

The Ibex: History of a Near Eastern Time Symbol

By Richard Dibon-Smith

There has been a growing appreciation of the political and cultural turmoil throughout the Near East during the third and fourth millennia. For one thing, it appears that during the fourth millennium, cities of the central and northern Iranian plateau such as Susa and Godin had submitted to a cultural union with the Mesopotamian people of the Late Uruk culture. Then, sometime later, the so-called Proto-Elamites, a non-Mesopotamian people coming out of the east, clashed with this same Uruk culture. By c3000 BC the Iranian Plateau had become unified under one cultural, economic, and political power, the Proto-Elamites.¹

The present paper presents the thesis that a great confrontation between old and new had already begun towards the end of the fifth millennium, was carried on throughout the fourth, and ended only after the Proto-Elamite culture was well in place, c3200 BC. This slow but consistent change in cultural concepts has been deduced from the study of how the inhabitants of the Near East represented their most sacred ideas on pottery and cylinder seals throughout this period.

Specifically, the life, death, and transfiguration of the ibex presents clear evidence of a cultural and even a religious revolution of fourth millennial Mesopotamia, a revolution that produced fundamental changes in man's cosmological ideas, some of which are still with us today.

Of all the bestiary that adorn the objets d'art of the ancient Near East, none has had so long, nor so eventful, a life as the ibex. First appearing on Samarran ware about 5500 BC, the ibex was among the earliest of the animal images to be seen on Near Eastern pottery. Various animals were beginning to be sporadically represented on Iranian pottery of the Sialk II period (c5400 BC) and the roughly contemporary Hacilar VI of South Anatolia, but the desultory treatment of these few animals does not indicate any great interest in them as either decorative subjects or symbolic messages. Over time, however, two animal themes become dominant, at the almost total exclusion of other animal designs: in the Halaf culture of Northern Mesopotamia the bucranium motif² and elsewhere the ibex motif. But treatment of these two subjects differed greatly; where the bucranium was a totally abstract design divorced completely from the animal itself, the ibex was treated as a living creature.

The significance of the early appearance of the ibex lies in the symbolic message which this animal clearly carried: Samarran ware consistently shows this caprid with long, branch-like antlers (1).³ That these antlers represent the so-called Tree of Life or Sacred Tree is shown by a further example, this time from the Iranian Plateau, c4500 BC, in which the antler-trees dominate the entire motif (2). In other words, the ibex—in both the North Mesopotamian and the Iranian plateaux—arrives full-blown onto the stage carrying an already well-developed symbol of fertility.

A second facet of this animal's early symbolic nature is demonstrated by the massive circular horns found on many pieces of Susiana ware (c4300 BC) (3,4). Between the horns of (4) is seen the lunar shape, with two darkened slices, top and bottom, and in between a plant motif. The tail of this ibex sports the now familiar Tree of Life. Thus, from well before 5000 BC to around 4300 BC the ibex appeared on Near Eastern pottery as a carrier of the two symbol-messages: the Tree of Life and the Moon- Crescent,⁴ both of which signified Fertility or Renewed Life and perhaps also Spring.

A second source of early animal art in the Near East confirms the importance of the ibex. When stamp seals begin to carry animal images, for example at Tepe Gawra around 5000 BC or before, it is this animal that first appears, and it holds a complete monopoly until other animals are introduced (stratum XIA) around 3800 BC.⁵

At Susa, around 4200 BC, the nature of the ibex begins to change. This change is seen clearly in (5): two small dog-like creatures attack an ibex which has the same serrated horns as (1) and the same Tree of Life tail as (4). The animal is standing on a curiously abstract design which has been interpreted by P. Ackerman as a rain cloud.⁶ Further on another explanation for this design will be offered and it will be clear that the reason for the change in the role of the ibex had much to do with this abstraction.

At the same time that the ibex first comes under attack, c4200 BC, stamp seals from Susa begin to reduce the animal to a mere abstraction (6) in which the animal has lost all of its former artistic appeal. It is at this time as well that stamp seals at Susa begin to portray other animals, most significantly the bull. Our examples show this animal under the threat of attack (7), or actually being attacked (8), by what looks like a crude lion in the first instance and either a lion or a leopard in the second. A stamp seal from Gawra (10), c3800 BC, one of the first to show animals other than the ibex, portrays an ibex being threatened by a dog and a lion. Two other stamp seals of the same period and locale are more explicit: (12a) shows a vulture about to land on a recumbent ibex and (12b) has a vulture landed and about to nibble the back of a startled ibex. The animal has now clearly become associated with death, a complete turnabout from its former motif.

Pottery designs of this time show the horns of the ibex wrapped around a celestial symbol while the body has been reduced to nothing (9). Indeed, the ibex soon disappears completely from pottery ware in Susa. Small bowls from Susa Ca (c3600 BC) show just what kind of transformation the ibex was undergoing before it faded from view altogether. As Edmond Pottier described these designs, the legs first multiply under the stomach (11a), then the head and tail are reduced to nothing more than hooks while the legs resemble the teeth of a comb (11b).⁷ These are the same designs that Ackerman had seen as rain clouds. We will now see that Pottier's concept, i.e., that of an animal undergoing some sort of transfiguration, is the more likely.

A little knowledge of the physical nature of the ibex will be useful at this point. Normally the ibex is a short-haired animal. In winter, however, it grows a long shaggy coat to help it survive the high mountain climate. It is suggested here that the multiple-legs and teeth of a comb are nothing more than artistic renderings of a winter coat. Thus, the Figure 5 meaning becomes clear: The ibex as the Sign of Life and Fertility (i.e. Spring) is dead; henceforth you shall regard the ibex as the Sign of Death (Winter). If

this is so, then it would mean that the ibex had been replaced by another animal as the primary sign of Fertility and Spring.

The winter season was apparently not of much interest to the designers of pottery. The ibex does not survive in this role on pottery, but it does survive on cylinder seals, and it is through the study of these seals that the death and transfiguration of the ibex can be fully traced. But first, these same seals can tell us the process by which the ibex as a symbol of Spring and Fertility was replaced by the bull.

Figures 13 and 14 announce the form in which this slow transformation was to take. In the first figure, a lion is seen directly above a crescent-horned bull; a star and a goat complete the picture. Thus, the bull has inherited the crescent symbol; it has become the foremost symbol of fertility, a role it would keep for thousands of years in both the East and the West.

The second figure shows the ibex with a large vase, a lion sitting above. That some kind of ritual is indicated is clear, for the vase is of the sort found commonly in conjunction with sacrificial libations. What is suggested might be that should the libation prove acceptable, the lion will attack the ibex, in effect killing off winter. That this interpretation is likely will become evident when we trace the further evolution of the theme. Figure 15 shows a lion with a paw on the back of a crescent-horned bull, a plant in the background. This cylinder seal dates from c3500 BC and it signals the beginning of one symbol that will become a familiar art motif.

The Uruk period, in which these themes of attack first appear, moved imperceptibly into the Jemdet Nasr period around 3400 BC. As more cylinder seals are seen with the crescent bull, the ibex becomes linear and abstract. The de-animalization of the ibex continues on into the First Early Dynastic period, in which the brocade-style increases the abstraction to its limit of comprehensibility.⁸ The ibex has become pure design; old themes sometimes return, i.e., the Tree of Life antlers (Frankfort, IXd), but the overall impression is one of elegant decoration based on old themes rather than a symbolic message for the present times. All through this latter half of the fourth millennium, the cylinder seals seem to be summing up the past, closing the book on the ibex as it had once been known.

The first indication of the new role which our animal was to assume occurs in the First Early Dynasty (16): an ibex is attacked by two lions. The theme is further developed as the ibex is upended, flanked again by two lions (17). This time one of the lions is reversed; this innovation meant that no matter which way one viewed the scene - right side up or upside down - the ibex would always be reversed to one lion. It was a theme that evidently had some promise, for our third example from the First Early Dynasty shows two lions, rampant, flanking a reversed ibex (18), the first of what became in the Second and Third Early Dynasties a recurring theme, executed with an increased realism and confidence that had long been absent from these seals. Figure 19, the earliest example of a reversed ibex from Susa, is stylistically quite different from the other examples of this theme. One is tempted to treat this votive plaque as an artistic variation of a foreign theme; the sense of attack has been replaced by rigid posing.

A parallel theme was in the process of development at this time. The Lion-Bull combat, which we glimpsed at in its earliest stages (15) has by the Third Early Dynasty developed into its classic confrontation: the lion on the back of the bull, its teeth usually sunk into the bull's neck. The crescent horn is always prominent; the bull always alive.⁹

It has long been assumed that these new themes, involving the lion and the ibex and bull, were combat scenes between animals that provided one's sustenance and the natural predators that haunted the hills of Mesopotamia. The concern over livestock was thought to be the overriding message, obvious though it may have seemed. Frankfort's remark is representative: "It seems that the idea of herds, flocks or game brought to mind inevitably the depredations of the beasts of prey."¹⁰ Moreover, he categorically rejects any deeper interpretation: "... [these seals] do not allow of any allegorical explanation."

Yet these scenes of combat show no naturalistic attitude of either animal, no artistic inventiveness that would normally accompany the free development of a particular motif over time. Instead, one is confronted with a scene that is rigidly posed, highly artificial, and quite repetitive. That is to say, the two motifs that we have underscored are not interchangeable; one doesn't come across a reversed dead bull in the grasp of a lion, or a living ibex with a lion on its back. Nor are other predators, wolves and leopards for example, ever present. In other words, it seems that rather than being merely decorative art work, these two specific themes are meant to deliver either some kind of symbolic message or portray special events of some sort. Furthermore, the animals are often accompanied by small circles or stars. Thus, some kind of celestial relationship is probably indicated, but to decipher this relationship would have involved a great deal more speculation than most scholars would tolerate.

It is Professor Willy Hartner, director of the Institut für Geschichte der Naturwissenschaften, Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität in Frankfurt, who provides the answer. In an article dealing with the origin of the constellations¹¹ Professor Hartner developed a truly elegant theory that not only explained the significance of the Lion-Bull motif but which also supplies us with the meaning of the reversed ibex motif, and demonstrates at the same time that an elaborate system of constellations was already known as early as 4000 BC.

Briefly, Professor Hartner's theory states that the motif of the Lion-Bull combat is a direct, visual equivalent to what the ancients would have seen in the sky, c4000 BC, once every year, toward the end of winter. "The constellation Leo would have been directly overhead, standing at zenith and displaying thereby its maximum power [as it] kills and destroys the Bull trying to escape below the horizon, which during the subsequent days disappears in the Sun's rays to remain invisible for a period of forty days, after which it is reborn, rising again for the first time (HR on March 21) to announce Spring equinox. ... There can be no doubt that this and nothing else has been the origin of the celebrated motif."¹²

As an art motif on these seals, the bull is attacked, but never killed: in the earliest examples at least, the bull is usually immobile, perhaps turning back, but always alive. After all, it had to return in forty days time to issue in the Spring season. The ibex, on the other hand, is gruesomely dispatched, often hanging upside down between two rampant

lions. Figure 20 displays both motifs, the live crescent bull under attack and the dead, reversed ibex.

If the Lion-Bull combat is a visual equivalent of the two constellations Leo and Taurus, what of the Ibex? Applying what I shall call *Hartner's theory of constellatory aspect*, we note (Hartner, p. 14) that at the Summer solstice the constellation Horns of the Ibex is near the cosmical setting, i.e., become visible first as a dawn setting, while Leo is rising heliacally, i.e., becomes visible first as a dawn rising. The sight of a rising Lion and setting Ibex, while not as visually striking as the Lion at zenith, yet was equally as important in that it announced the Summer solstice. The Ibex itself was the sign of Winter solstice, as it rose heliacally in early December. What better way to visualize the beginning of Summer than to show the victorious rampant Lion, sign of Summer, over the recumbent, spent shape of the Winter Ibex?

Professor Hartner's theory, then, provides corroborative evidence to what we have found on stamp and cylinder seals and pottery, namely that by no later than 4000 BC the ibex was beginning to be seen no longer as the symbol of the moon and fertility but rather as part of a solar-astral calendar - a winter constellation, facing an annual death by the summer lion,¹³ no doubt after ritualistic libations at its first appearance in the December skies, the practice of which probably continued throughout the Winter months.

These libations were eventually augmented by the sacrificial slaughter of goats, the domestic cousin of the celestial ibex. In Figures 21 and 22 we see the acting out of religious rituals of supplication for the return of the sun. The ibex in these last series of cylinder seals has been shorn of its winter coat; it is no longer the victim of sacrifice but is now a respected member of the small coterie which sits in judgement while domestic goats are offered in its stead. It would remain in the skies, becoming the favoured animal of Enki/Ea.

Sometime before 700 BC the constellation Ibex, formed in the fourth millennium, would be divided up into the two constellations Capricorn and Aquarius, on the eve of the formation of the zodiac.¹⁴

Thus we have traced the evolution of the ibex from its prehistoric use as a symbol of the moon until an abrupt change around 4000 BC realigned the night skies, giving the Spring equinox to the Bull, the Summer solstice to the Lion, and the Winter solstice to the Ibex. At the same time the moon became associated with the bull, while the ibex became disassociated from the shorter lunar cycle that most likely had been the earliest calendar formed by man.

As for its prehistoric past, we have seen how the ibex arrived on Near Eastern pottery in full flower, its horns already carrying the Tree of Life or the crescent shape indicating its long association with the moon. Just how far back in man's history this animal, or at least its horns, were so regarded, can only be a matter for speculation at this point. It may be significant, however, to recall that the study of lunar notation on Paleolithic bones turned up the intriguing fact that the first animal found in association with notated bones was an ibex.¹⁵ Moreover, Marshack found evidence on several bones that the ibex horns in these Paleolithic cultures served as a Spring marker.¹⁶

From the study of Paleolithic art by Leroi-Gourhan it has been demonstrated that the ibex had for thousands of years before the invention of pottery been a symbol of quasi-religious significance. In Leroi-Gourhan's reconstruction of an ideal Paleolithic sanctuary the ibex forms the central figure.¹⁷ Its importance in this early stage was shared with other animals, principally the bison, horse, and mammoth. Yet even here one notes the characteristic curvature of the crescent horns, shared by no other animal.

Thus we see that the Near Eastern images of the ibex, even as we first notice them on Samarran ware of about 5000 BC, already have a long history stretching back into the Paleolithic era. It would be a history that would come to an abrupt end, at least in the Near East, when the peoples known as the Proto-Elamites appear on the scene, bringing with them new religious ideas. These new notions necessitated the killing off of the indigenous ibex—long-standing moon and fertility symbol—and putting in its place the bull. Shortly afterwards the lunar-astral calendar appears, with both bull and ibex hunted down annually by the lion. It was the beginning of a cosmological ethos that would have direct bearing on all subsequent cultures even down to the present day.

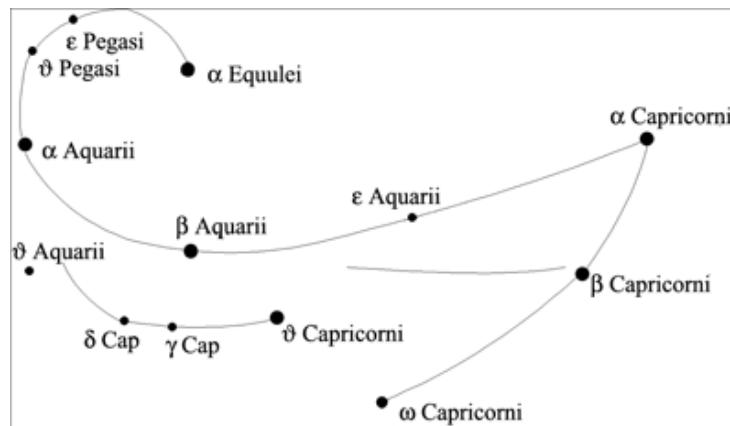
...

NOTES

1. *Antiquity* 52(1978)114-120; *Antiquity* 53(1979)195-204.
2. *Iraq* 2(1935)154f; *Sumer* 22(1966)23-43
3. Parenthetical numbers refer to Figures 1-22; see also Table 1 for a summary of all figures and references. The examples used are all representative of their period; for further examples of the earliest ibex images see *Sumer* 21(1965)109, Plate VII, 113, 114; *JNES* 3(1944)72, figs. 261, 262, 267-273; *JNES* 4(1945)255f, fig. 1/4.
4. That this motif represents the crescent of the moon is here accepted as most probable; the design is quite explicit in its shape, and remains so, even when transferred to the bull, as will be made clear as the argument is developed.
5. A. Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra II* (Philadelphia, 1950) Chapter VI and Plate CLXVI, #123. Note also numbers 124-127, the Tree of Life motif. Tobler thought of these as multi-tined antlers and therefore called the animal a stag; its similarity to the contemporary pottery design already mentioned leaves no doubt that the ibex is intended. Even counting these examples as stags Tobler found that of the over three hundred stamp seals excavated at Tepe Gawra with animal designs, the animal most commonly represented is the ibex. [p. 185] Plates CLXIV-CLXX scan the entire period, c5000-c3400 BC.
6. A. Pope and P. Ackerman (eds.) *A Survey of Persian Art* (London, 1967) vol. 14, pp. 2917f. This is a promising concept only if it can be shown that the people of lower Mesopotamia equated water with rain. Yet it has been clear for some time that the primary source of water for these people came through the extensive development of irrigation canals (said to have originated here) in conjunction with the Tigris-Euphrates river system. [P.J. Ucko and G.W. Dimbleby (eds.) *The Domestication and Exploitation of Plants and Animals* (London, 1969)79, 89f; T.E. Downing and M. Gibson, *Irrigation's Impact on Society* (Tucson, 1974)1-6; *Iraq* 22(1960)186-196]

When rain did occur, it often resulted in flooding, as the chemical properties of the soil were such that water was not quickly absorbed [*Sumer* 13(1957)37f].
7. *Mémoires de la Délégation en Perse*, vol. 13, p. 40. Mallowan (*CAH*, 1970 edition, vol. 1, p. 429) puts figures 11ab into Susa A, which does not disrupt the chronology nor the argument of the present article. Indeed, these images would then be contemporary with Figure 5.
8. See for example H. Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals* (London, 1939) Plate IX; E. Porada (ed.), *Corpus of Ancient Near Eastern Seals in North American Collections: the Pierpont Morgan Library Collection* (Washington, 1948), Plates VI, VIII; M.-L. Vollenweider, *Catalogue Raisonné des Seaux Cylindres et Intailles* (Geneva, 1967) vol. 1, Plates 9-10.
9. Frankfort, XIIIh; Buchanan, #159; Porada, XI-XV; Vollenweider, Plate 1; Pierre Amiet, *La Glyptique Mésopotamienne Archaïque* (Paris, 1961) Plates 24 and 25.
10. Frankfort, *ibid*, p. 24.
11. W. Hartner, "The Earliest History of the Constellations in the Near East and the Motif of the Lion-Bull Combat" *JNES* 24(1965)1-16.

12. While I was elated to find that the ancients had regarded the ibex so highly as to use its star-group to indicate the Winter Solstice—thus confirming the historical importance of the animal—I nevertheless wished to put several questions to Professor Hartner. First, I wished to review his evidence of the existence of this constellation, and second, whether (as I hereby claim) that the constellations Leo and Horns of the Ibex would be topsy-turvy to each other, so that an observer would see the two as a right-side up Leo facing an upside-down Ibex, thus originating the artistic motif. I put the question to Professor Hartner in a letter early in 1982, only to find that he had died in May of 1981.



The principal stars of the ancient constellation Ibex, according to Professor Willy Hartner. The horn is made up of ϵ and θ Pegasi and α Equulei. α Capricorni is actually a pair of double stars α^1 and α^2 . This star also goes by the Arabic name *Algedi*, meaning Ibex.

13. As the symbol par excellence of the sun, the lion is well documented. See in particular Anne Roes, "L'Animal au sign solaire", *Revue Arch.*, 6th series, XII (1938)160-162; Anne Vollgraff-Roes, "The Lion with Body Markings in Oriental Art" *JNES* 12(1953)40-49; W. Hartner and R. Ettinghausen, "The Conquering Lion, the Life Cycle of a Symbol", *Oriens* XVII (1964)161-171.
14. Hartner, p. 9; B.L. van der Waerden, "History of the Zodiac", *Archiv für Orientforschung* 16(1953)226.
15. A. Marshack, *The Roots of Civilization* (New York, 1972)106f and fig. 39. The figure, a faint but deftly executed left horn and ear, is the only representation of an animal on a Perigordian bone (25,000 BC ?); the notation, according to Marshack, adds up to nine lunar months.
16. *Ibid*, pp. 170-9; 213f: along with the salmon, the seal, and various plants, the ibex is a regular feature indicating a seasonal renewal of life on four Upper Magdalenian bones (c12,000 BC).
17. A. Leroi-Gourhan, *Préhistoire de l'Art Occidental* (Paris, 1971; second edition) fig. 763. Not only the central figure, the ibex is the most numerous of all the peripheral animals.



1



2



3



4



5



7



9



6



8



10



11a



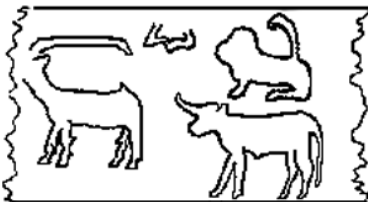
11b



12a



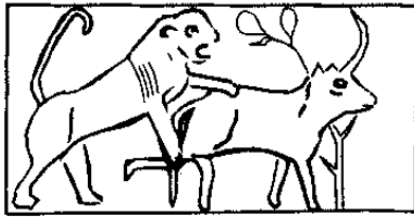
12b



13



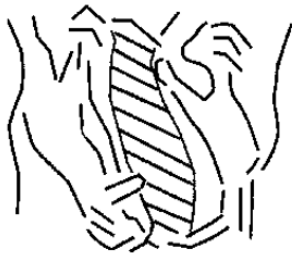
14



15



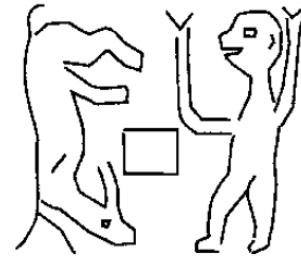
16



17



18



19



20



21



22

“The Ibez: History of a Near Eastern Time Symbol” General Summary and References

B.C. ¹	Sites		General culture	Fig.	Subject	Ref. ²	
	South	North					
2500	Dd	Gawra	Early Dynasty III [Akkadian Period]	22	Sacrificial scenes begin; goats presented to priest	F:Pl.XIId F:Pl.XXb	
	Dc S			21			
2750	Db	VII	Early Dynasty IIIA	20	Reversed Ibez, rampant Lions, crescent Bull, ‘Hero’ Earliest reversed Ibez and rampant Lion at Susa	F:Pl.XXc L:Fig.43/11	
	U			19			
3000	Da S	VIIA	Early Dynasty II [Gilgamesh] Early Dynasty I	18	EARLIEST REVERSED IBEX Reversed Ibez, two rampant Lions Upended Ibez, rampant Lions (one reversed) Earliest example of Lion attacking Ibez	B: #116 B: #115 B: #101	
	Cc			17			
	A			16			
	Cb			VIIIB			Jemdet Nasr
3500	Ca	IX X	U Late	14	Lion pulling leg of crescent Bull Ibez, Lion, vase [Theme of Libation] Lion, crescent Bull, Star, Ibez	F:Pl.Va F:Pl.IVk M8:Fig.16	
				R			13
							12ab
3750		XI	U Middle	11ab	Ibez with vulture; Gawra Ibez winter coat motif; Susa Ibez with Lion and Dog; Gawra	M13:II;4,1 T:#156	
	B			XIA			10
4000		XII XIII	K U	9	Ibez body shrinks out of sight: Susa Bull-Lion (leopard?) combat: Susa First Bull-Lion combat: Susa ‘Geometric’ Ibez appears, stamp seals: Susa Tree of Life Ibez under attack, on a winter Ibez	M13:Fig.135 L:Fig.15/7 L:Fig.15/8 L:Fig.8/12 L:Fig. 7/25	
				XIIA			8
	SUSA						7
	A						6
4250		XIV XV XVI	B Late A Early	5	IBEX AS CRESCENT-SYMBOL ENDS Ibez with crescent horns: Susiana ware	M12:Fig.83c	
							4
	‘e’						
	S						
4500	U	XVII	I D	3	Ibez with crescent horns: Susiana bowl	E: O 402	
	‘c’						
4750	S	XVIII XVII		2	Iranian Ibez Tree of Life (Siyalk III)	G:Pl.XXI,1	
	I			XIX			
	‘b’			XX			
5000	A						
	N	‘a’					
5250	Eridu A			1	Ibez with Tree of Life antlers: Samarra ware	D:Pl.VI,112	

1. Chronology based primarily on J. Mellaart, *Antiquity* liii (1979)6-18.
 2. B: Briggs Buchanan, *Catalogue of Ancient Near Eastern Seals in the Ashmolean Museum* (Oxford, 1966).
 D: Takey Dabbagh, “Hassuna Pottery” *Sumer* 21(1965)93-111.
 E: Richard Ettinghausen and Eric Schroeder (eds.) *Iranian and Islamic Art* (1944) [Oriental Art, Series O, Sect. IV].
 F: Henri Frankfort, *Cylinder Seals* (London, 1939).
 G: R. Ghirshman, *Fouilles de Sialk* (Paris, 1938).i.
 L: Louis Le Breton, “The Early Period of Susa, Mesopotamian Relations” *Iraq* 19(1957)79-124.
 M: *Mémoires de la Délégation en Perse* + vol.: 8 (pp.1-27); 12 (pp. 79-122); 13 (pp. 27-103).
 T: Arthur Tobler, *Excavations at Tepe Gawra II* (Philadelphia, 1950).