



The Hand Palm Symbol on Sasanian Seal Impressions in the Iraqi Museum from the Tell Abu Sha'af Site

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Abstract

Human palm is one of the motifs found on seal impressions from the site of Tell Abu Sha'af, which is part of the Hamrin Dam basin in Iraq. Archaeological excavations in 1978 at the structure known as the fortified palace revealed clay pieces that were spherical or oval, featuring two holes in the back. On the front, there was either a single flat seal impression or multiple impressions called "bullu." The total number of these pieces is around 800, varying in shape, size, color, and the motifs depicted. All of them date back to the Sasanian period and are currently housed in the Iraqi Museum.

Keywords -impressions, Fortified, Revealed, Multiple, depicted

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Introduction

Human palm is one of the motifs found on seal impressions from the site of Tell Abu Sha'af, which is part of the Hamrin Dam basin in Iraq. Archaeological excavations in 1978 at the structure known as the fortified palace revealed clay pieces that were spherical or oval, featuring two holes in the back. On the front, there was either a single flat seal impression or multiple impressions called "bullu." The total number of these pieces is around 800, varying in shape, size, color, and the motifs depicted. All of them date back to the Sasanian period and are currently housed in the Iraqi Museum.

A total of 81 clay pieces (bullu) were selected and studied, among which three clay blocks bear impressions of the human palm symbol. This symbol is a common motif in Sasanian art, particularly in seals and their impressions. It is associated with religion, as it is described in Persian art as having cultic significance or being mysterious symbols. It may have played a role in Mithraic rituals. The origin of this concept could be the inscriptions accompanying the hand impression bearing the name of the god Mithras, or from certain elements associated with it. It might signify loyalty, or an oath of faith made by the king to the gods and nobles, or perhaps indicate a greeting.

In this research, we will present a comprehensive study of three impressions from the site of Tell Abu Sha'af, including practical, descriptive, and analytical assessments, as well as comparative analysis. The impressions will be photographed and illustrated to clarify them as much as possible. This will be preceded by an introductory study of the archaeological site, its significance, historical roles, and key discoveries.

1. Tell Abu Sha'af

Tell Abu Sha'af is one of the archaeological mounds that underwent excavation campaigns in the Hamrin Dam basin in 1976 (Abu al-Souf, 1978, p. 1). It is located in the northeastern part of the Hamrin Dam basin (Al-Hiyali, 2006, p. 18). This site belongs to the Diyala Governorate and is approximately 190 km from Baghdad and 25 km north of the center of Jalawla (Saleh, 1987, p. 102), about 3 km north of the village of Oyoun al-Khashalat (General Authority for Antiquities and Heritage, Studies and Research, Tell Abu Sha'af, p. 1). It is situated in the Qara Tapa district, which is part of the Kifri district in the former Kirkuk province

and is included within the village of Ouj Tapa (General Directorate of Antiquities, 1970, p. 222) (Khamas, 2020, p. 202). Its archaeological significance was announced in the Iraqi Official Gazette, issue 2288, on June 11, 1945, by a statement from the General Directorate of Antiquities (formerly known) No. 5 of 1945 (Khamas, 2020, p. 101, 202).

The mound was excavated by the General Authority for Antiquities and Heritage on 1/7/1978 (General Authority for Antiquities and Heritage, Studies and Research, Tell Abu Shaaf, p. 1) by the excavation committee consisting of (Dr. Fawzi Rashid, Chairman, Dr. Nawal Al-Mutawali, Professor Awad Al-Kassar, and Mrs. Al-Ham Al-Salihi), and for one season only (Al-Kassar, 1979, p. 468).

A large main structure was uncovered, referred to as the "fortified palace." This building is unique in its design and architecture (Saleh, 1987, p. 102). It consists of a single construction layer but was used for several later historical periods (Abu al-Souf, 1979, p. 417), as evidenced by the walls being covered with successive layers of plaster (Francis, 2017, p. 148).

Based on the architecture of the building and the large mud bricks used in its construction, it is believed to date back to the Parthian occupation and continued to be inhabited during the Sasanian occupation, as indicated by the seal impressions discovered there, which have been dated to the Sasanian period in Mesopotamia (226-637 CE). This building is the first of its kind in terms of planning and design within the excavations of the Hamrin Dam basin. It is likely to have been a military fortress and a stronghold, given the massive walls, the narrow main entrance, and the large towers surrounding the building's wall (Al-Salahi, 1985, p. 255). Alternatively, it may have served as an administrative building, as indicated by the large number of seal impressions found, which may represent receipts for receiving and delivering.

The building is approximately square-shaped (see Diagram 1 and Table 1), with its sides not perfectly aligned with the cardinal directions, tilting at an angle of 40° towards the west. It is constructed of mud bricks and clay, surrounded by a wall approximately 1.60 m thick. The structure is supported by eight towers, four of which are massive circular towers located at each corner, each with a diameter of 4 m. Between every two larger towers, there is a smaller semi-circular tower with a diameter of 3 m (Al-Salahi, 1985, p. 255).

The building is constructed using a uniform type of mud brick measuring 43×43×10 cm, with clay used as the binding material. All walls are covered with clay, and there is also a layer of plaster present. Most of the floors are plastered as well, particularly in some rooms (Al-Kassar, 1979, p. 468; Al-Salahi, 1985, p. 254).

The building has a single narrow entrance located on the southeastern side. The interior layout is organized and symmetrical, with three rooms on each of the northern and southern sides. The western side contains two rooms separated by a *iwān*. All rooms open onto an open courtyard (*finā*) at the center of the building. Additionally, the structure includes three *iwāns*, storage areas, and corridors (General Authority for Antiquities and Heritage, Studies and Research, Tell Abu Sha'af, pp. 1-2).

The archaeological excavations in this building uncovered a large collection of 800 clay pieces referred to as "bullae." The term "bulla" (plural: "bullae") derives from their spherical shape, and it is an English term (Al-Salamīn, 2012, p. 55). This designation has also become common in Arabic sources (Muhammad and Ismail, 2005-2006, p. 233). These bullae bear various seal impressions in different shapes, sizes, and themes, found in storage room number 3 in square E.9, within the small courtyard and narrow corridors between the four corners. Some were discovered in burial contexts, while others were on the floor. Although there were other storage areas to the south and east, they were found to be empty (General Authority for Antiquities and Heritage, Studies and Research, Tell Abu Sha'af, p. 2). This suggests that they were abandoned once they were no longer needed. This discovery is unique within the Hamrin archaeological rescue campaign, as such seal impressions have not been found in other sites within the basin (Al-Kassar, 1979, p. 469).

Among the 800 clay pieces (bullae) preserved in the storage of the Iraqi Museum, 81 pieces of varying shapes, sizes, colors, and themes were selected for study, all of which date to the Sasanian period in Mesopotamia. The number of pieces for the study was determined according to the guidelines set by the

General Authority for Antiquities and Heritage for each researcher, based first on the diversity of motifs depicted on the impressions and second on the clarity of the impressions. Within this study of seal impressions from Tell Abu Sha'af, three clay pieces (bullae) bear an impression of the human palm symbol, which will be highlighted in this research. This symbol is one of the common elements extensively found on seals and seal impressions from the Sasanian period. This study will provide a comprehensive analysis of these three impressions in terms of description, size, color, theme, analysis, and comparison, as well as include photographs and drawings for clarification.

The sealed clay pieces (bullae) used by the Sasanians were employed to seal goods and merchandise or to authenticate documents. Most seal impressions bear rope marks on the back, indicating their use for commercial goods and materials. These were utilized for tax purposes to verify their weight and quality, or to facilitate commercial transactions, in addition to ensuring their protection. A small number of these bullae were associated with documents (Gropp, 1974, p. 123; Niknami & Naderi, 2016, p. 7).

2. General Description of Seal Impressions (Table 2)

Figure 1: SH-29. A

A piece of clay (bulla), measuring 2×1.8×1 cm, irregular in shape, preserved in the Iraqi Museum, bearing two flat seal impressions. The first impression is central, oval-shaped, measuring 1 cm × 8 mm, depicting the symbol of the right-hand palm from the inside, with the index finger and thumb touching each other, while the other fingers are open. The sleeve of the garment is visible on the wrist.

The second impression is oval-shaped, measuring 9 mm × 5 mm, depicting a decorative motif (symbol) of a crescent above two branches or leaves on a horizontal base (or possibly a tulip flower). The bulla has two through-holes on the back, aligned in a straight line, designed for passing a cord or thread for hanging.

Figure 2: SH-29.C

A piece of clay (bulla), oval-shaped, measuring 2.2×2×1 cm, bearing two flat seal impressions. The first impression is oval-shaped, centrally located on the bulla, measuring 1 cm × 7 mm, depicting the symbol of the right-hand palm from the inside, with the index finger and thumb touching each other, while the other fingers are open. The sleeve of the garment is visible on the wrist.

The second impression is located on the side of the bulla, circular in shape, with a diameter of 6 mm, depicting a bird (duck) standing in a side view facing to the right. The head and beak are clear, the body is elongated, and the wing, body, and tail are pointed. The bulla has two through-holes, one on the side and the other on the back, designed for passing a cord.

Figure 3: SH-71

A piece of clay (bulla), approximately spherical in shape, measuring 3.3×3.5×1.3 cm, bearing two flat seal impressions. The main impression is circular and centrally located on the bulla, while the secondary impression is also circular and situated on the side of the bulla.

The main impression measures 1 cm × 8 mm and depicts a gazelle in a side view facing to the right. The antlers are branched, and the hind legs are slightly bent forward, while the front legs are unclear due to damage in that area. The animal appears jumping, and its tail is small.

The secondary impression depicts the palm of the right hand from the inside, with the thumb and index finger touching each other, while the other fingers are open. The palm rests on pairs of twisted ribbons branching out on either side. The bulla has four holes for passing a cord, three located on the back and one on its side.

3. Tracking and Artistic Analysis of the Palm Symbol

The hand symbol in Mesopotamia signifies control or grasping, as well as various ailments. It has names in the Akkadian language that directly associate it with the powers of different deities: "Hand of Shamash" (Utu), "Hand of Ishtar" (Inanna), and "Hand of the god" (Black & Green, 2003, p. 102).

The palm symbol is considered an effective talisman for protecting individuals from the evil eye. Numerous models in the shape of an open hand (with fingers extended) or a closed fist have been discovered, regarded as amulets that ward off evil and witchcraft (Buren, 1945, p. 57). These amulets and charms in the shape of a hand have been popular since prehistoric times, carved from bones, shells, stones, and frit glass. This tradition continued into later periods, with such amulets often pierced for hanging around the neck to protect the wearer from harm and the evil eye (Abbas, 1989, p. 49).

The shape of the hand or palm appeared on cylinder seals and their impressions during the Old Babylonian period. One example is a clay envelope from the city of Sippar, dating to the reign of King Samsu-iluna (1749-1712 BCE), featuring seven different seal impressions. One of the impressions depicts a large hand with six fingers, positioned on a tall column between two interceding goddesses. Another impression on the envelope shows an upright hand between a holy king holding a scepter and a goddess raising both hands in prayer. In other examples, the hand is depicted with five or four fingers (Buren, 1945, pp. 57-58). This impression may symbolize an oath of loyalty and the commitment to uphold one's promises.

A collection of baked clay figures representing clasped hands (termed "Hand of Ishtar" in modern archaeological terminology) was found embedded in the walls of the palace of the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 BCE) and his son Shalmaneser III (858-824 BCE). These figures bear inscriptions that record the name of the king and the palace or temple where they were placed. These clasped hands have been interpreted as magical tools to ward off evil from these structures, while others view them as simple architectural ornaments to support ceiling beams, or perhaps as decorative elements rather than purely structural ones (Black & Green, 2003, p. 102).

At the beginning of the hymn, there is a reference to the "Hand of Justice" (Hand of Shamash), indicating that the symbol of the great hand preceded the deity during processions and special occasions. Thus, the Hand of Justice reflects the hand of the god Shamash, representing a symbol of great power and sanctity. It was appropriate to take an oath before it as a testament to the strong faith of the individual swearing. The symbol was likely firmly embedded in the pavement in front of the temple where the oath was taken (Al-Shakir, 2002, p. 78). In some artistic representations, the symbol of the hand of Shamash is placed next to the symbol of the sun disk, suggesting that oaths were sometimes made in the presence of both symbols, as Shamash was seen as the deity who defended others. The divine judge was symbolized by the hand, representing the Hand of Justice (Al-Shakir, 2002, p. 79).

In Sasanian art, some sources describe these symbols as devotional signs or mysterious emblems. This symbol may play a role in Mithraic rituals, and its origins likely stem from inscriptions accompanying the hand impression with the name of the god Mithras (Mustafa, 2019, p. 41). It may also signify loyalty or an oath of faith taken by the king towards the gods and nobility (Bivar, 1969, p. 25), or it could represent a greeting or prayer when the hand is open (Brunner, 1978, pp. 121-122).

It is important to note that since ancient times, there was a sign language in Iran that conveyed numbers through finger formations. Sasanian officials incorporated these signs into their iconography as a subset of vocabulary. This sign language may have been developed to facilitate trade among merchants along the Silk Road (Soudavar, 2009, p. 7).

The use of finger counting is one of humanity's inventions. Researchers have noted the use of nineteen signs related to finger formations instead of numbers in calculations, allowing for the representation of numbers from one to ten thousand using fingers. For instance, the pinky and ring finger of the right hand represent numbers from one to nine, while the thumb and index fingers are used to denote multiples of ten. On the left hand, the thumb and index finger signify multiples of one hundred, and the middle, ring, and pinky fingers indicate multiples of one thousand. In this system, the formations for one to nine on the right hand correspond to the formations for one hundred to nine thousand on the left hand (Soudavar, 2009, pp. 36-38).

Sources attempting to decipher the meanings of hand gestures indicate that there are two hand movements representing the number (20), which corresponds to the total number of fingers on the hands and feet. This

may symbolize the full utilization of all limbs, signifying the individual's possession of complete power (Soudavar, 2003, p. 60). The first movement is a closed fist, while the second is a mutual greeting gesture between kings, where the thumb of the right hand is placed under the proximal phalanx of the index finger, regardless of the position of the remaining fingers. This gesture also symbolizes victory and superiority (Soudavar, 2009, p. 8).

Some have interpreted these gestures as indicators of the numbers (30 and 10,000). The number (30) is formed by positioning the tip of the thumb against the tip of the index finger while keeping the other three fingers extended. The number (10,000) is represented by a similar gesture, with a slight modification by pushing the thumb and index finger forward so that the tips of the fingers are aligned (Soudavar, 2003, pp. 60, 162, figs. 58-59).

The hand shape forming the number 10,000 while holding a lotus flower symbolizes the continuity of power and strength. Thus, the gesture of holding the flower represents a positive wish for ongoing brilliance, glory, victory, and success at a magnitude of 10,000. It is suggested that a similar gesture by Anahita on certain seals represents the same wish for the seal's owner (Soudavar, 2003, p. 61, figs. 73-51).

4. Comparison

In comparison to the hand shapes found in the seals from Tel Abu Shafa, numerous seals and impressions preserved in the British Museum and a collection from the Bandar Abbas Museum bear human hand shapes in various forms. Some of these features a rose, while others depict a symbol consisting of three curved lines sharing a common axis, which was used as a symbol of nobility (Mustafa, 2019, p. 53). Additionally, some designs are enclosed within pairs of ribbons or wings, and some are accompanied by inscriptions. Other forms incorporate additional elements such as symmetrical scorpions or celestial bodies (like the crescent and star), as well as crosses, among others. All these accompanying elements carry religious significance linked to deities and religious beliefs, in addition to serving as decorative fillers (Mustafa, 2019, p. 478, figs. 1844-1858). For instance, a formation of fingers shaped to represent the number 10,000 appears next to a shining star, symbolizing a wish for good fortune multiplied by 10,000 (Soudavar, 2003, p. 62, 162, fig. 60).

Conclusions

1. **Impressions of Hand Symbols:** The hand impressions were executed as a primary design at the center of the bulla, as shown in Figures (1-2), and as a secondary impression on the side of the bulla, as seen in Figure (3). All impressions are small, not exceeding 1 cm in size, and originate from oval-shaped seals.

2. **Artistic Styles:** The hand symbols on the seals from Tel Abu Shafa were created using two artistic styles:

- The **realistic style** is evident in the portrayal of the hand in its true form, with attention to anatomical details, lines, and the actual proportions of the fingers.
- The **symbolic style** lies in the gesture of the hand and the meaning behind the movement. The hand impressions were carved in a bas-relief technique, resulting in clear, slightly raised prints that accurately depict the design.

3. **Meanings of the Hand Symbol:** The symbol of the hand carries various meanings, including:

- Effective powers for protecting individuals and warding off the evil eye and sorcery, as well as alleviating harm.
- Associations with control and the divine powers of deities.
- Elements of worship or mysterious symbols, possibly linked to Mithraic rituals.
- Oaths and commitments to truthfulness.
- Justice, strength, and promises of loyalty.
- Symbols of greeting, along with wishes for good fortune.
- Indicators of specific numerical calculations.

4. The clay bullae bearing the hand symbol in the stamps from Tell Abu Shaaf may indicate a specific type of goods that were sealed with this symbol or their quantity. Alternatively, they might not carry any particular meaning and could simply be associated with the seal of the administrative official responsible for the sealing and inspection of goods.

Diagram (1)

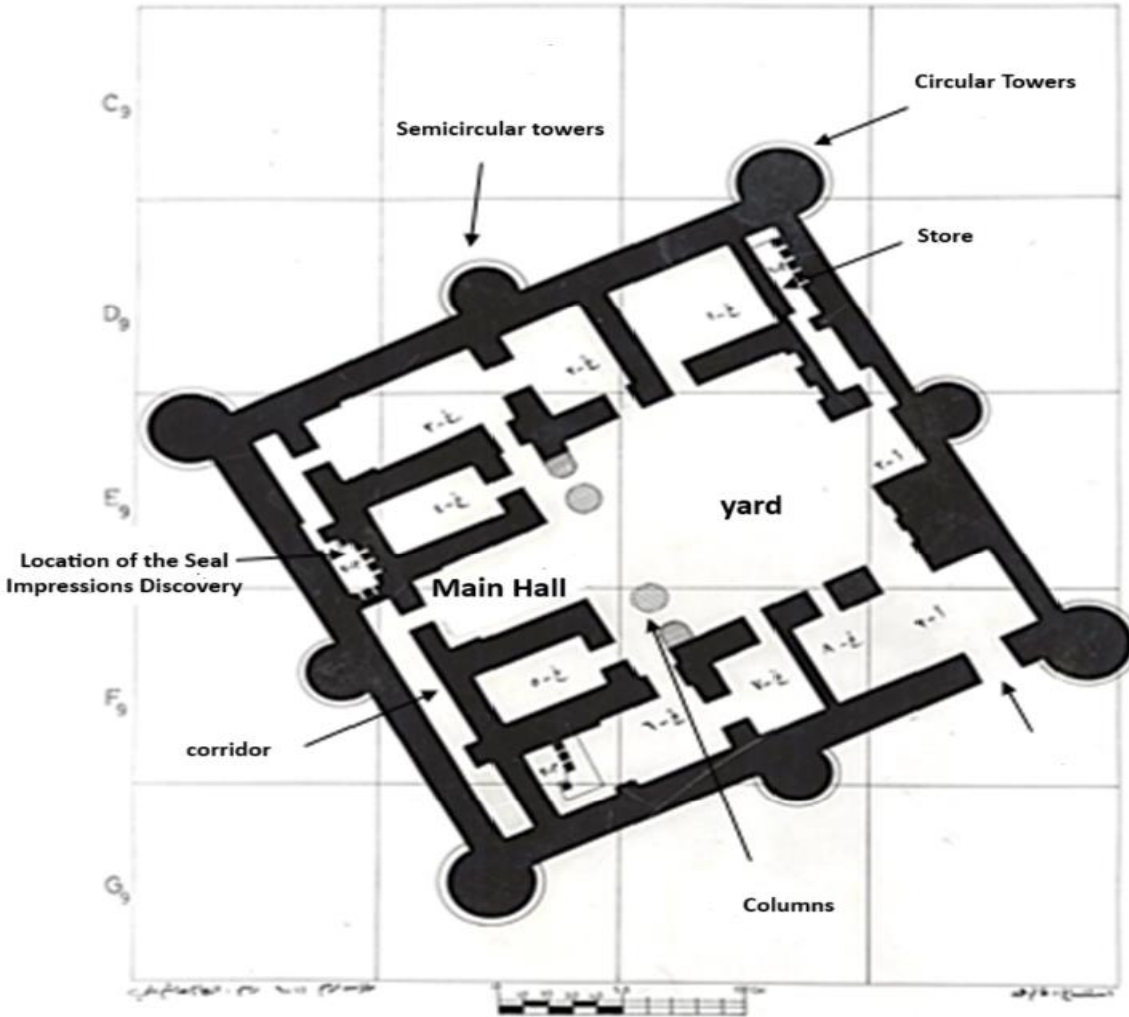


Diagram Showing the Fortified Structure and the Location of the Seal Impressions Discovery

Table No. (1)

Information about the Measurements of the Fortified Structure

Table No. (1)Information about the Measurements of the Fortified Structure

Feature	Details
Building Shape	Approximately Square
Measurements	24×25 m (without towers) / 27×28 m (with towers)
Towers	8 (4 circular, 4 semi-circular)
Diameter	4 m (circular) / 3 m (semi-circular)
Courtyard	1
Courtyard Size	9×10 m

Rooms	8 (Room 1, Room 2, Room 3, Room 4, Room 5, Room 6, Room 7, Room 8)
Room Sizes	Room 1: 5×4 m / Room 2-7: 3×4 m / Room 3-6: 7×4 m / Room 4-5: 5×3 m / Room 8: 8×4 m
Stores	3 (Store 1, Store 2, Store 3)
Store Sizes	Store 1: 1×4 m / Store 2 Part of Room 6 / Store 3: 1×3 m
Passages	3 (Passage 1, Passage 2, Passage 3)
Passage Sizes	Passage 1: 12×1 m / Passage 2: 5×1 m / Passage 3: 4×1 m
Iwans	3 (Iwan 1, Iwan 2, Iwan 3)
Iwan Sizes	Iwan 1: 4×6 m / Iwan 2: 3×2 m / Iwan 3: 2×4 m

Table No. (2) Information about Seal Impressions

Figure No.	Museum Number	Bulla Dimensions	Impression Dimensions	Location	Color (Munsell Scale)
1	SH-29.A	2×1.8×1.2 cm	a) 1 cm × 8 mm b) 9 mm	Buried T I, Storage 3, Square E/9	Yellowish Red 7.5 YR 6/6
2	SH-29.C	2×2×1 cm	a) 1 cm × 7 mm b) 6 mm		Reddish Yellow 5 YR 5/6
3	SH-71	3.3×3.5×1.3 cm	a) 1.5 cm b) 1 cm × 8 mm		Yellowish Red 7.5 YR 6/6



Appendix: Figures

Figure (1)

Figure (2)

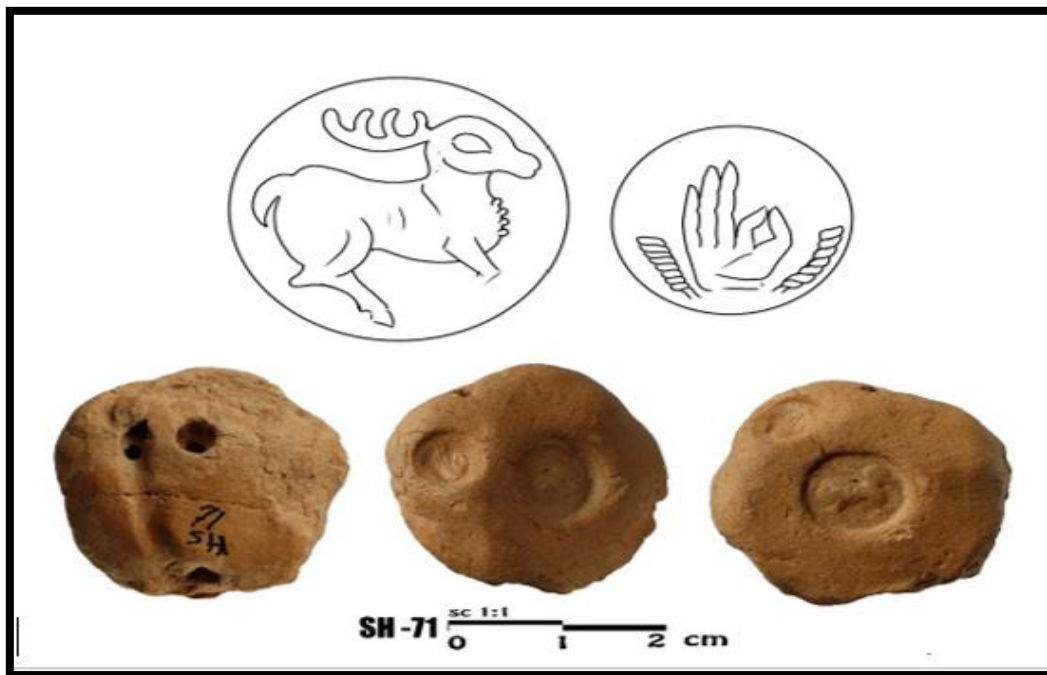
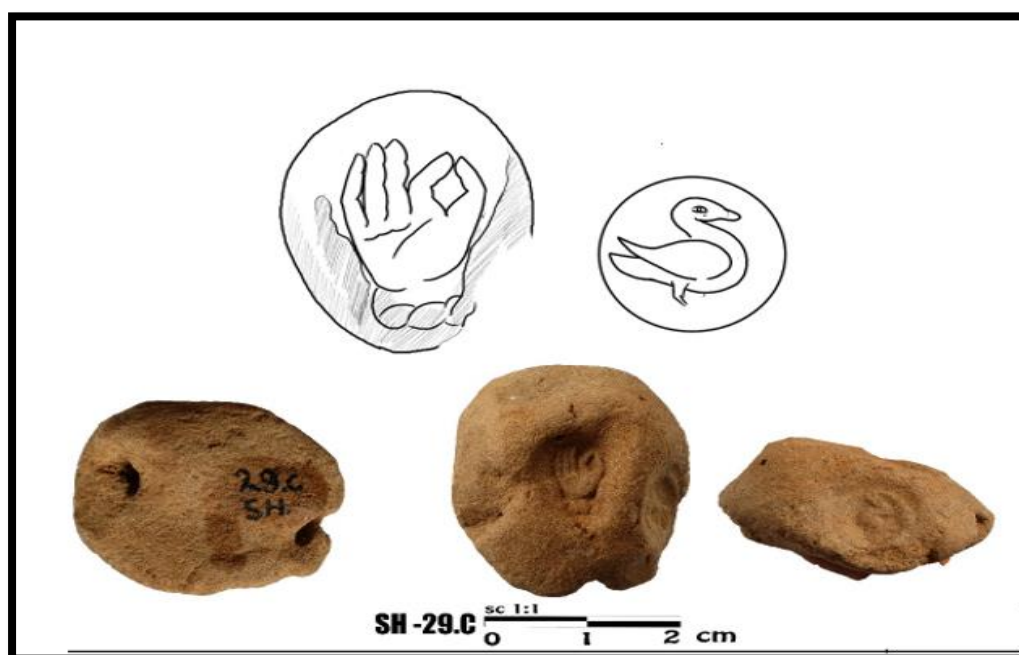


Figure (3)

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