solar deity [Fig. 5:9, as part of a contest scene; Fig. 5:10; for gods without attributes see Boehmer 1965: Figs 299, 310–312, 345; Collon 1982: No. 131 with a “star-spade”; for gods with rays see Boehmer 1965: Fig. 122?, 287 – a diminutive bull-man attacks a god with rays rising from his right arm toward the solar disk, 294 – a unique seal showing a god with rays on one side, attacking a bull-man with a dagger, 300, 308 – with a “star-spade” sign, 339; Rohn 2011: No. 507]. The close association of the bull-man with Shamash may be inferred from further

- 2 A unique opportunity to match image and text is provided by the content of a hoard (although of much later date, attributed to the Middle Assyrian period) found beneath the courtyard of the temple of Assur at Assur. This assemblage contained an inscribed bronze cross and a gold plate with the image of a bull-man, shown in profile, wearing a horned tiara, and holding a standard (Klengel-Brandt and Marzahn 1997: bull-man plaque: Fig. 3, Pl. 20; cross with inscription: Fig. 4, Pl. 18). The text, commissioned by the brewer of the Eshara-temple, is dedicated to ^dGUD.DUMU.^dUTU (“The-Bull-Son-of-the-Sun-god”; Klengel-Brandt and Marzahn 1997: 218–221). Frans Wiggermann, with some reservations, equates both GUD.ALIM and GUD.DUMU.^dUTU (as well as another epithet, GUD.DUMU.AN.NA) with *kusarikku*; however, he allows for the possibility that GUD.DUMU.^dUTU may not have been a spelling of *kusarikku*, in which case “two mutually exclusive monsters would exist, one of them having no Akkadian reading (GUD.DUMU.^dUTU)” (Wiggermann 1992: 51–52). Maria deJong Ellis (1989: 129, footnote 56) points out the argument from silence fallacy behind this equation of terms. She also brings up a Neo-Assyrian text mentioning “red-bronze images of, respectively, ^dgud-dumu-^dutu’s and *kusarikku*’s”. If we assume that GUD.DUMU.^dUTU was a separate being, the bull-man would be a good candidate for this role; still, not only is concrete proof lacking, but moreover, the epithet first appears in texts dated to the Old Babylonian period (Wiggermann 1992: 176). Even when in later periods the iconography of the human-faced bison and the bull-man had become blurred, it is evident that in the EDIII contest scenes these two hybrid beings were distinct creatures.



Fig. 5. Bull-man in EDIII contest scenes (1–8): Amiet1980b: Nos 1000, 1042, 1013, 1096, 1723, 1109, 1080, 1375 (© Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris 1980) and Akkadian seals with a bull-man being restrained by the solar deity: 9 – BM89765 (© The Trustees of the British Museum); 10 – Louvre AO2485 (photo © RMN-Grand Palais (Musée du Louvre)/ Franck Raux)

Akkadian seals. On a seal from Nippur, Shamash is depicted in a shrine, under a canopy supported by spiral columns, flanked by two bull-men with frontally rendered faces holding gateposts (Collon 2005: No. 765). On another seal, two bull-men with gateposts are flanking a rising Shamash (Amiet 1980a: No. 1487).

Two Early Dynastic seals also depict an unarmed god, without attributes, facing and constraining a bull-man by taking hold of his arm and horn or tail (Amiet 1980a: Nos 1384, 1771). These renderings show that the origins of the motif popular in Akkadian glyptic may be pursued back to the late EDIII period. The conflict with, or the subduing of, the bull-man by the Sun-god would be in agreement with Wiggermann's comment on the art of the Akkadian period: "For the monsters, outlaws by nature, it is only small step from unpredictable servant to rebel, and from rebel to defeated enemy. The role of the god changes accordingly from master to rightful ruler, and from rightful ruler to victor" (Wiggermann 1992: 153).

Monsters were either the associates or servants of particular gods to which they were subordinate. Wiggermann suggests a close relationship of both taurine hybrids with the Sun-god from their first appearance: "The human-faced bison and the bison-man are associated with the Sun-god, a feature that must go back to the time before they split into two separate figures. This association of the mythologized (human-faced) bison(-man) with the sun perhaps goes back to the fact that the actual bison is at home in the hilly flanks of the Mesopotamian lowland, distant countries travelled only by the sun" (Wiggermann 1992: 174). The hilly flanks were also home

to the wild bulls. Appellations referring to bulls and their virtues are frequent among royal and divine epithets, but bovine imagery is particularly often evoked in the context of Utu/Shamash. For instance, in the Sumerian myth *Enki and the World Order*, the rising Sun-god is described as "the hero, the bull who comes out of the *hašur* forest bellowing truculently, the youth Utu, the bull standing triumphantly, audaciously, majestically ..., the judge who searches out verdicts for the gods, with a lapis-lazuli beard, rising from the horizon into the holy heavens" (Black et al. 1998–2006: t.1.1.3, *Enki and the world order*, 374–378). In the epos *Lugalbanda in the mountain cave*, the rising sun is called "the bright bull rising up from the horizon, the bull resting among the cypresses" (Black et al. 1998–2006: t.1.8.2.1, *Lugalbanda in the mountain cave*, 228–229; on the bovine imagery at sunrise in Mesopotamian texts, see also Polonsky 2000: 204–207). The association of Shamash with the wild bulls is also demonstrated in the passage from the EDIII *Hymn to Shamash*: "The radiance of Šamaš 'ate' (his) wild bull(s) in front of the mountain" (Krebernik 1992: 83, C6.6–C 7.1).

BIRD OF PREY AND LION-HEADED EAGLE

Another composite creature that appears on seals featuring the contest scene is the lion-headed eagle, one of the earliest animal hybrids, occurring since the Uruk period and present in Mesopotamian iconography until the end of the 3rd millennium BCE (Green 1997a: 254; for a discussion on the lion-headed eagle in Mesopotamian glyptic art see Amiet 1980a: 140–144).

In 3rd millennium BCE art, a lion-headed eagle is commonly accepted as an emblem of the mythical Thunderbird An-

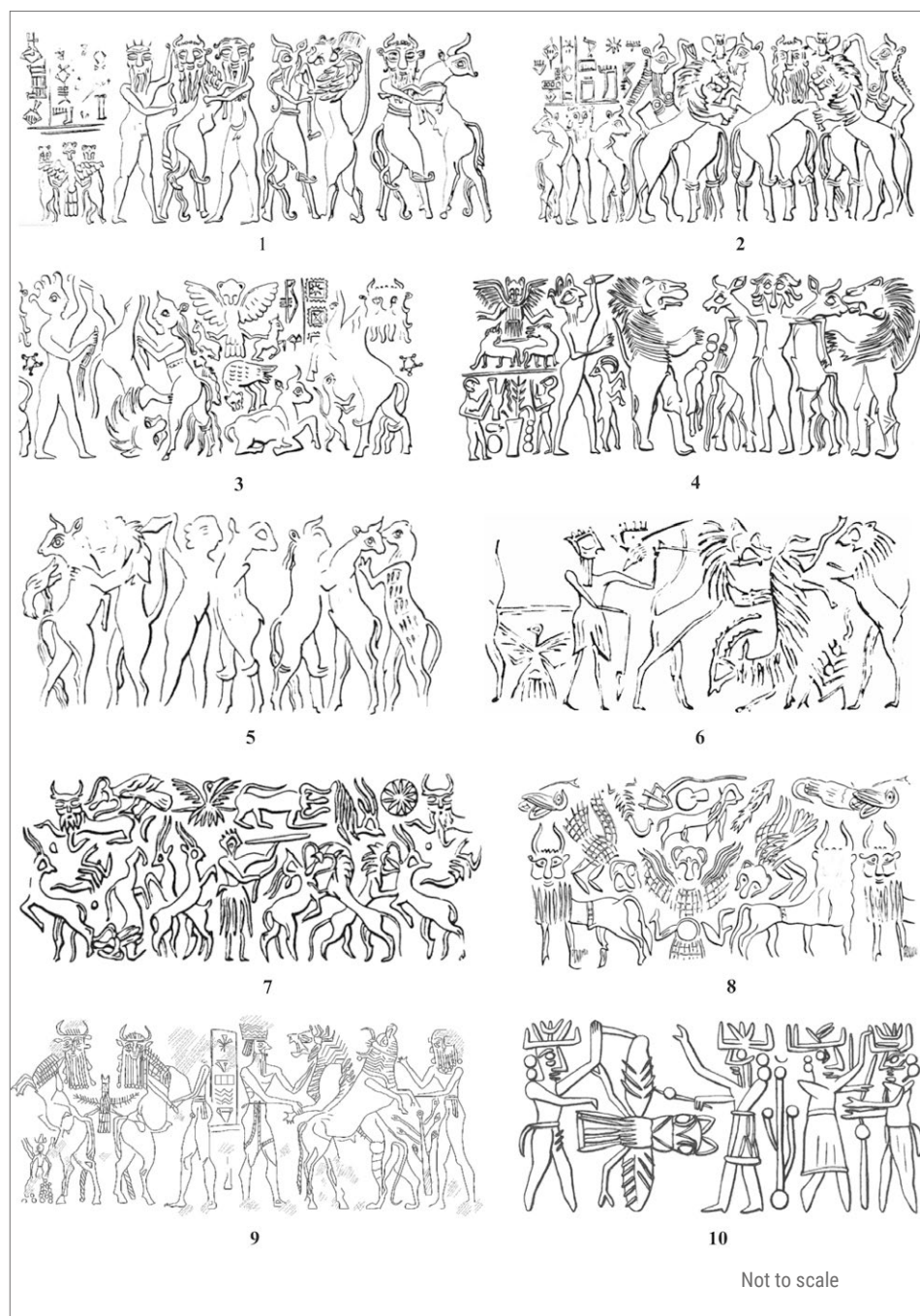


Fig. 6. EDIII (1–8) and Akkadian (9, 10) seals featuring the Anzud/Anzû bird: 1–8 –Amiet1980b: Nos 1108, 1098, 1062, 1350, 1044, 1020, 1274, 1271 (© Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris 1980); 9 – after Rohn 2011: No 140; 10 – Ornan 2010: Fig. 15; Israel Museum Collection No. IAA 65-7 (drawing P. Arad, with kind permission of T. Ornan)

zud (“Heavy Cloud” or “Heavy Storm”), originally probably a personification of atmospheric forces (Wiggermann 1997: 223, 243; Watanabe 2002: 127; Black and Green 2004: 107–108; Evans 2012: 99; Selz 2019: 41–42). Lion-headed eagles were frequently depicted in Sumerian art (on the iconography see Fuhr-Jaeppelt 1972; Braun-Holzinger 1990). Perhaps the most interesting of recent finds are the limestone inlays from a wall panel found in Royal Palace G at Ebla, featuring heraldic groups of figures of lion-headed eagles grasping human-faced bison (Aruz and Wallenfels 2003: 175, Cat. No. 115a). In the composition of the contest scene, its role seems to be subsidiary. It appears only occasionally but in a typical, recurrent way: either frontally, with outstretched wings, usually claspings in its talons two heraldically placed animals (birds, lions, or herbivores), or in a field between the other participants of the scene [Figs 1:6; 4:1, 4; 5:7; 6:1, 2<twice>, 3, 4]. Its depictions in profile are less frequent: with folded wings, almost invariably it is biting the spine of a human-faced bison [Figs 4:3, 5; 6:7] or, exceptionally, a bull (Amiet 1980a: Nos 1116, on the photograph in Amiet 1957: No. 46, the head of the bird is in the shadow and not discernible, 1721 photo and description: Boehmer 1969: 279–280, Fig. 53) [Fig. 6:3]. The motif is known also from other categories of artifacts, for instance, a limestone plaque from Al-Ubaid or a side panel of the Standard from Ur (Aruz and Wallenfels 2003: Cat. Nos 47, 52).

The *Lugalbanda* epic states that the Anzud bird resides in the eastern Zabu mountains, where wild bulls and stags also live:

When at daybreak the bird stretches himself, when at sunrise Anzud cries out, at his cry the ground quakes in the Lulubi mountains. He has a shark’s teeth and an eagle’s claws. In terror of him wild bulls run away into the foothills, stags run away into their mountains (Black et al. 1998–2006: t.1.8.2.2, *Lugalbanda and the Anzud bird*, 44–49)

According to Wiggermann, Anzud with outstretched wings shown above two antithetic animals (symbols of various gods) represents Enlil, the god of the space between Heaven and Earth, under whose supervision all other deities operate; the attitude of Anzud is not that of attack, but of supremacy, of the master of animals (Wiggermann 1992: 159–161; 1997: 226). This statement is corroborated by another passage from the *Lugalbanda* epic, being self-praise of Anzud:

I am the prince who decides the destiny of rolling rivers. I keep on the straight and narrow path the righteous who follow Enlil’s counsel. My father Enlil brought me here. He let me bar the entrance to the mountains as if with a great door. If I fix a fate, who shall alter it? If I but say the word, who shall change it? (Black et al. 1998–2006: t.1.8.2.2, *Lugalbanda and the Anzud Bird*, 99–104)

Anzud is a separate being, but he is acting on behalf of Enlil, who is his father and master. Therefore, although Anzud is not, strictly speaking, a symbol of Enlil, he may denote his begetter in the visual arts.

Realistically depicted birds of prey are sometimes rendered in an attitude similar to that of the lion-headed eagle. They can be shown with outstretched wings, but separately rather than as part of a heraldic, symmetrical group with other animals [Figs 6:6, 7], or pecking the spine of herbivores, but never that of the human-faced bison [Figs 1:2; 6:5] (see also birds with outstretched wings: Porada and Buchanan 1948: No. 96; Amiet 1980a: Nos 1005, 1015, 1072, 1077; Al-Gailani Werr 1992: No. 31 and birds with folded wings in Amiet 1980a: No. 1119). The meaning of this difference is not clear, but since both the eagle-headed and the lion-headed birds are shown in similar settings and attitudes, it is conceivable that they might, to some extent, convey a similar symbolic meaning (Frankfort 1939: 58). The depiction is not always detailed enough to determine whether a bird's or a lion's head was intended. Occasionally, two birds (lion-headed or of both kinds) are present on the same seal [Fig. 6:2, 3, 7]. On the "God-boat" seals, both kinds of birds are sometimes depicted [see Figs 4:8, bird; 6:8, three lion-headed eagles; and 7:3, eagle]. The lion-headed eagles and the birds of prey with outstretched wings are often shown in a similar position in compositions featuring a row of animals. According to Amiet's interpretation, scenes with a bird of prey with outfolded wings depicted

above animals symbolize divine protection (Amiet 1980a: 113–115, 131–132, 140–142). So, it looks as if in the EDIII period, the two creatures carried a somewhat different message, but in Akkadian glyptic the distinction between them could occasionally become blurred and both images could be used interchangeably. This is illustrated by scenes showing the killing of a bird of prey, with gods participating in the kill, shooting with bows and arrows or hitting the bird with other weapons. The bird is usually portrayed in a naturalistic way; however, at least once, the lion-headed eagle is depicted in precisely the same circumstances (compare, for instance, Frankfort and Jacobsen 1955: Fig. 519 with the present Fig. 6:10).³

SCORPIONS, SNAKES AND LIZARDS

One of the most frequent auxiliary motifs is a scorpion, usually shown upright with raised pincers. It is the scorpion in its cosmic function (Amiet 1956: 115–116; 1980a: 133–134) which, according to Wiggermann (1992: 180–181; 1997: 242), is the earliest form of the scorpion-man (*girtablullû*); he was associated with Utu/Shamash in later art and in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, where the scorpion-man and his mate guarded the gate in the Twin Mountain of Mashu through which the sun would rise (for the relevant passage in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* see George 2000: 71, IX 38–45). As far as EDIII contest scenes are concerned, an

3 For deities hunting birds of prey in Akkadian glyptic see also Boehmer 1965: Figs 323–325, 334–336 (324 with the assistance of a solar god; 334 with a god restraining a bull-man); Keel-Leu and Teissier 2004: No. 68; Otto 2004: Pl. 29 (with a "star-spade" symbol below the bird). Of interest in this context is also an Akkadian seal and a seal impression with a similar motif of a falling god (Boehmer 1965: Figs 354, 355) attacked by, in the first case, two lion-headed eagles, and in the second, a bird (the creature is somewhat awkwardly rendered but seems to have a bird's head with a beak).



Fig. 7. EDIII (1, 2, 4–9) and early Akkadian(10) contest scenes featuring scorpions, scorpion-men, lizards, and snakes; EDIII god-boat scene with a scorpion-man (3): 1, 2 – Amiet 1980b: Nos 1017, 1070; 3 – Buchanan 1981: 131, No. 345 = YPM BC 036944 (courtesy Yale Babylonian Collection); 4 – YPM BC 006264 (courtesy Yale Babylonian Collection); 5–10 – Amiet 1980b: Nos 1345, 1029, 1299, 1079, 1298, 1377. Nos 1, 2, 5–10 (© Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris 1980)

upright scorpion with raised pincers is the most frequent variant, occasionally occurring below a double horizontal line that separates it from astral symbols [Fig. 7:6; without a double line, Fig. 7:1; below a star-spade, Fig. 8:4; see also Delaporte 1923: No. A.94; Moortgat 1988: No. 120]. A scorpion appears also below astral symbol(s) without a double horizontal line (Amiet 1980a: Nos 77bis L, 1041, 1065). In some cases, the space above the scorpion and the double line was left blank, perhaps for an inscription (Eisen 1940: No. 21; Porada and Buchanan 1948: No. 72; Frankfort and Jacobsen 1955: Nos 332, 502; Wiseman 1962: Pl. 16b; Buchanan 1966: No. 161; Parrot and Dossin 1968: No. 4448; Amiet 1980a: No. 1023; Pittman and Aruz 1987: No. 18). Occasionally, the upright scorpion is disproportionately large, occupying most of the height of the design (e.g., Buchanan 1966: Nos 164, 212; Amiet 1980a: Pl. 77bis J and Nos 1016, 1114). In other cases, it is placed somewhere in the field among other figures, usually—but not always—with pincers uplifted [Figs 4:4, 6:3, 6, 7]. On an early Akkadian seal, Shamash carrying his emblem, the *šaššaru*-saw, is depicted above the “cosmic scorpion” and a double line [Fig. 7:10; on the association of a scorpion with Utu/Shamash see Woods 2009: 191–192].

The representations of a scorpion-man hybrid in Mesopotamian EDIII glyptic are rare, but several can be pointed out, among them a few incorporated into contest scenes. In these renderings, a scorpion, usually shown with lifted pincers, acquires a human head, which seems to be a first step in the evolution towards the fully developed creature present in

Akkadian glyptic and later art (Amiet 1980a: 133–134; 1980b: 39–40; Green 1997a: 250). For instance, this monster can be found in a contest scene featuring only lions attacking herbivores and a large scorpion-man with raised arms in an upright position (Buchanan 1981: Fig. 275; on a depiction of the scorpion-man in Early Dynastic glyptic, see also a peculiar seal shown in Amiet 1980a: No. 1363). On another contest seal (Amiet 1980a: No. 1002), a hybrid being seemingly composed of parts of a scorpion and a goat is depicted. Two other seals, bought on the antiquities market, may be fakes (Amiet 1980a: No. 1760; Rohn 2011: No. 890). A scorpion-man is also depicted on the bottom register of a shell plaque from the sound-box of a musical instrument found in PG/789 at Ur (Woolley 1934: Pl. 105). The scorpion-man, with the upper part of the body placed horizontally and tail upraised, is shown in an EDIII contest scene on a sealing from Mari (Beyer 2007: Fig. 5). Two other contest scene seals feature upright scorpions, probably with traces of the heads (damaged): one from Abu Salabikh, of uncertain date (<https://oi-archive.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/dbfiles/objects/2151.htm>), and the other early Akkadian (Boehmer 1965: No. 30 = Amiet 1980a: No. 1023). A similarly rendered creature is shown in a “God-boat” scene [see Fig. 7:3]. Judging by the rays protruding from the shoulders of the deity on some Early Dynastic(?) and Akkadian seals, the god travelling in the boat is a Sun-god (for a god with rays? protruding from the forearm in a “God-boat”, see Amiet 1980a: Nos 1430, 1431 with a scorpion in front of the deity; for Shamash in a “God-boat” on Akkadian

seals see Amiet 1980a: Nos 1504–1506; for the scorpion and scorpion-man on “God-boat” seals see Hempelmann 2004: 44–46), and the scene is most probably related to the journey of Shamash described in the *Hymn to Shamash* (see above). A horizontally placed scorpion with a human head and a naturalistically rendered scorpion are depicted on another seal with “God-boat” motifs [see Fig. 6:8]. Perhaps the most intriguing and unique representation is that of a human-headed scorpion with a horned crown forming an integral part of a contest scene with two heroes, an antelope, and a stag attacked by a lion [Fig. 7:4]. Finally, the close relationship between the Sun-god and the scorpion can also be inferred from an Akkadian seal showing gods engaged in battle, among which there is a solar deity, most likely Shamash, probably assisted by a divine scorpion-man crowned with a horned tiara, with rays emanating from his lower body (Wiggerman 1992: 153; Woods 2009: 192, Fig. 21; on scorpions on Akkadian seals featuring a rising Shamash see Boehmer 1965: No. 406; Lambert 1979: No. 7).

Lizards and snakes are also recurrent, if not indispensable, motifs in contest scenes. They are not engaged in fighting and seem unconnected in any readable way to the main topic. Nevertheless, their presence is frequent enough for them to be regarded as essential appendages to the main scene. Lizards appear among other participants of the contest scene, typically in an upright position (Legrain 1936: No. 504 a lizard not present on Amiet 1980a: No. 1311; Porada and Buchanan 1948: No. 81E; Frankfort and Jacobsen 1955: No. 512 a lizard upside down; Wise-

man 1962: Pl. 16c; Buchanan 1966: Nos 132 a lizard below a scorpion, uncertain ED date, 160; Amiet 1980a: Nos 1017, 1021, 1025 a lizard placed horizontally, 1070; Rohn 2011: No. 75a) [Figs 3:4; 7:1, 2, 7]. The animal shown in Fig. 3:4 (and possibly also in Amiet 1980a: No 1179, left) is rather stout and resembles a turtle, but since the carapace is not marked, and there is at least one kind of a similarly looking Near Eastern lizard (the spiny-tailed lizard, *Uromastix aegyptia*), it is classified here as a lizard. On several seals, lizards are placed below astral symbols, or—similarly to the scorpion in its “cosmic” aspect—below a double horizontal line dividing the height of the seal (below astral symbols: Legrain 1951: No. 94; Amiet 1980a: No. 1115; below a double horizontal line: Parrot and Dossin 1968: No. 4441; Amiet 1980a: No. 1117; Moortgat 1988: Nos 113, 119). A unique seal features in the lower register an animal contest scene flanked by two scorpions with two different kinds of lizards (or a lizard and a turtle?) above them (Amiet 1980a: No. 1179). Lizards are occasionally depicted in similar contexts on early Akkadian contest seals; of special interest is a seal featuring a bull, a winged gate with Shamash sitting close to it, and a large lizard behind him (Louvre, AO 2281; see also Akkadian contest scenes, e.g., Boehmer 1965: Figs 49, 103, 105; Buchanan 1966: Nos 273, 277).

Snakes—some diminutive, others occupying the full height of the composition—often accompanied by scorpions, are rendered either as a simple wavy line (which raises doubts as to their identification), occasionally with a marked head [Figs 6:3; 7:2, 7], or as a coiled, plaited pattern [Fig. 7:8] (see also Wool-

ley 1934: No. 62; Frankfort and Jacobsen 1955: Nos 320, 360; Buchanan 1966: No. 185; Amiet 1980a: Nos 1015, 1022, 1030, 1062, 1085, and Pl. 77bis A, N; Al-Gailani Werr 1992: No. 31; for coiled snakes see Amiet 1980a: Nos 1037, 1250). In a few cases, the snake seems to be touching or attacking a hero or an animal (Porada and Buchanan 1948: No. 64 hero in profile; Buchanan 1966: No. 163? hero in profile; Amiet 1980a: Nos 1069 “frontal” hero, Pl. 77bis M lion). In the lower register of the seal, a hero holding snakes seems to participate in a contest scene [Fig. 7:5]; in the upper row, there is a procession of people carrying snakes in their hands, bringing to mind some kind of a religious ceremony, but it cannot be ascertained if the two motifs are interrelated. A snake is also carried by a person (the hero in profile?) in the seal, which, though atypical, is clearly related to the contest scene [Fig. 7:9]. In a few instances, the object held by a hero or a bull-man, sometimes described as a weapon, might actually be a snake (e.g., Fig. 3:1; Porada and Buchanan 1948: Nos 85E?, 119; Frankfort and Jacobsen 1955: No. 380?; Amiet 1980a: Pl. 77bis G).

In his exceedingly inspiring article, Christopher Woods defines the Mesopotamian eastern horizon, the place of the rising Sun-god, as a line separating death and night from day, the reborn sun, and the promise of life. In this context, he points to the dual aspect of the scorpion. It is a deadly predator and a creature of the night but, at the same time, just as the eastern horizon, it is a symbol of life and rebirth due to the regular molting process from which it emerges larger than before: a symbol of birth and rejuvenation (Woods 2009: 192–193). The role of the

snake and lizard representations in contest scenes cannot be elaborated on based on available evidence. Apart from other diverse symbolic connotations of scorpions and snakes (particularly chthonic ones), it should be noted that just as scorpions, these animals also periodically shed their skin. For this reason, they may be regarded as icons of rejuvenation and revival, as described in the Gilgamesh epos, where the snake which devoured the plant of rejuvenation that the hero had found immediately sloughed off its skin (George 2000: 98–99, XI, 283–307).

ASTRAL SYMBOLS AND THE “STAR-SPADE” SIGN

The repertoire of images other than genuine or mythological beings is rather limited. Rarely, a dagger appears in the field between the combatants (Woolley 1934: Nos 62, 151; Wiseman 1962: Pl. 16a; Keel-Leu and Teissier 2004: No. 39) [Figs 3:1; 5:6; 8:1]. Astral symbols occur more often: a moon-crescent, a star, and dots or globes probably denoting planets [see Figs 3:5; 4:2; 5:7; 7:1, 2, 6; 8:2]; in a few instances, the sun can also be present (as in Buchanan 1966: No. 164 or Amiet 1980a: No. 1274 and, perhaps, Fig. 7:7). These symbols can be single, or more than one can appear on the same seal, usually (but not always) close to one another, in various permutations (for instance, Amiet 1980a: moon crescent Nos 1065, 1071, 1306, 1452; star Nos 1028, 1093, 1115, 1116, 1124, 1125; crescent and star Nos 1113, 1019, 1240; moon crescent and dot(s) Nos 1018, 1024, 1080, 1450 and Pl. 77bis L; star, moon crescent and dots Nos 1043, 1250). Astral symbols may have been used in an attempt to create a “celestial context” for



Fig. 8. Symbols and deities on EDIII (1-7, 9) and Akkadian (8, 10) seals: 1 – Doumet 1992: No. 70 (Collection Chiha, with kind permission of C. Doumet-Serhal); 2 – Amiet 1980b: No. 1082; 3 – BM123568; 4-6 – Amiet 1980b: Nos. 77bis G, H, I; 7 – BM123279; 8 – BM89110; 9 – BM 8907; 10 – Amiet 1980b: No. 1285 (Nos 3, 7-9 – © The Trustees of the British Museum; Nos 2, 4-6, 10 – © Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris 1980)

the scene or to indicate the presence of the deities denoted by their astral representations (Watanabe 2002: 40). One may argue that astral symbols may indicate the sky at dawn, just before sunrise—a crescent that gives direction to the rising sun (mentioned in the *Lugalbanda* epic, see Rochberg 2009: 52), and a morning Inanna—but the idea cannot be supported by any additional evidence.

Of greatest interest is a sign called the “star-spade” or “Sonnenzeichen” (Boehmer 1965: 84–86; Collon 1982: 33; the following discussion on the “star-spade” symbol is based on the material collected in Rohn 2011: 135–148, with slight chronological adjustments in a few cases). It consists of a star (the DINGIR determinative?) on top, a vertical stroke, and a sign clearly resembling the Sumerian logogram UTU in the lower part. It first emerged in the EDIII period, when it was strongly associated with contest scenes (11 examples, *Fig. 8:2–6*, Rohn 2011: Nos 713–722 [714=*Fig. 8:4*, 716=*Fig. 8:3*, 717=*Fig. 8:6*, 718=*Fig. 8:2*, 719=*Fig. 8:5*], 726; seal No. 715, Sotheby’s, *non vidi*, 716 – the sign placed upside down). The symbol appears only twice in scenes of a different kind: on a seal depicting a horizontally placed “frontal” hero (between his feet, Rohn 2011: No. 724), and on a late-ED seal featuring a mythological scene, the meaning of which eludes us [*Fig. 8:7*]. In the contest scenes, the “star-spade” is placed either in the field between the fighting figures or above the double horizontal line, where astral symbols occasionally appear in other contest-themed seals (in the field between the participants of the fight: Rohn 2011: Nos 713, 714, 716, 722 below a crescent, 726 below a dot and

a crescent; above a double horizontal line: Nos 717 above a scorpion, 718 above an unidentified object, 719 above a hero with antelopes, 720 above a scorpion, 721 above a vertical dagger).

The only known parallels are to be found on seals from the Akkadian period. Such a comparison must be treated with due caution, but the sign’s identical form, the continuity of its occurrence between the subsequent periods, and its frequent association with contest scenes suggest that the concept behind the “star-spade” icon also persisted. The sign can be found mostly on early Akkadian seals. Among renderings where the form of the sign is identical to its Early Dynastic version, around 40 are featured in the contest scene (e.g., Rohn 2011: 137–141, 146). In the remaining 27 cases of seals from this group, the majority of other depicted motifs seem closely connected with the iconography of Shamash. Most frequently, the god is shown rising, ascending a mountain, standing in a gate (nine seals) [*Fig. 8:8*], or sitting on a throne (five seals). One seal depicts a battle of the gods, with a solar deity grasping a bull-man by the horn and tail, and a banquet scene with the “star-spade” placed close to a person (whose head is only partly preserved) with rays protruding from his shoulders (Rohn 2011: Shamash inside the gate Nos 844, 845, 854, 855, 856, 858, 860, 862, sitting on a throne Nos 563, 821, 823, 827, and 830 Sotheby’s, *non vidi*, Shamash ascending the mountain No. 942, battle of the gods No. 815, banquet scene with a participant, perhaps a god with rays protruding from the shoulders No. 809). The remaining 11 include a few that may have also been connected with contest iconography (a row of fron-

tally depicted heroes [see *Fig. 8:10*]), or with Shamash, like the scene where the “star-spade” is set behind a sitting god facing a winged gate, or that with gods fighting a bird of prey (Rohn 2011: Nos 871=*Fig. 8:10*, row of heroes, 660 winged gate, possibly also 866; on the likely connection between the Sun-god and the winged gate motif see Collon 1982: 87–88). The reason for the insertion of the symbol into some of the other seals is uncertain, but none of these cases contradicts the suggestion that it might have been a symbol of Utu/Shamash (Rohn 2011: Nos 539, 581, 817, 832, 835, 839, 840, 869).

The second group of Akkadian seals contains an emblem very similar to the “star-spade”, but with the lower part in a triangular rather than rhomboidal shape, which could be a simplification of the Early Dynastic version. The other “star spade” signs discussed by Rohn are modified, mostly by the addition of horizontal line(s) in the middle (Rohn 2011: 147–148); since the meaning might also have been altered, these examples will not

be considered here. In the second group the distribution of accompanying motifs is similar as in the previous group: out of 29 seals 13 bear a contest scene, and eight are firmly related to Shamash imagery (god with rays rising in a gate or sitting on a throne, Rohn 2011: 147; Shamash rising or standing in a gate: Rohn 2011: Nos 825, 847, 850, 853, 859; Shamash sitting on a throne in adoration or presentation scenes: Rohn 2011: Nos 824, 826, 829). Of the remaining eight seals, at least two may also be associated with the Shamash sphere (bull-man grasped by a god without attributes, and a winged gate motif), while the other six are open to various interpretations (Rohn 2011: Nos 816 bull-man grasped by a god without attributes, 863 a winged gate motif, and 807, 837, 838, 841, 867, 870, 874). On account of both the shape of the “star-spade” sign and the context of its occurrence on Akkadian seals, it seems likely that it actually was a symbol of Utu/Shamash (see Boehmer 1965: 84–86, but see conclusion in Rohn 2011: 147–148).

COMPOSITION OF THE CONTEST SCENE: RANDOM OR DELIBERATE?

The vast majority of contest scenes is focused on herbivores struggling against predators, a battle in which the attacked animals are assisted, protected, and sometimes perhaps restrained by heroes and bull-men. In some cases, however, the composition of the scene seemingly goes against the grain of this interpretation.

Writing about EDIII contest scenes, Henri Frankfort (Frankfort and Jacobsen 1955: 29) remarked that:

“... the friezes at this time are even less suitable for consideration from the point of view of meaning than those that went before. To this extent they are more exclusively decorative”, and: “[I]t is fatuous to inquire into the exact relationship between the various figures on his [seal-cutter] seals. Clearly, the artist was not interested in that aspect of his subject but was preoccupied with producing a closely

interwoven pattern” (Frankfort and Jacobsen 1955: 30; see also Frankfort 1939: 54, 58 for a similar notion).

This stance is debatable because it is difficult to accept that the most popular motif engraved on seals that also served as amulets would be a meaningless, purely decorative pattern. Moreover, as stated above, the main notion encoded in the scene—the protection of herbivores against the attacks of lions and leopards—is apparent and undeniable. Scenes featuring predators attacking herbivores are most numerous, with heroes and bull-men often standing by the assaulted ruminants or human-faced bison. Had the scene been solely of decorative value, designs departing from this scheme would have been much more frequent rather than constituting relatively rare exceptions.

Seals with typical participants of the contest scene shown in an unusual context or in a peculiar attitude regarding one another are quite rare. They can be divided into a few categories. To begin with, as mentioned above, the human-faced bison is sometimes attacked by a lion-headed eagle and may be defended by a hero and a bull-man [*Figs 4:3, 5; 6:7*]. Since seals with such a motif form a small but consistent group, the conflict between the two characters might have been part of a story or a myth of which we have no record, and it does not need to stand in contradiction to the presumed general meaning of the contest scene. Secondly, there are motifs of wrestling involving heroes and bull-men incorporated into the main scene (see also Boehmer 1965: *Fig. 5*; Amiet 1980a: Nos 1010, 1024, 1094, 1095,

1116, 1721) [*Figs 3:2; 5:4, 6*]. If we follow the interpretation of Joseph Azize (2002: 1), who sees wrestling between a hero and animals as “a prayer in picture that the limits be maintained”, a struggle which is essential to upholding the natural balance and the fragile equilibrium of the universe, then the competition between heroes and/or bull-men also tallies with the proposed general interpretation of the contest scene.

More puzzling and intricate are scenes where an armed hero or bull-man attacks herbivores, seemingly with the intention to wound or kill. In some cases, it is a matter of interpretation if the animal is being protected or attacked. For instance, in *Fig. 1:5*, the hero is armed with a dagger, but he does not necessarily pose a threat to the deer depicted there. He might equally well be preparing to pull the deer out of the reach of a lion rearing behind it and then to strike the great cat. The same scenario can be suggested in a few other cases where a herbivore is seemingly menaced by a hero or a bull-man wielding a dagger over its head (e.g., *Figs 5:2; 7:1*). There too, it can be assumed that the real target is the predator seen behind the herbivore. This is quite clear in some other examples [*Fig. 5:3*], even if occasionally the result is awkward and the hand of the attacking bull-man gets elongated out of proportion [*Fig. 5:1*]. Nonetheless, in a few cases, there is no doubt that the dagger is being thrust into the head of a herbivore (Amiet 1980a: Nos 1103?, 1042, 1084, 1125, 1283; Hansen 1987: No. 21) [see *Fig. 7:7*]. On a few other seals, a hero and/or a bull-man seem to be attacking a human-faced bison, but the weapon(?) is not always shown in detail (Parrot and

Dossin 1968: Pl. XVIII: 4441; Amiet 1980a: Nos 1080, 1090, 1257, 1258; Doumet 1992: No. 69). Finally, the compositions on some seals are so unique or atypical that they escape our understanding, e.g., a seal that contains characters typical of contest scenes, including a naked hero seemingly stabbing a deer, but no predators [Fig. 7:9]. Another case in point is a seal with a hero attacking a herbivore protected by another hero, again without any predators in sight [see Fig. 8:9]. A fragment of a sealing featuring a bull-man and a hero attacking each other with weapons is also peculiar [Fig. 5:5].

Although the composition of the contest scene is diversified and the variations countless, the way the respective participants are shown (their posture and gestures) is notably repetitive. According to Catherine Breniquet, the use of iconographic stereotypes is an essential trait of Mesopotamian animal art. The

repetitions “provide an indirect evidence that artists used sketch books made of perishable materials of which we have no extant examples” (Breniquet 2002: 152; see also Sonik 2014: 269, 276, 282). This reasoning might well apply also to EDIII glyptic contest scenes, in which the recurrent, standardized postures, motions, and certain details of the characters’ appearance are distinctive for the individuals participating in the struggle. Models for particular creatures could have come from “pattern books” or from actual seals or collections of seal impressions, and rearranged into new designs. This hypothesis (highly plausible, yet impossible to substantiate or refute) provides the best explanation for some awkward lapses in rendering. Although the general sense of the scene would have been widely known, occasionally, a seal-cutter could have been unacquainted with the exact significance of particular details.

THE SETTING OF THE SCENE: CONTEST AT THE EASTERN HORIZON

There are some persuasive indications in the depictions examined above that point to the location of the struggle in the distant eastern mountains. The impenetrable Zagros range was the boundary of the known world, a place which, according to the *Lugalbanda* epic is secret and unknown, “the great mountains, to which no one should travel alone, from which no man returns to his fellow man” (Woods 2009: 211). It was the place where wild bulls, bison and other wild animals depicted on the seals used to live; it was also the homeland of the mythical bird

Anzud and other fabulous creatures.

If we accept the continuity of basic concepts behind the contest scene between the Early Dynastic and Akkadian periods, as seems plausible, then Akkadian glyptic art provides yet another clue leading to the eastern mountains. In a number of depictions of Shamash rising or sitting on a throne, Woods noticed the presence of a conical tree, probably a kind of conifer (*Juniperus polycarpus?*), likely a hašur tree, which is so closely related with the mountain of sunrise that it was named after it in literary sources (Woods

2009: 190–191; see also Buchanan 1981: Fig. 468, and Collon 1982: No. 160=Boehmer 1965: Fig. 448 for a similar motif of a sitting Shamash with a tree behind him, although the photo is not complete). Such a tree was occasionally placed between the participants of the contest scene; particularly significant are those examples in which the tree is located on a hillock marked by a scaly pattern commonly used in pictorial representations to indicate mountains (Boehmer 1965: Figs 181 and 251 with a scaly hillocks, 148=photo: Collon 1982: No. 66; and Nos 102?, 103, 134?, 153 with an oryx, 154, 189, 262; Legrain 1951: No. 176; Moortgat 1988: Nos 166, 186; see also Aruz and Wallenfels 2003: Cat. No. 149 for a hunting scene with wild goats in a mountainous landscape with similar trees). The connection between the contest scene and the eastern horizon is explicitly demonstrated on an Akkadian seal where a small figure of Shamash rising from between Twin Mountain peaks appears in the midst of the main participants of the scene (photo: Boehmer 1965: Fig. 72) [Fig. 6:9]. Associations between elements of the contest scene and the eastern, mountainous area where wild animals and monsters were at home are in agreement with a traditional textual description of the characteristic features of outer, peripheral regions, contrasted with the attributes of the central, lowland homeland of the Mesopotamian civilization (Wiggerman 1996).

First and foremost, however, the eastern mountains were the place of the rising sun. The association of some creatures, such as the human-headed bull, bull-man, scorpion/scorpion-man, and of the “star-spade” symbol with Utu/Shamash,

a god who supervised the region of the distant eastern mountains, has already been suggested and discussed in detail. As mentioned above, the scorpion’s (but also the snake’s and lizard’s, both present in contest scenes) ability to cyclically shed its skin may well be linked to the symbolism of the eastern horizon as a place of birth and rejuvenation. Again quoting Woods (2009: 185–186):

... in Mesopotamia the edges of the earth are shrouded in myth and it is the Sun-god who is a master of this domain by virtue of his daily journey ... The Mesopotamian horizon ... is a region with its own iconography and imagery, with a cosmography that straddles reality and myth. ... It is at daybreak that the fates are determined and judgments are decided at the horizon.

All the issues related to the recurrent gathering of the assembly of gods, rendering verdicts and determining fates at daybreak in the presence of Utu/Shamash were discussed at length, and the relevant written evidence was presented systematically by Janice Polonsky (2000; 2002). The qualification *ki-^dutu* (“the place of Utu”) refers to an earthly site but clearly associated with its mythical counterpart (*ki-^dutu-è(-a)*). Mentioned in two inscriptions of Eannatum, it acts in this instance—as suggested by Polonsky—as a general description of the eastern direction (Polonsky 2000: 91). The texts referring to the mythical location of the place of the rising Utu, *ki-^dutu-è(-a)* or its earthly ritual counterpart are later than the seal corpus discussed here, but some

noteworthy mentions can be found also in inscriptions written down in Sumerian back in the 3rd millennium BCE. In the text of Gudea's cylinders, the moment of sunrise is mentioned twice in the context of deciding fates—once on cylinder A in the passage quoted above, referring to the sunrise as a place where the fates are decided—and on cylinder B: “The daylight came out, the fate had been decided” (Black et al. 1998–2006: t.2.1.7, *The building of the Ningirsu temple* (Gudea, cylinders A and B), 705–707=A.26.3–5, 925=B5.16). In both instances, the word “fate” is a translation of the Sumerian phrase “nam tar”; its basic meaning, as analyzed by Steinkeller (2017: 7) is “to determine the essence or existence of a person or a thing” (for the discussion of the meaning of the phrase see also Polonsky 2002: 75–79, 168–178). The reason for the presence of Anzud in the contest scenes might be twofold. First, he is the dweller and the guardian of the eastern mountains where the sun rises, and second and remarked above, he is closely linked with the fixing of destinies and with the god Enlil, whom he might in some cases symbolize. In the myth *Enki and the world order*, also Enki claims that: “With Enlil who fixes his gaze upon the Mountain, I am the one who determines a good fate. He (Enlil) placed in my hand the destiny which is determined at ki-^dutu-è-a” (Polonsky 2000: 94).

The place where the Sun-god rises was also the spot where daily judgments and verdicts were rendered, as stated in the *Sippar Temple Hymn*: “[Utu is] pronouncing judgment where the sun rises” (Black et al. 1998–2006: t.4.80.1: 489, *The Temple Hymns*; on Utu/Shamash as the

chief justice and decision-maker for gods, humankind and animals, as well as on the convocation of the divine assembly at sunrise in later texts, see Polonsky 2000: 95–97; 2002: 224–239). As mentioned before, the conception was elaborated by Polonsky on the ground of texts written down in the late 3rd millennium BCE, or later still. In only one instance, the inscriptions take us firmly to the Akkadian period: clay cones dating to this time bear the record of a certain Lú-Utu, an *ensi* of Umma, who built a temple “[I]n ki-^dutu-è, the place of deciding destiny” (Polonsky 2000: 93). According to Polonsky, the Sun-god, after unbolting the gates of heaven and providing light at daybreak, convokes the assembly of gods, and, in his role as chief justice, executes judgements during the daily decreeing of fate (Polonsky 2002: 215–249).

An important question remains: can this concept, based on later texts, be transposed to the reality of the Early Dynastic period? The answer can be found in the aforementioned *Hymn to Shamash* known from Ebla and Abu Salabikh. This difficult composition is not yet fully translated and understood, but it seems to refer to the underworld trip of Shamash to the eastern horizon and his rise from the netherworld. Referring to the meeting of the River-god and Shamash mentioned in the *Hymn*, Woods (2005: 45) states that both met on the mythological plane “on the eastern horizon, where Šamaš renders his judgments and where the Great River flows” (see also Woods 2009: 219). The text begins with the praise of Shamash, who is described as “The bolt of (venerable) heaven” (C1.1//A 1.1).⁴ At a certain point in this rather complicated story, Shamash stays in the

west(?), in the vicinity of Mount Sharshar (C6.2-3//A 4.5-7 to C.5-7.6), identified with Jebel Bishri (Lambert 1989: 25). Alternatively, as suggested by Woods (2009: 218-219), Mount Sharshar may be identified with the mountain of sunrise. In the next three lines, Shamash's trip to the other side (or: marsh) of the sea is described (C7.1-7.5), which may be understood as a nightly underworld journey to the east. Then, when he came to the heights(?), the lofty gods came (or: stood up), and the platform for the assembly was delivered to the house of Shamash (C7.5-6 to C8.3-4). The following episodes, as suggested by Lambert (1989: 25) took place in the courtyard of the mountain (C11.1), apparently still in the netherworld:

C11.3

The Annuna gods, the judges of
the young men, he assembles.
he solves...

C11.4-12.1

Šamaš, the river (god), and Ištaran
assemble.⁵

Šamaš...

C12.2-3

Šamaš, the hero, ...,
the gods met each other
the land listened.

Later on, Shamash rides to the fortress of Ea, visiting him in Apsû, where some incomprehensible events are taking place (C12.3-4 to C13.1-4; on the eastern location of Apsû, see Steinkeller 2005: 47,

Fig. 1; Woods 2009: 200). Finally, in the presence of the Anunna gods, Shamash lifted the door (in the moment of rising?, C14.1). Furthermore, in the final part of the composition, it is said about Shamash that he is the one who gives orders to the land (C14.3-4) and that he determined the ME (C17.1).

As for Shamash's companions, Ishtar was associated with justice and passing judgments already in the Early Dynastic period (Krebernik 2008: 355); the god is also mentioned in another literary text from Abu Salabikh, in similar context (Lambert 1980; on Ishtar as a divine judge associated with Shamash, see Woods 2004: 72-76). The River-god, responsible for the trial by ordeal, may also be included among divine judges (von Soldt 2005: 124; Woods 2005: 32; Krebernik 2008: 359). The River-god is attested in both Sumerian and Semitic personal names already in texts from Fara and Abu Salabikh (Woods 2005: 33). The idea of a River-god goes back to the *primaeval* river that flowed at the eastern horizon. In the Ur III-period hymn of Ibbi-Sin, it is said that "[Y]our river is a mighty river, the River which determines fates, the Great River at the place where the sun rises, no one can look at it" (Woods 2005: 33; the Great River *rised* from the Apsû, Woods 2009: 204). Earlier in the same composition (C9.4), the Anunna gods were described as "the Anunna-gods of venerable heaven". The main function of this group of Mesopota-

4 The following discussion (as well as line numbering and citations) is based on the translation of the text in Krebernik 1992: 81-86.

5 Woods (2004: 73) adds in his translation, before Ishtar, the name of Nammu, a water deity equated with the River-god (dÍD) in later periods.

mian highest gods was to decide the fates and pass judgments (Brisch 2016), and in later texts they played a prominent role in divine assemblies convoked for decreeing the fates (Polonsky 2002: 138–144).

The translation of the *Hymn to Shamash* is still incomplete, and some details are missing, but—if this interpretation is correct—the passage discussed above, describing the meeting of divine judges and other gods seems to provide a good parallel for the concept of *ki-^dutu-è* known from later texts, as elaborated by Polonsky. However, to understand the events in the *Hymn to Shamash*, a certain modification of her reasoning seems to be required (as suggested already by Woods and Steinkeller). As shown by his visit

to Apsû at the end of the sequence of events described above, Shamash stays in the east but remains in the netherworld. According to Woods, all things concerning the eastern horizon, fate determination, and divine judgment originated in the netherworld, whereas the horizon is only the place of their manifestation. This interpretation is contrary to that of Polonsky, who sees the horizon as the place of both their creation and realization (Woods 2009: 210, note 103, 217; see also Steinkeller 2005: 25, footnote 36, 34–36). Therefore, one can imagine that the judgments the land is waiting for would be announced at sunrise but were decided earlier, still in the netherworld.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite many attempts at interpretation in past publications, the meaning of the contest scene, crucial to the iconography and religious beliefs in Mesopotamia throughout most of the 3rd millennium BCE, has yet to be convincingly ascertained. However, most of the recent interpretations tend to associate it with the eternal struggle against forces of chaos, the battle between order and havoc.

A thorough examination of all of the elements of the composition, offered in this article, not only those of primary importance but also ancillary ones, substantiates this general elucidation of the scene. Some hints (such as the presence of hybrid creatures and the occasional appearance of gods) point to a mythical rather than realistic setting of the contest. Consideration of all of the components of the contest scene (animals, hybrid crea-

tures, and the “star-spade” symbol) leads to the conclusion that they were associated either directly with the Sun-god—Utu in the EDIII period, and Shamash in later periods—or with the eastern mountains, the place of the rising sun.

The contest could have thus been envisaged to take place at a site on the eastern horizon where Utu/Shamash rises, somewhere at the edge of the world—in a distant, inaccessible, and liminal place, a great divide between night and day, life and death, the known/safe and alien/dangerous. The reason for such a location becomes apparent if we turn to the written sources describing the actions of gods at the time of sunrise. There and then, in the presence of Utu/Shamash, destinies, fates, and judgments were revealed to the land. Rendering verdicts and determining destinies are perpetual and re-

current acts, just as the endless battle of animals, hybrid creatures, and heroes is a struggle in which no one conquers for good, “the battle drama in which a primeval contest for world order against the forces of chaos was refought and rewon” (Thorkild Jacobsen, citation after Zettler and Horne 1998: 89). The fixing of destinies, the pronouncing of judgments and their announcement at sunrise may

be regarded as acts stabilizing the world, giving it rules, protecting its laws, and securing universal order. This is why the contest scene, as a metaphor for instituting law and order, was so frequently represented on seals belonging to rulers (Otto 2018: 418), and this is precisely how we interpret the message encoded in the contest seals: an unceasing fight against evil and chaos.

Prof. Dorota Ławecka

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9045-3078>

University of Warsaw

Faculty of Archaeology

dorotalawecka@uw.edu.pl

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