

# Shu-ilishu's Cylinder Seal

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SOME YEARS AGO, while perusing the great Assyriologist A. Leo Oppenheim's *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, I found a reference to the personal cylinder seal of a translator of the Meluhhan language. His name was Shu-ilishu and he lived in Mesopotamia during the Late

Akkadian period (ca. 2020 BC, according to the new, low chronology).

I was interested in this man because Meluhha is widely believed to have been the Indus Civilization of the Greater Indus Valley in India and Pakistan (ca. 2500–1900 BC)—the

focus of my own research. Based on cuneiform documents from Mesopotamia we know that there was at least one Meluhhan village in Akkad at that time, with people called “Son of Meluhha” living there. Therefore, to find evidence of an official translator was no surprise, though it is nifty when archaeology can document this sort of thing.

To learn more I tracked down a photograph of Shu-ilishu's cylinder seal in a substantial volume found in the Museum Library—*Collection de Clercq*. Gathered together in the 19th century by a wealthy man, this collection is composed of objects purchased from dealers with little, if any, provenience data presented. Therefore, we do not know where Shu-ilishu's cylinder came from.

Despite this, I asked our Museum's Photo Studio to make a black and white negative and several prints of the cylinder's rollout impression. I have subsequently published this rollout

in several places—renewing interest in Shu-ilishu. This cylinder seal has now become commonplace in discussions of Persian Gulf archaeology and the Indus Civilization's contacts with Mesopotamia. My late colleague Edith Porada, the world's leading expert on Mesopotamian seals in her day, confirmed the information presented in Oppenheim. She also noted that the seal had been re-cut from its original appearance (not unusual) and that its style was Late Akkadian (ca. 2200–2113 BC), possibly even from the succeeding Ur III period (ca. 2113–2004 BC).

During the spring of 2003, when the topic of Meluhha came up during a seminar I was teaching, I showed Porada's letter to a small group of students. Thinking afresh about the re-cutting of the seal, I decided that the reading of the inscription should probably be checked. Did it really say that Shu-ilishu was a translator of Meluhhan? I took the photograph I had copied from the *Collection de Clercq* to Steve Tinney, my colleague



The founder of Mesopotamia's Akkadian dynasty, Sargon the Great, boasted that: *The ships from Meluhha / the ships from Magan / the ships from Dilmun / he made tie-up alongside / the quay of Akkad* (translated by Samuel Noah Kramer). Magan and Dilmun are modern Oman and Bahrain, respectively. This inscription, other cuneiform documents, and recent archaeology in the Arabian Gulf tell us about the maritime activity between Akkad (modern Iraq) and Meluhha (modern Pakistan and India) during the 3rd millennium BC.



The rollout of Shu-ilishu's cylinder seal. Courtesy of the Département des Antiquités Orientales, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

in the Museum's Babylonian Section. He was kind enough to look at it and confirm everything, at least as far as the rather poor image allowed. It occurred to me that someone should probably track down the original seal and make a fresh impression, but where was the "Collection de Clercq" now—in Paris? I was sure I would get to it someday, but that is where I left things until a splendid piece of luck dropped it in my lap.

In the spring of 2004, the "First Cities" show opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. On June 10, 2004, I visited the Met with a couple of students. The show was a truly magnificent display, with treasures from the Near East and India set out in a very attractive and informed way. The Penn Museum's material from Puabi's grave at Ur was there, as was the British Museum's famous Royal Standard of Ur. The "Priest-King" from Mohenjo-daro had been lent by the Pakistan Government—he looked great!—and the Louvre had also been very generous with its loan of various objects. The students and I did our tour through the galleries and then lingered, reading labels again or with greater concentration than on the first pass through.

I was in a gallery near the "Priest-King" when I spotted Shu-ilishu's cylinder and a clear impression of its rollout. It was a part of the Louvre's loan. The "Collection de Clercq" had found its way to the Louvre, and Joan Aruz, the Met curator of the show, had been good enough to put it in her loan request. I showed the students and retold the story of why it is important.

I knew that Tinney should see the fresh impression, but maybe I could do even better. After consulting with Aruz and her staff, it was agreed that I could approach Annie

Caubet, Conservateur Général, Département des Antiquités Orientales at the Musée du Louvre, and seek permission to make a fresh impression while Shu-ilishu's seal was at the Met. Caubet's answer was virtually immediate and positive. We could make a fresh impression and it could be a part of the "loan" collections at the Penn Museum. This was all accomplished, and Tinney reconfirmed the original translation. The Penn Museum now has a very fine rollout of the seal in its collections, where it can be used as a research tool for many, many years.

The writing of Meluhha (the Indus script) remains undeciphered, in spite of many claims to the contrary. The inscriptions are short, and this makes the job of decipherment very difficult. To break the code, what is probably needed is a body of bilingual texts, like Jean-Francois Champollion had when he deciphered the Egyptian hieroglyphics on the Rosetta Stone. The presence in Akkad of a translator of the Meluhhan language suggests that he may have been literate and could read the undeciphered Indus script. This in turn suggests that there may be bilingual Akkadian/Meluhhan tablets somewhere in Mesopotamia. Although such documents may not exist, Shu-ilishu's cylinder seal offers a glimmer of hope for the future in unraveling the mystery of the Indus script. 🏠

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#### For Further Reading

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