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The much-travelled ancient collection of clay tags with Achaemenid seal impressions: two new exemplars

Abstract

Published here are two clay tags with Achaemenid seal impressions kept at the Montserrat Museum (Barcelona). Both of them clearly belong with the ancient dossier of more than forty sealed tags identified and brought together by Henkelman, Jones and Stolper in ARTA 2004.001.

Keywords

Clay tag, Achaemenid seal impression, Montserrat Museum.

Bulle, empreinte de sceau achéménide, Musée de Montserrat.

In Arta 2004.001 Wouter F. M. Henkelman, Charles E. Jones and Matthew W. Stolper brought together an ancient group of 42 anepigraphic clay tags with Achaemenid seal impressions from disparate collections. They identified 21 in the De Liagre Böhl Collection of NINO in Leiden, 14 in the Musée du Louvre, 3 in the Yale Babylonian Collection, 2 in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, 1 in the University of Groningen (formerly part of the De Liagre Böhl collection), and 1 in the former collection of the Crozer Theological Seminary in Rochester, NY (currently unlocated). Pierre Briant reported one additional exemplar kept unpublished at the École Biblique in Jerusalem (apud Garrison 2017, p. 545 n. 118). In the course of catalogue work on the collection of Ancient Near Eastern seals and seal impressions of the Museu de Montserrat (Barcelona), the writer discovered two anepigraphic clay tags with Achaemenid seal impressions that belong with the same ancient assemblage identified by Henkelman, Jones and Stolper.

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Thanks are due to the late Father Pius-Ramon Tragan and to Brother Xavier Caballé, Director of the Museu de Montserrat, for their kind permission to study, illustrate and publish the two objects, MM 750.204 and MM 750.205. Work on the Montserrat collection of Ancient Near Eastern seals and seal impressions has been helped by research funds, namely the Spanish project FFI2015-67370-P.

Like the other 43 known clay tags, MM 750.204 and MM 750.205 are decontextualised. As a matter of fact, there is little accurate documentation regarding the provenance of the Western Asiatic antiquities housed in the Museu de Montserrat. The collection was built by Father Bonaventura Ubach at the Benedictine Abbey from the acquisitions he made primarily from dealers during his stay in Iraq between 1922 and 1923. It is possible, however, that the two objects presented here were acquired before he travelled to Mesopotamia. The record of publication of several of the Leiden, etc. exemplars, which can be traced back to Scheil 1901 (see Henkelman, Jones & Stolper 2004, pp. 3-15), lends plausibility to the suggestion that Father Ubach acquired the two Montserrat tags during his stay in Rome from 1913 to 1922. During this decade he taught Oriental languages at the Benedictine Collegio Sant'Anselmo as well as at the Pontificio Istituto Biblico, and developed a special friendship with Father Anton Deimel, with whose help, and perhaps at the Pontificio Istituto Biblico itself, Father Ubach acquired over 170 clay tablets inscribed in cuneiform (conceivably including some uninscribed ones) for the Museu Bíblic de Montserrat as it was then called (Díaz i Carbonell 1997, repr. in Márquez Rowe 2015).

Although all 45 tags are without archaeological precise contextual information, Father Vincent Scheil stated that the tags he discussed in 1901, the first ones to be brought to light, came from the southern Mesopotamian site of Tello (Scheil 1901, p. 567). Albrecht Goetze's skepticism concerning this attribution (Goetze 1944, p. 97) has been followed by Henkelman, Jones and Stolper on the grounds that there are no other Achaemenid remains from this site (Henkelman, Jones & Stolper 2004, p. 16). Mark B. Garrison and Margaret Cool Root, however, did not dismiss Scheil's attribution all together, considering that further archaeological work on the site of Tello might yield interesting results for Achaemenid times (Garrison & Root 2001, p. 37). Although Garrison has later chosen to define the ancient collection of tags as "unprovenanced" (Garrison 2017, 2021), it may be worth referring to the unexpected recent discovery of a Hellenistic temple during the new archaeological excavations in Tello.

The two Montserrat clay tags, MM 750.204 and MM 750.205, are almost fully preserved and are very consistent in form and content with most of their published counterparts (for their description, see Henkelman, Jones & Stolper 2004). They are roughly pyramidal in shape. Their vertex is rounded and their base is rectangular, so



that they present two large and two small subtriangular lateral faces. There is one string hole at each end of the long axis of the base. The tags are also of similar and consistent size: MM 750.204 is 33.9 mm high, 34.2 mm wide and 21.2 mm thick; and MM 750.205 is 34.7 mm high, 38.6 mm wide and 21.1 mm thick. They carry no text, only seal impressions. The orientation of the seal impressions on the large lateral faces shows that the bases with the string holes are in fact the top of the tags.

Each sealed face of the tag bears a single seal impression and all impressions are from cylinder seals. Seals have been rolled out on four of the five surfaces of the Montserrat tags. Indeed, like in other exemplars, one of the small lateral faces is left without impression. Like the Leiden, etc. tags too, impressions are carefully placed in the centre of the surface and parallel to one of its axes, and they are made so as to show as complete a scene as the space allows (Henkelman, Jones & Stolper 2004, p. 10). Despite the worn surface of some of the faces of MM 750.204 and MM 750.205, it is possible to distinguish the cylinder seals that were impressed on them and identify them with the ones involved in the other 42 known tags.

Consistent once more with the sealing praxis of this ancient group of tags, each Montserrat tag has impressions of three different seals (following Henkelman, Jones & Stolper 2004, references to the seals and/or seal impressions are after Scheil 1901 [RB = *Revue Biblique*]). MM 750.204 has RB 2 on one of the large lateral sides, RB 4 on the other large lateral side as well as on one small lateral side, and RB 5 on the base. MM 750.205 has RB 4 also on both one large lateral side and one small one, RB 1 on the other large lateral side, and RB 6 on the base.

The Montserrat exemplars thus confirm Henkelman, Jones and Stolper's observation that RB 5 and RB 6 are found only on the top edges of the tags, and therefore are never collocated with each other (Henkelman, Jones & Stolper 2004, p. 53). Such a conventional pattern or protocol strongly suggests that both cylinder seals represent the controlling authority behind the transaction, communication or relationship that produced these documents (see Henkelman, Jones & Stolper 2004, p. 53, and Garrison 2017, pp. 545-546). The fact, on the other hand, that all the seals that were rolled out on the tags are of an exceptionally high quality, carved in what Garrison has termed the Achaemenid imperial Modeled Style, has led the four scholars to conclude that this ancient collection of now at least 45 tags probably comes from an official state archival context (Henkelman, Jones & Stolper 2004, pp. 53-54, Garrison 2017, pp. 544-549, Garrison 2021, pp. 780-781).

Also of interest, and again consistent with several other exemplars of this collection, the two Montserrat tags show on their surface the impressions of what could be a textile. These impressions were clearly made after the seals were applied. The possible explanations that have been put forward remain, however, conjectural and



do not answer the difficult questions of purpose and use of the tags (see Henkelman, Jones & Stolper 2004, pp. 45-51).

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Fig. 1. MM 750.204: composite image following the orientation of the seal impression on the top edge (1st row: top edge; 2nd row: left edge of side 1, side 1, right edge of side 1, side 2).



Fig. 2. MM 750.204 side 1.



Fig. 3. MM 750.204 side 2.



Fig. 4. MM 750.204 left edge of side 1.



Fig. 5. MM 750.204 top edge.



Fig. 6. MM 750.205: composite image following the orientation of the seal impression on the top edge (1st row: top edge; 2nd row: left edge of side 1, side 1, right edge of side 1, side 2).



Fig. 7. MM 750.205 side 1.



Fig. 8. MM 750.205 side 2.



Fig. 9. MM 750.205 right edge of side 1.



Fig. 10. MM 750.205 top edge.



Fig. 11. MM 750.204 vertex with impression of a textile (?).



Fig. 12. MM 750.204 vertex with impression of a textile (?).



Fig. 13. MM 750.205 right edge of side 1 with impression of a textile (?).



Fig. 14. MM 750.205 side 1 with impression of a textile (?).

Arta

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