

Symbols of Dilmun's royal house – a primitive system of communication adopted from the late Indus world?

This article presents evidence of a system of symbolic markings, which developed in Dilmun between c.1950 and 1500 BC. The symbols predominantly appear on pottery, tokens and seals and may originally have been inspired by similar systems in the post-Indus script period of the Harappan culture. There was a development over time from single symbols on pottery and tokens to more complex sequences on seals that ultimately formed irregular logograms. The system was developed as a means of communication in an illiterate society. Based on the shape of the symbols and related evidence it is argued that they all represent variations on the theme of palm branches, palm trees and altars and that they are connected to the cult of Inzak. From the contexts in which the symbols appear it is demonstrated that the symbols were exclusive to Dilmun's royal house and temple institutions.

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Introduction

The Dilmun State emerged at the very end of the third millennium BC, a time when major polities across Middle Asia were on the threshold of a horizon dramatically dubbed the 'Eclipse of the East', after a number of systemic collapses and processes of societal disintegrations that followed in the wake of climatic changes. The most prominent societies that underwent this process of disintegration were the hitherto tightly integrated polities—city-states, territorial states or short-lived empires—which had comprised the Indus civilisation (Possehl 1997). The Kulli culture in Pakistani Baluchistan also disintegrated (Jarrige, Quivron & Jarrige 2011) along with the Jerofft civilisation in the Kerman Province of Iran (Lawler 2003; Pittman 2008; Fouache *et al.* 2009) and the Umm an-Nar culture on the Oman peninsula (Laursen 2009; Gregoricka 2014).

Prior to, or concurrently with, the disintegration of Indus society a relation developed between the small but centrally located Dilmun polity and the Indus world in general. At some point, probably about 2050 BC, a standardised weight system based on the Indus unit was adopted by the embryonic Dilmun state that was emerging on Bahrain Island. This adaptation is evidenced by contemporary Babylonian mercantile tablets which speak

of 'weights on the Dilmun standard' (Bibby 1971; Roaf 1982) and by the discovery of Indus cubical stone weights in Bahrain (Højlund 1994a). Concurrently, Dilmun also adopted a stamp seal and sealing technology from the administrative toolkit of the Indus urban bureaucracy (Laursen 2010, forthcoming). Even if shrouded in a mystery of its own the still undeciphered Indus script may also have found some use in Dilmun at this time, if one is to judge from its presence on some of the very earliest seals of the Gulf type. The abnormally high frequency of a 'twins sign' in sequences found on the seals in Bahrain and the Gulf suggests that the messages conveyed were composed on the basis of a local concept or language (Parpola 1994; Laursen 2010). The Indus script proper apparently never gained a significant—if any—foothold in Dilmun and was probably entirely forgotten by the time the active use of the script ended in the Indus world. The Harappan seal and sealing tradition, however, continued in Dilmun long after it had vanished from the Indian subcontinent and lived a vibrant life of its own (Laursen 2010, forthcoming). Seal-impressed clay tokens produced in Dilmun (Crawford 1998; Kjærøum 2003) have close parallels in the Indus world and suggest that the Dilmunites also found direct inspiration for this enigmatic practice here

(Laursen, forthcoming). In addition to the spectacular appurtenances of urban administration such as seals, writing and weights which have received much attention in Indus studies, the Indus pottery assemblage also exhibits a number of poorly understood systems of symbolic markings. An elucidation of this vast material lies outside the scope of this contribution and what is referred to here as 'symbolic markings' is, generally speaking, the multitude of diverging traditions from the third and early second millennium BC of pre-fire 'potter's marks', post-fire 'graffiti' and 'script' on pottery which served still completely unknown communicative purposes in the Indus (see Joshi & Parpola 1987; Shah & Parpola 1991; Parpola, Pande & Koskikallio 2010). Direct exposure to 'symbolic markings' from the Indus world in Dilmun is evinced by post-fire graffiti on an Indus pottery sherd from the elite A'ali burial mound Tomb 28, which on the basis of tomb typology and grave-goods, can be dated to about 1900 BC (Mackay 1929: pl. VI, bottom left) and on some Indus pottery sherds found at Qala'at al-Bahrain dating to about 2100 BC (Højlund 1994b: 125–127, fig. 374 and possibly 337 and 378). The concept of symbolic markers used throughout this paper is kept intentionally vague because neither the analogies in the Indus corpus nor the data presented in the extant contribution place us in a position that as yet renders it productive to offer a conclusive definition.

The present study is intended to add new information on the general trend of technological transmission by presenting a category of symbolic markings used first on pottery and later on Dilmun type seals (style III). The symbols may reflect a system of communication used by temple institutions and the royal household in Dilmun and for which inspiration should probably be sought in late and post-Harappan Gujarat. Conceivably, these symbolic markings functioned as graphemes and were occasionally used to compose simple logograms or pseudo-script intended for a generally illiterate population.

Symbolic markings on pottery

In the initial stage of the Dilmun state, c.2050–1950 BC (Højlund's Qala'at al-Bahrain period IIa) the new sealing technology was apparently still conceived as something of a novelty by Dilmun's general public. Manifestations of the special status of the new sealing technology can be observed in a number of skeuomorphic representations of sealings on pottery vessels. The most widely used form of skeuomorphism associated with sealings is pre-firing seal

impressions and pseudo string-and-sealing appliqués on pottery vessels (Fig. 1). The majority of the known examples are fashioned so as to give the appearance of one or two strings that hang down the side of the vessel near the transition of the neck and shoulder (Fig. 1/a–c, f–h). More rarely a circular lump of clay has been placed in the position of a sealing or tag on the side of the vessel (Fig. 1/d–e). These pseudo string-and-sealing appliqués are found on pottery vessels from a wide range of archaeological contexts including settlements (e.g. Qala'at al-Bahrain and Saar settlement), burials (e.g. Saar, Karzakkan/Hamad Town and A'ali Mound Cemeteries) and the Barbar temple (see Laursen, forthcoming with references). Besides being a symbolic and ornamental function it is clear that they did not serve any practical purpose.

A rarer but closely related category consists of pre-firing seal impressions that typically appear on the neck of the vessels where they have been stamped into a pseudo-sealing (Fig. 2). Of the four examples known to us, two come from Qala'at al-Bahrain and of these one is stamped with a Dilmun style IA seal (Kjærum 1994: fig. 1747), while the other is too eroded to allow for an identification

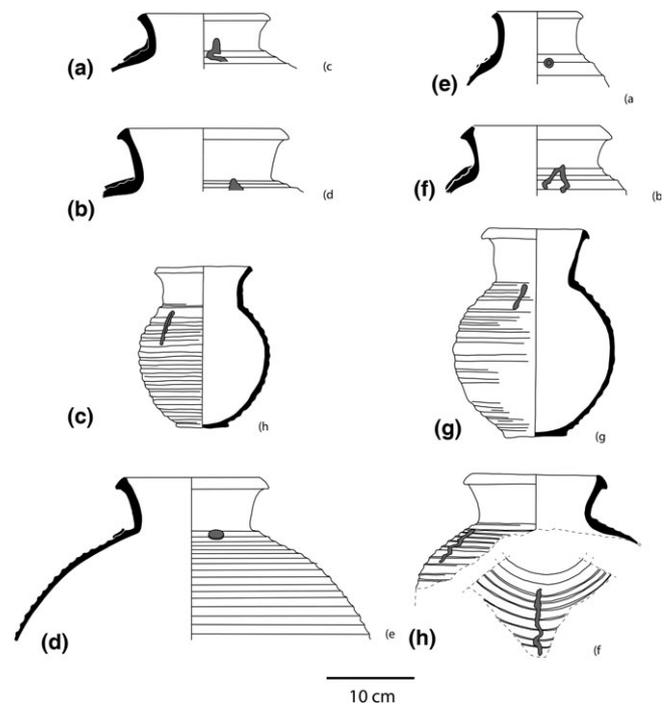


Fig. 1. Examples of skeuomorphic pseudo-string-and-sealing appliqué on Early Dilmun period vessels: a–b, d. Barbar temples (redrawn after Højlund 2003: figs. 347, 356, 289); c, g–h. Saar Mound Cemetery (redrawn after Ibrahim 1982: fig. 37/1–2, 4); e–f. Qala'at al-Bahrain (Højlund 1994b: figs. 227–228).

of style (Højlund 1994b: fig. 225). A third comes from the Barbar temple and is stamped with a proto-Dilmun style seal (Kjærøum 2003: fig. 778), and finally an impressed pseudo-sealing on a jar from a Dilmun burial at Shakhura (see Fig. 2) has been stamped with a Gulf or Proto-Dilmun style seal. The style of the seals corresponds well with the Qala'at Al-Bahrain period IIa date of the pottery on which the pseudo-sealings appear. It is possible that the impressions were made with the seals of the producer of the vessels or the person or institution on behalf of which the vessels had been commissioned. Given that tens if not

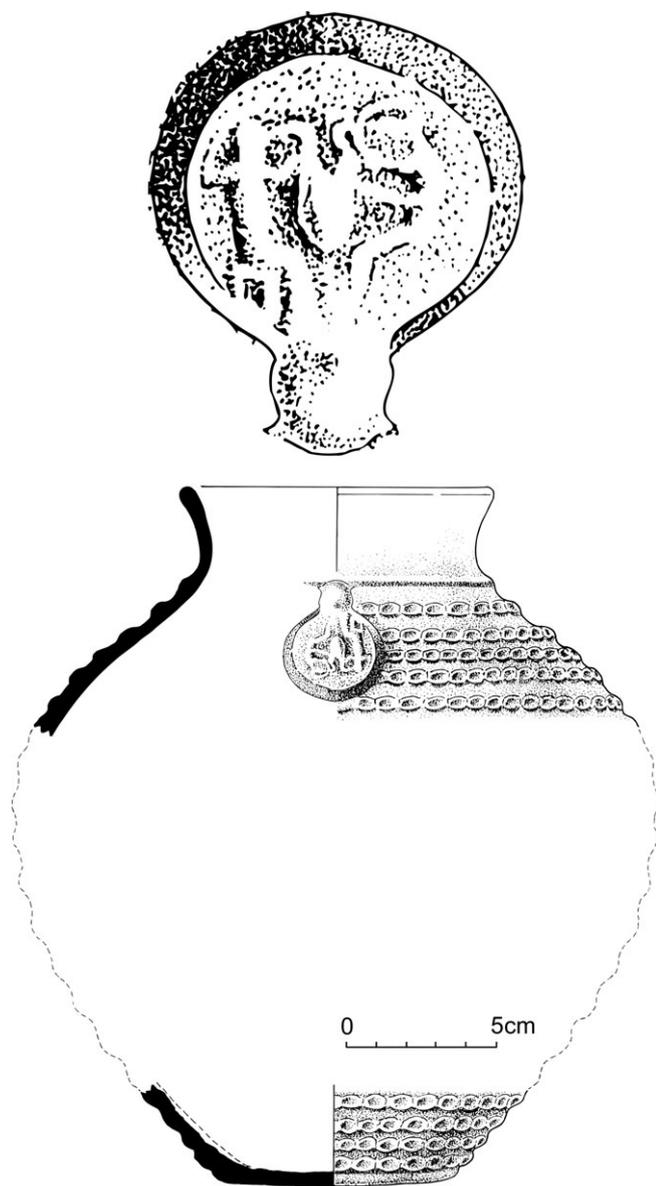


Fig. 2. A jar from a Dilmun burial at Shakhura, Bahrain (after Daems, Haerincx & Rutten 2001: fig. 5).

hundreds of thousands of Early Dilmun pottery sherds have been processed by archaeologists, however, the absolute rarity of the phenomenon appears to be genuine. Accordingly, if they indeed were primarily intended to serve as markers of identity or ownership, the practical application of the method never became widespread.

Pre-fire seal-impressed pottery vessels are known to occur in almost all ancient seal-bearing societies where such impressions doubtlessly served a variety of different communicative functions. It is, however, important to make note of the fact that the cases from the Early Dilmun culture are conceptually different from most others because they occur in the company of a skeuomorphic imitation of a sealing. From the Indus region pottery vessels (in particular pointy base beakers) impressed with seals are known from large urban sites such as Harappa (Shah & Parpola 1991: 315, nos. H-690A and H-691A (1–2); Joshi & Parpola 1987: 206H–167A (1–2); Parpola, Pande & Koskikallio 2010: 149–152, nos. H-1081A–H-1099A) and Mohenjo-Daro (Joshi & Parpola 1987: 103–104, nos. M-420A–M-424 A (2); Parpola, Pande & Koskikallio 2010: 98–99, nos. M-1998 A (1)–M-2007 A), but here one can only speculate whether the function of the seal impression was as property or producer marker or a religious one associated with particular ceremonies. Be that as it may, the use of skeuomorphic representations of sealings had already started to disappear from Early Dilmun pottery during period IIa (c.2050–1950 BC). After this time, based on the excavations at the Early Dilmun settlement at Saar, it seems that seals and sealings had found widespread use in Dilmun and now permeated all levels of society (Crawford 2001).

After c.1950 BC (Qala'at al-Bahrain period IIb) a new category of simple symbolic markings, which are predominantly known from pottery vessels, were introduced to the Early Dilmun artefact assemblage. The symbols that have attracted only limited attention are popularly referred to as 'potter's marks' but this is clearly a misnomer. They appear in Dilmun at a time when the Indus script proper must have been but a distant memory and they also signify a break with the previous skeuomorphic traditions (Højlund 1994b: 98). When found on pottery the symbolic markings under consideration have always been incised into the wet clay before firing. Symbols identical in size and shape to some of the ones found on pottery also appear on copper tools but, even if it seems most likely to be the case, it cannot be established with certainty that these symbols were not added after the copper tools had been cast.

Here it will be argued that the markings in all probability served as symbols of the royal household and key temple institutions and that they played some kind of role in the administration of these institutions' portable property. The symbolic markings on pottery have been assigned to four more or less well-defined groups that are described as follows.

The first group consists of some simple or poorly preserved signs that generally constitute a heterogeneous group of miscellaneous markings and 'singletons' (Fig. 3). All markings that belong to this group come from pottery vessels where they appear near the rim or on the shoulder. It remains a distinct possibility that some fragmented signs ascribed to this group actually belong to some of the more well-defined symbolic markings found in the other groups. Based on their shape the majority of the marks assigned to this group has previously been termed 'arcs' by Højlund (Fig. 3/a–j) but a sign reminiscent of a swastika is also included (Fig. 3/m). Vertical lines on the outer facing of the rim are reported from a few vessels (Fig. 3/n–o) but a more careful examination of the evidence may show this particular trait to be far more frequent.

The second group is represented by a singleton in the shape of a 'sheaf of grain' found on a pottery sherd from Failaka (Fig. 4). The symbol is singled out in its own group due to the relatively distinct character of the symbol and the curious fact that it apparently occurs in a number of other contexts, which will be discussed below.

The third group is made up of symbolic markings that are both distinct and homogeneous (Fig. 5). The mark is composed of three strokes that form an arrow-shaped symbol placed inside a square or rectangular box. The mark is known from fragments of two pottery vessels of Type 28 from Failaka on which the marks are located on the rim with the 'arrow' pointing in the direction of the curvature (Fig. 5/a–b). In two of the cases, two identical marks are placed on the rim of two different vessels (e.g. Fig. 5/b). In addition to the illustrated examples comes a complete pottery vessel of Højlund's Type 28 found west of the Tell F6 'palace' by the Johns Hopkins University expedition to Failaka, which also had two 'arrow in box' marks on the rim (not illustrated). According to Højlund the 'arrows' on the rim pointed clockwise and counter clockwise, respectively (1987: 39, 166). An eroded and very uncertain example from the Early Dilmun settlement at Saar is also included here (Fig. 5/c). The orientation of the 'arrow in box' symbol is not self-evident and the 'arrow' may well have been intended to point upwards. Interestingly, a symbolic marking that is probably related to the 'arrow in box'

also appears on a huge 1.15 x 2.2 m pithos vessel found by Pézard on Bender-Bouchir (see already Højlund 1987: 37–38; 1994a: 99 n. 9) (Fig. 6). The vessel from Bender-Bouchir is an import from Dilmun and the symbolic marking which possibly represents an eroded example of the 'arrow in box' is located on top of the rim (see sketch Fig. 6).

The fourth group is composed of a series of symbolic markings that resemble a stylised 'palm branch' (Fig. 7/a–h) and a possible variant of the palm branch or 'arrow' symbol (Fig. 7/j–m). The stylised palm branch appears on a relatively large number of vessels from Failaka (Fig. 7/a–f) and one from Saar (Fig. 7/g), and four from Qala'at al-Bahrain of which two are illustrated here (Fig. 7/h and i). The mark is typically placed on the rim or the shoulder of the vessel. Of interest in a discussion of the function of these markings is a pottery vessel with a marking shaped like a stylised palm branch or arrow that was found in the lowest floor of the palatial warehouse at Qala'at al-Bahrain (1994 sounding in room 2 of Building I) (Fig. 7/j), and a sherd with a palm branch found in drain outside the palatial warehouses (Fig. 7/i). Of further interest in that respect are three vessels with similar marks on the rim and shoulders found at the Barbar temple (Fig. 7/k–m).

Before an examination of the evidence can proceed it is necessary to make some fundamental source-critical observations concerning the pottery with symbolic markings. Taking into consideration the vast quantities of pottery from the Early Dilmun period analysed by archaeologists, as advanced earlier in connection with the pseudo-sealings, in the case of the symbolic markings it also becomes apparent that they were rare in both absolute and relative terms. Furthermore, a cursory examination of the contexts from which the pottery with markings derives also provides some important information with regard to the function of the markings. Markings are frequent on pottery at the trade colony on Failaka (n=23) and to a lesser extent the Barbar temple (n=6) whereas they are rare at Qala'at al-Bahrain (n=5) and barely present at the Early Dilmun settlement at Saar (n=2). It is impossible to compare the absolute count of the pottery vessels processed for each site and to evaluate to what extent these would have been detected or made their way into the final publications. For instance the 'arc' symbols from Failaka may have been deemed too indistinct and consequently have been disregarded in other pottery studies. Even if one cannot establish the relative frequency of these markings it is important, however, to keep in mind

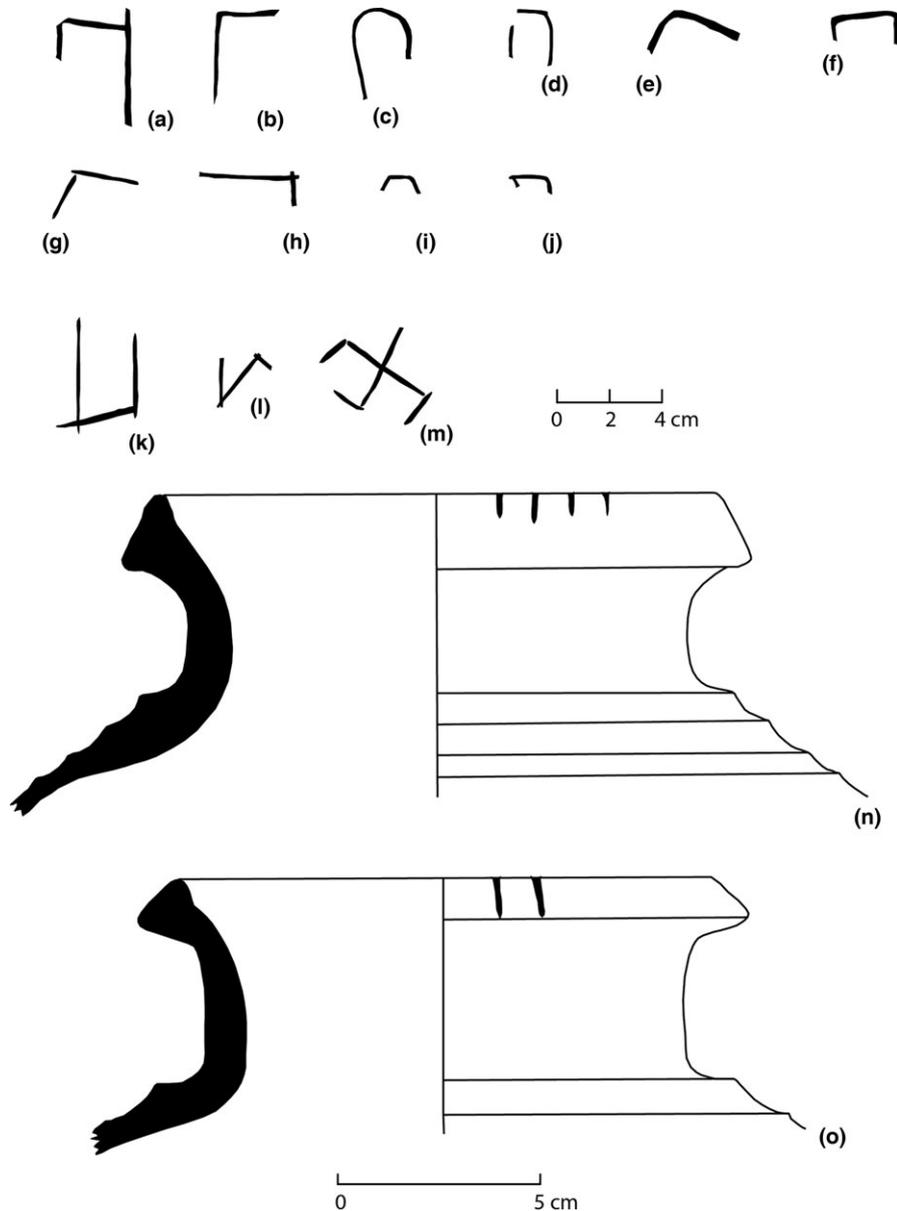


Fig. 3.

Symbolic markings of the first group: **a–j**. Failaka F3 and F6 (after Højlund 1987: fig. 712/a–j); **k–m**. Failaka F3 and F6 (after Højlund 1987: fig. 712/s, u–v); **n–o**. Barbar temple (after Højlund 2003: figs. 466–467).

that considerable amounts of pottery have been unearthed at all four major Dilmun sites and additionally that this material in all cases has undergone intensive pottery analysis. Finally, judging from the burial sites that have been published to date, the frequency of symbolic markings on pottery appears to have been low (n=1, see OA208 below). A cursory examination of the vast unpublished material in the storerooms of the National Museum of Bahrain by the author has only strengthened the impression left by the published record.

Regardless of the constraints of the small data set, some important patterning can be identified. In the case of Qala'at al-Bahrain one must recall the one pottery vessel with a palm branch-like mark that was found *in situ* on the floor of the palatial warehouse (Building I) with a fragment of another in a nearby drain. This find is particularly interesting because Building I, which was one of several large buildings flanking a 12 m-wide plastered boulevard, in all probability was part of a central storage facility controlled by the royal house

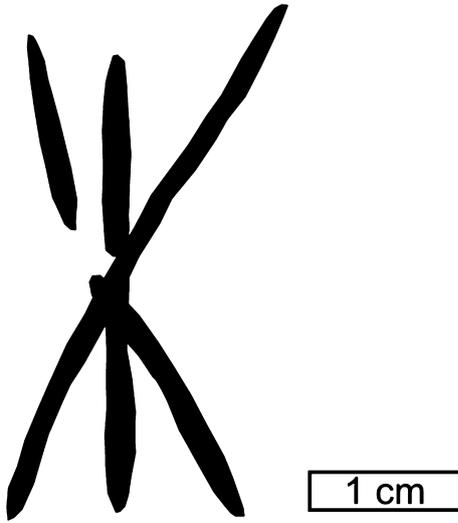


Fig. 4.

A symbolic marking from Failaka shaped like a 'sheaf of grain' or 'fasces' (Højlund 1987: fig. 712/t).

of Dilmun (Højlund & Andersen 1997; Højlund 1999). This line of thought can be pursued further still by consulting the evidence from the 'royal' burial mounds. A large ridged vessel with two arrow- or palm branch-like symbolic markings on the rim was found during the Danish 1960s excavations in the A'ali mound cemetery (Fig. 8/b). Interestingly, this vessel was found in the burial mound of an individual who, although clearly not a paramount royal figure, certainly must have been closely associated with Dilmun's ruling class or royal family (see Højlund 2007). The burial mound, originally excavated under the name Mound OA 208, was located in the north-eastern corner of the A'ali mound cemetery approximately 600 m east of the royal cemetery proper (Fig. 9/c). The mound was located in a broad east-west-running band of extra-large mounds which borders the royal cemetery proper towards the south. Mound OA 208 had a large H-shaped chamber which although badly disturbed, in addition to the vessel in question contained a number of other grave-goods, the most notable of which are three filter-neck vessels and a fragmented cylindrical ivory cup made from a hollowed-out elephant tusk (Højlund 2007: 63–66).

Discoveries from the Bahrain Burial Mound Project's recent excavations at the Royal Mounds of A'ali lend further support to the association between the palm-branch symbol and Dilmun's royal lineage. This new evidence was found during excavation at the royal cemetery proper

in two of the most impressive burial mounds ever constructed in Dilmun, both of which are located in the north-east periphery of the royal cemetery (Fig. 9/a–b). The first example is a large rim sherd with a cross-shaped marking on the rim combined with a palm branch on the shoulder of the vessel (Fig. 8/a). The sherd was found at floor level in the access shaft of the 'royal' mound BBM no. 63.526 (Fig. 9/a). The fragment had either been placed before the tomb was sealed and the shaft filled in, or discarded there later by tomb robbers. The second example comes from a vaguely ridged and very fragmented pottery vessel with all the neck and rim sherds missing (Fig. 8/c). The symbolic markings appear in the form of two upward-pointing stylised palm branches or arrows located on the shoulder of the vessel. Significantly, this vessel was found at a height of *c.*3 m in the fill of the access shaft of the large neighbouring 'royal' Mound N, where it had apparently been discarded by tomb robbers (Fig. 9/b).

Considering the rarity of the symbolic markings, the appearance of these in two 'royal' tombs, one 'aristocratic' tomb and the 'palatial' warehouse, leads to the impression that there existed an association with the royal house of Dilmun. The markings are clearly not identical but are sufficiently similar to represent variations on the palm-branch theme. The three vessels from A'ali and the example from Building I are also united by the circumstance that they all represent variants of one and the same general functional vessel type.

A similar situation that should be noted is the presence at Failaka tell F6 (with a temple and 'palace') of three vessels with the distinct 'arrow in box' marking. The fact that the *in situ* vessel with two such markings was found in a complete state and dug into the ground just west of the 'palace' (Howard-Carter n.d.), further strengthens the association between this particular symbol and the temple institution at tell F6. The association between the 'arrow in box' symbol and the temple institution on Failaka is further substantiated below, where the evidence from tokens and seals is examined.

Symbolic markings on other objects

Symbolic markings are also known from a few other classes of objects from the Early Dilmun period, but their association with the marks on pottery vessels presented above is not always entirely clear. Among the most convincing examples is a group of near-identical marks found on the blade of three copper tools found close to each other in Bahrain. Two of the marks appear on a copper axe

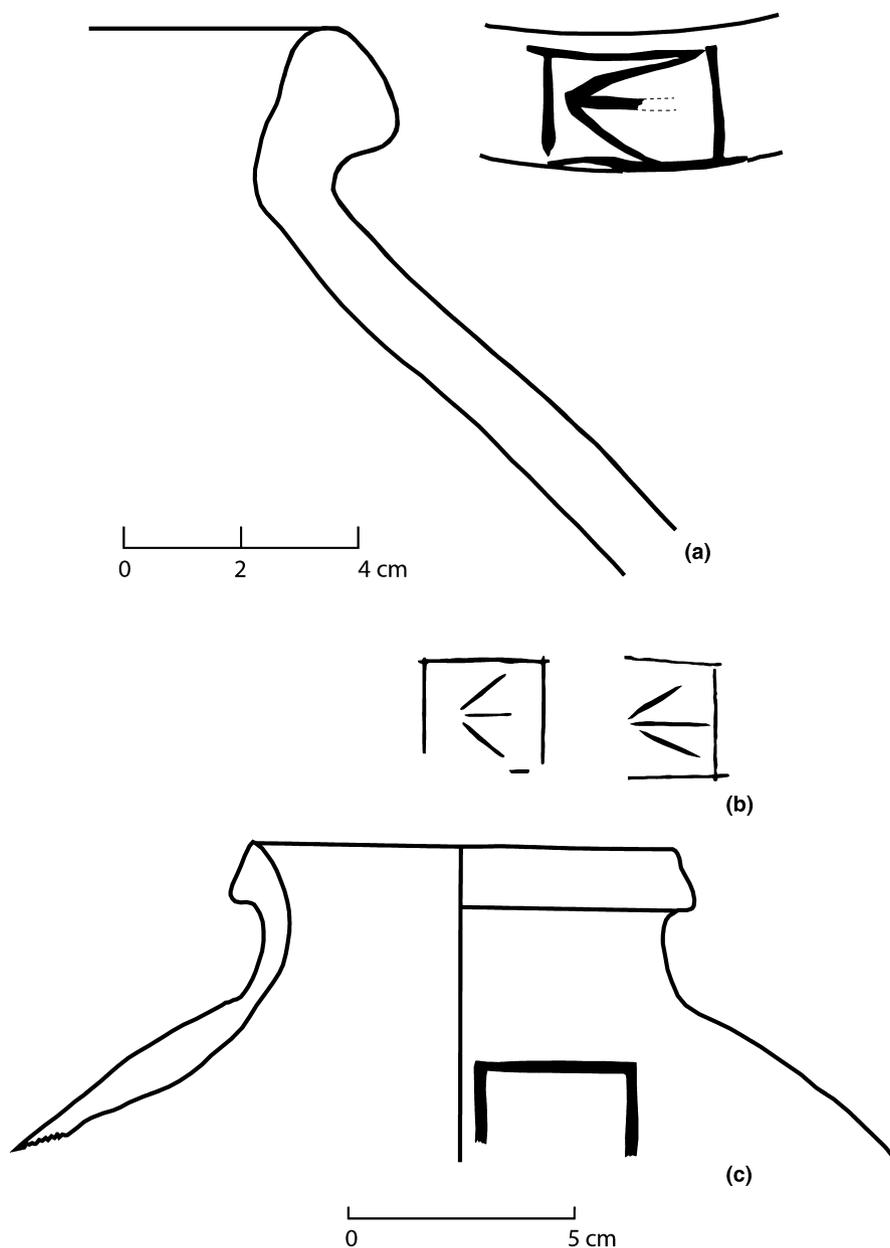


Fig. 5.

Symbolic markings in the form of an 'arrow in box': **a.** a sherd from Failaka with a symbolic marking (after Højlund 1987: fig. 114); **b.** symbolic markings from the rim of a sherd from Failaka (after Højlund 1987: fig. 712/k-l); **c.** fragment of a symbolic marking on the shoulder of a vessel from Saar settlement (after Heinz 1994: no. 480).

head and a copper knife blade found at the Barbar temples (Fig. 10/a-b). The third appears on a copper chisel found at the Diraz tell only *c.* 1.5 km south-west of the Barbar temples (Fig. 10/c). The symbolic markings are very homogeneous and in all three cases consist of two parallel lines and an arrow-like object oriented in the direction of the lines. The arrow is certainly reminiscent of the

symbols found on ceramic vessels from the Barbar temple (Fig. 7/j-l) and two of the markings from the royal mounds at A'ali (Fig. 8/b-c). It is also possible that there is an affinity with the marking on the vessel from Bendar-Bouchir (see Fig. 6). The two parallel lines in the markings on the copper tools are, however, clearly an important element in this composite symbol and thus set

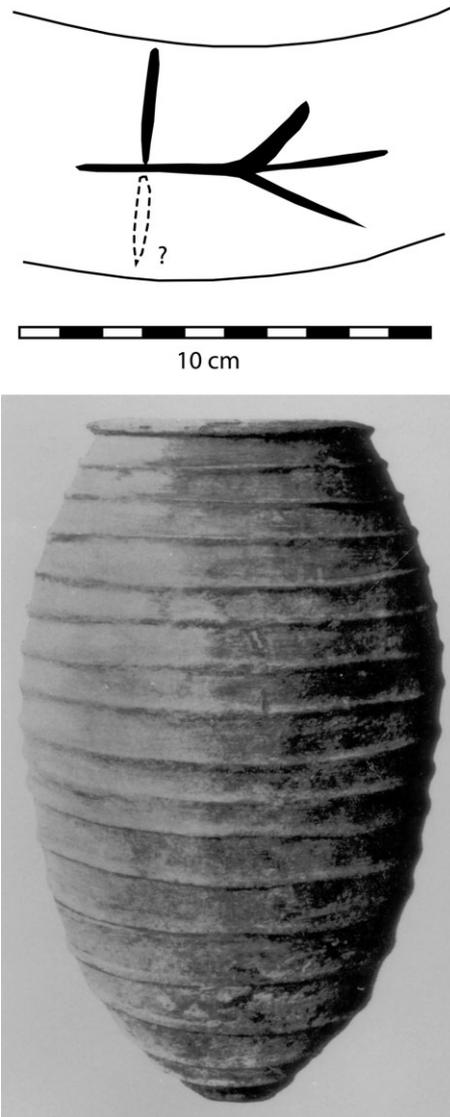


Fig. 6. Giant-size (1.15 x 2.2 m) Early Dilmun type pithos discovered at Bender-Bouchir by M. Pézard (photograph after Pézard 1914: pl. VI no. 5) and incised 'arrow' symbol drawn from the photograph (vessel BB 136) (courtesy of the Département des Antiquités Orientales, Musée du Louvre).

these markings apart from the above-mentioned parallels on pottery. Incised marks which share certain similarities to the symbolic marking discussed in this article are also known from the Wadi Suq period collective tomb SH 102 in Shimal, Ras Al-Khaima, UAE. The objects of interest are seventeen bronze arrowheads found in uncertain chronological context at the tomb, which exhibit symbolic markings on one or both sides (Vogt & Kästner 1987: 23–26, figs. 19–20). For now there are too many open ques-

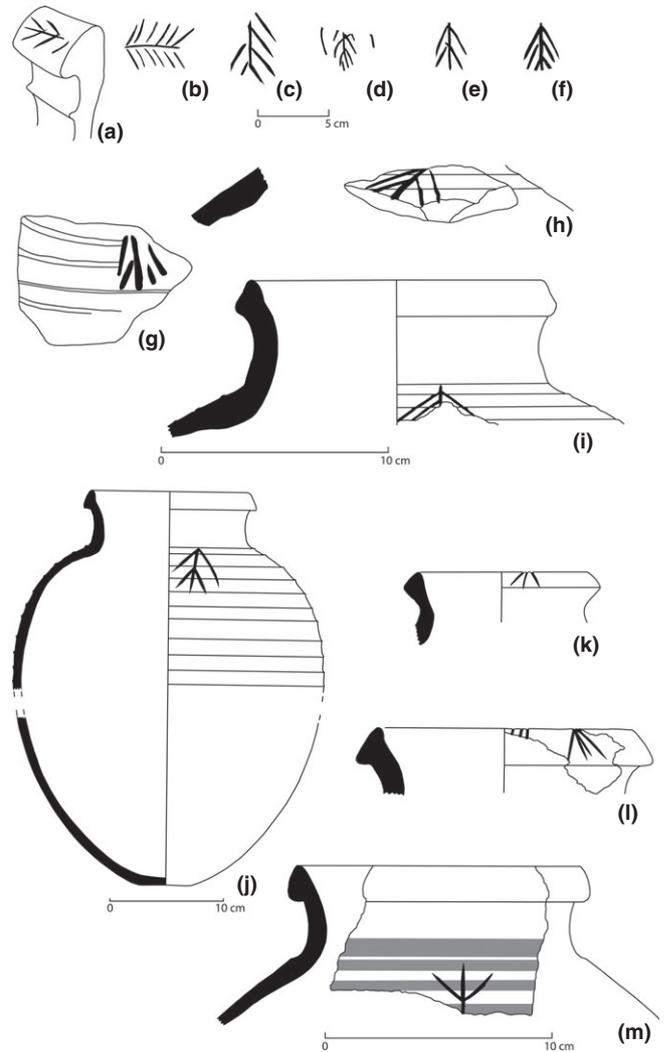


Fig. 7. Palm branch and arrow-like symbolic markings on pottery: **a–f**. Failaka F3 and F6 (after Højlund 1987: fig. 712/r, b–q); **g**. Saar settlement (after Heinz 1994: no. 446); **h**. Qala'at al-Bahrain (after Højlund 1994b: fig. 230); **i–j**. Qala'at Building I (after Højlund & Andersen 1997: figs. 92 and 32); **k–m**. Barbar temples (after Højlund 2003: figs. 516–518).

tions to decide if these markings are in any way related to those from Dilmun.

Another example that may be associated with this general phenomenon is a palm branch incised on the inside of a steatite vessel of Umm an-Nar type from Failaka Island (Fig. 10/d). This type of incision is also known from other steatite objects (e.g. Hilton 2014: figs. 124, 389, 444, 448) but they may well represent unrelated 'graffiti' that found their way to the stone vessels for entirely unrelated reasons.

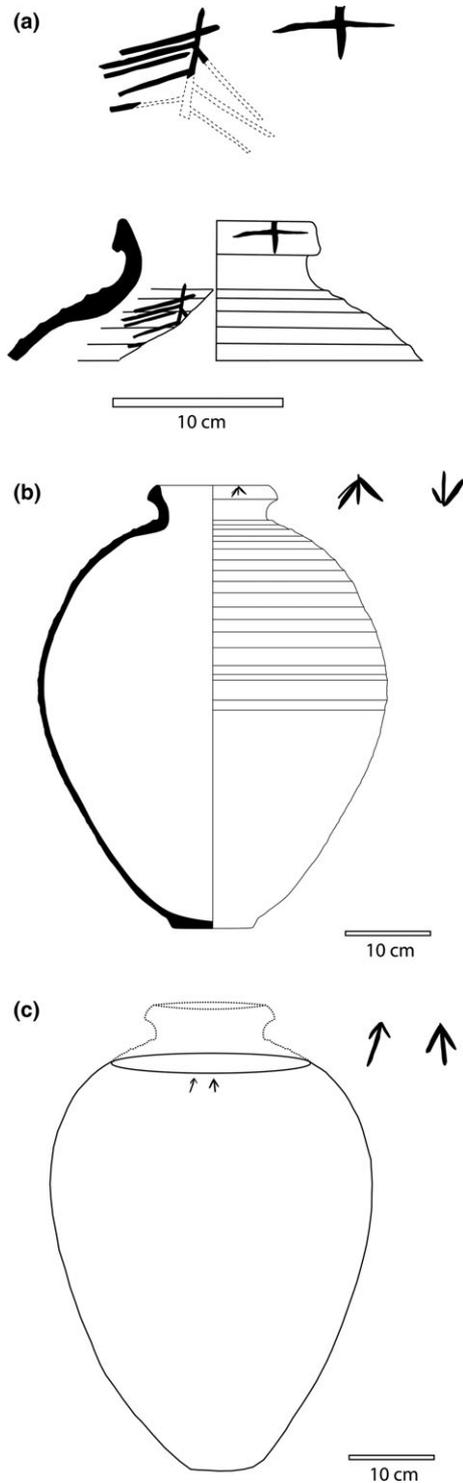


Fig. 8. Vessels with symbolic markings found at the Royal Cemetery of A'ali, Bahrain: **a.** unpublished rim sherd from Mound BBM no. 63.526 ('Mound Ali Ebrahim'); **b.** a complete vessel from BBM no. 63.236/Mound OA208 (after Højlund 2007: fig. 96 left, with a second mark added by this author); **c.** unpublished vessel from BBM no. 63.477 ('Mound N').

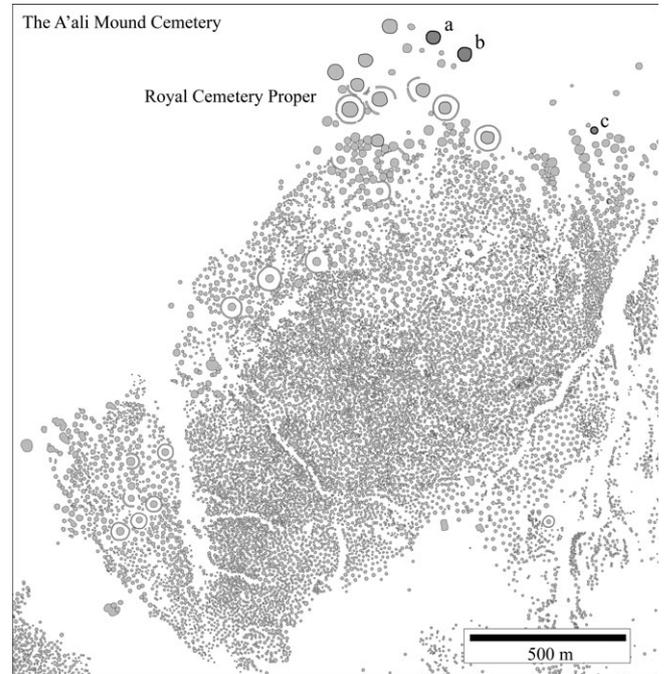


Fig. 9. A map of the A'ali Mound cemetery; the Royal Cemetery proper is located at the northern tip: **a.** Royal Mound BBM no. 63.526 ('Mound Ali Ebrahim'); **b.** Royal Mound BBM no. 63.477 ('Mound N'); **c.** aristocratic Mound BBM no. 63.236 (Mound OA208) (location slightly uncertain).

Symbolic markings on tokens

Another and much more informative source of information on the symbolic markings are the so-called clay tokens. The tokens of which only nineteen examples are known from Bahrain are circular *c.* 2 cm in diameter clay discs uniaxially or biaxially impressed with stamp seals. Several tokens, all dating between *c.* 1950 and 1800 BC and stamped with the same seals, are known from the Barbar temples and the Early Dilmun settlement at Saar (Crawford 1998, 2001). The purpose of the tokens is as yet unknown but they may have served a function in connection with the payment of tribute, tithes or obligatory offerings to various religious institutions. The latter interpretation is supported by the appearance at the Barbar temple of several tokens in and near an oven that appears to have been used for baking them (Højlund 2003). Another and, in this connection, equally important association with religious institutions can be found in the motives of the seals that were used to impress the tokens. The tokens are stamped with stamp seals that are associated with Dilmun's glyptic tradition, but the seals clearly represent a selected sub-set of the

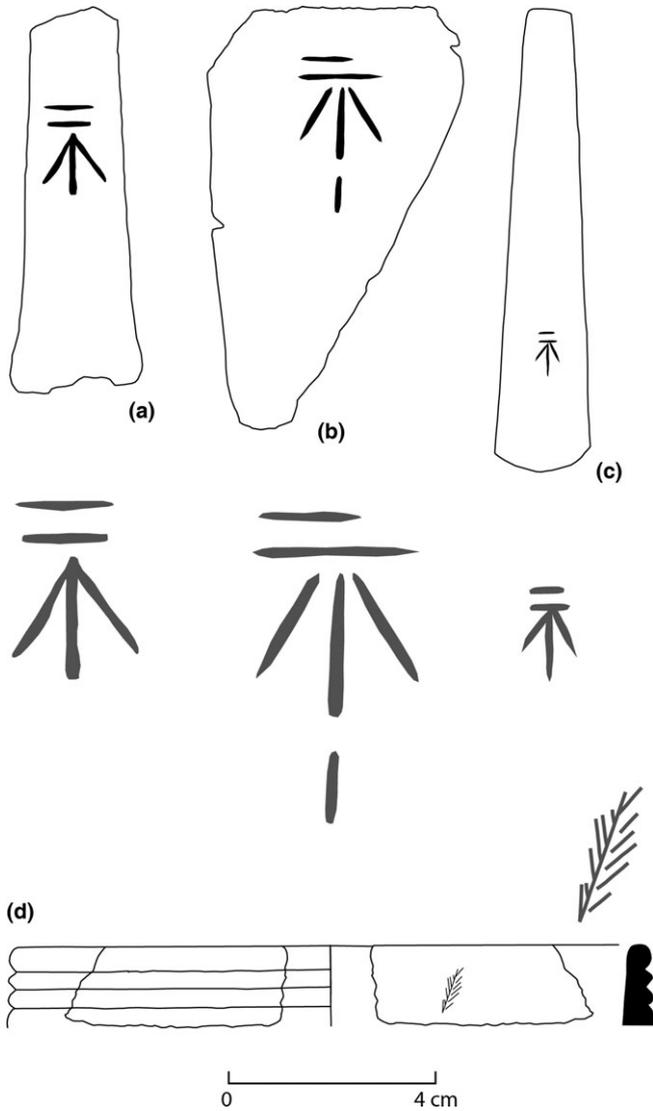


Fig. 10. Non-ceramic objects with symbolic markings: **a.** axe head (after Højlund 2003: fig. 737); **b.** knife blade (after Højlund 2003: fig. 734); **c.** chisel blade (after Cleuziou 1989: 38 no. 39); **d.** steatite rim of Umm an-Nar style vessel (after Hilton 2014: fig. 111).

style 1A seals found in settlement and burial mounds (Laursen, forthcoming).

What is particularly characteristic about the motives is the presence of unusual geometrical designs and, more importantly, motives where the central element appears to be a temple altar or offering table (Fig. 11). Significantly, two bifacial tokens found at the Saar settlement have been stamped on both sides with two almost identical seals (Fig. 11/a). The only difference between the motives of the two seals, which have been used for both tokens, is

that they represent mirrored versions of one another. The seal impression features a central temple altar motive (Fig. 11/a). The altar, which is superimposed over a palm branch and flanked by crescents, can be identified as an altar by the presence of two protomes of mystical creatures which project from the altar top. Importantly, the position of the mystical creatures also provides an orientation of the altar. What is more compelling about the altar is an arrow-shaped object that appears, emblem-like, in its centre. This provides us with a most convincing analogy to the symbolic ‘arrow in box’ marking found on pottery at Failaka (see group 3 above).

Four additional tokens found at Barbar of which two are uniface and two others bifacially stamped, also offer a relation between our symbolic markings and the temple altars or temple gate emblems. The two bifacial tokens are also impressed with a seal with a concentric pattern motive (e.g. Fig. 11/a left), which has also been used to stamp two tokens found at the Saar settlement (Kjærnum 2003: 303; Crawford: 2001). The seal impression most pertinent to our present case, however, has an altar or a temple gate-like motive (e.g. Fig. 11/b–c), which came from a seal that was used to stamp a total of four tokens found at the Barbar temple (Kjærnum 2003). Significantly, this altar or temple gate also carries a central emblematic symbol, this time in the shape of a ‘sheaf of grain’ similar to the singleton on pottery (cf. Fig. 4).

Finally, a single token found at Qala’at al-Bahrain provides us with yet another reference to the symbolic markings (Fig. 11/d). The impressed motive has a temple altar (or gate) as its central element under which a rosette appears. Two men flanking this altar and two birds depicted on top of it unmistakably provide us with an orientation. Moreover in this case, an emblem-like symbol appears in the centre of the altar but here in the shape of an upward-pointing ‘arrow’. This symbol has a strong similarity to both the tokens with an arrow emblem (Fig. 11/a), the symbolic markings with an ‘arrow in box’ (Fig. 5) and the palm-branch-like symbols that constitute group 4 (see Figs. 7/i–l & 8/a–c).

Symbolic markings on seals

More than any other category of material culture, the Dilmun type seals carved in style III (Kjærnum 1980; Denton 1997) exhibit a wealth of symbolic markings dating to around 1600 BC (Fig. 12/a–k, n). Possible symbolic markings also appear on a few of the earlier Dilmun type seals in style Ia but the association is uncertain (Fig. 12/l–m). It

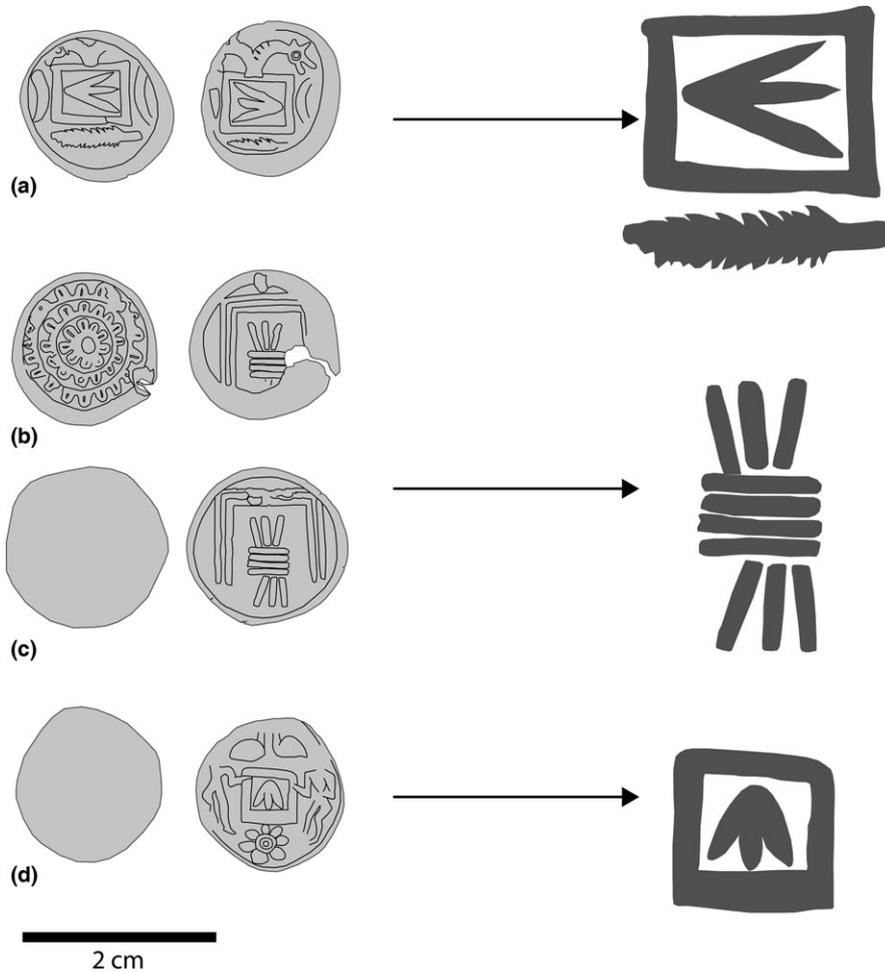


Fig. 11.

Uni- and bifacial clay tokens from Bahrain: **a.** Saar settlement (redrawn after Crawford 2001: 110 no. 6539); **b–c.** Barbar temples (redrawn after Kjærøum 2003: 301, figs. 786 and 302, fig. 789); **d.** Qala’at al-Bahrain (redrawn after Kjærøum 1994: 337, fig. 1749).

should be noted, however, that when addressing symbols of low figurative complexity across time and multiple classes of artefacts, one is confronted by a variation in appearance that may, or may not, be the result of differences in scale and texture and change over time. These factors make it challenging to confirm if two superficially similar symbols were intended to denote the same message. It goes without saying that this problem is also of relevance when relatively large symbols on pottery are compared against minute symbols found on stamp seals. In the case of the Dilmun type seals carved in style III there can, however, be absolutely no doubt that a large number of symbols are identical to those found on pottery, copper tools and tokens. In an attempt to assist the reader in this presentation all symbols of relevance have been

highlighted and enlarged next to the seal on which they appear in Figure 12.

Importantly, the symbolic markings are found both on seals with and without a cuneiform inscription in Akkadian (Fig. 12/b–c) and they are arranged in vertical panels that evidently mimic those of cuneiform inscriptions (esp. Fig. 12/n but also a–b & f–k). The symbols generally exhibit the same orientation across all seals and their orientation is also generally compatible with that of their counterparts on pottery. In combination, these factors leave one with the impression that the sequences of symbols on style III seals were intended to be ‘read’.

On seal Figure 12/a, symbolic markings appear twice in two identical vertical panels. The ‘sheaf of grain’ symbol

may be intended here but it could equally well be a perversion of other symbols that had lost their original meaning and at this point only served as decoration or pseudo-script. The registers, however, also feature down- and upward-pointing arrow-like symbols that can be related to the symbolic markings of groups 3 and 4.

Significantly, the altar and temple gates with a central emblem known from the tokens also appear on a number of seals (Fig. 12/d–f, l–m). Notably, in Figure 12/d two worshippers are flanking an altar which as its central emblem features the ‘arrow’ symbol. An object over the altar could represent firewood and flames. Be that as it may, the example represents a fascinating parallel to the tokens (Fig. 11/a and d) and pottery (Fig. 5), and for the sake of argument at this point I venture to suggest that the ‘arrow’ emblem on altars represents a stylised date palm (see below). An altar with such a stylised date-palm emblem is also present on another style III seal (Fig. 12/f) and probably in the altars with standards on Figure 12/e and n.

An upward-pointing version of the ‘arrow’ symbol, which is more rounded in shape and with three projections of equal length, appears on a large number of style III seals (Fig. 12/a–c, f–k, n). Needless to say such issues are highly speculative, but for the sake of argument it may again be useful also to regard this symbol as a stylised date palm. Significantly, the symbol stands in an apparent syntactic relationship with two other symbols; in at least seven cases a symbol consisting of two vertical lines appears over the rounded ‘arrow/date palm’ (Fig. 12/b, c, g, h, n) and in at least eight cases an X-shaped symbol appears over the rounded ‘arrow/date palm’ (Fig. 12/b, f, i [x2], j). The fact that the syntaxes on the seals exhibit the ‘two lines symbol’ in combination with the rounded ‘arrow/date palm’ is highly interesting in light of the obvious similarity with the near-identical symbolic markings found on three copper tools (see Fig. 10). Whether an association also exists between the X over the rounded ‘arrow/date palm’ and the A’ali vessel with an X on the rim over a ‘palm branch’ on the shoulder (cf. Fig. 8/a) remains an open question.

The symbols on Figure 12/n are arranged in panels similar to cuneiform, but they exhibit a symmetry that makes it apparent that we are dealing with pseudo-script and ornamentation.

The ‘palm branch’ is another symbol that appears on nearly all style III seals. The technical execution of the ‘palm branch’ is more realistic and it is used as a ‘stand alone’ that is almost always placed in the periphery of the

central scene (e.g. Fig. 12/b, c, e, h, k, n). The ‘palm branch’ is systematically disassociated from the panels with symbols and this makes it clear that it served a communicative purpose that was isolated from that of the sequences. The ‘stand alone’ role of the ‘palm branch’ is attributed to symbols such as crescents, suns, stars and rosettes that frequently appear on the style III seals.

Discussion and conclusion

It is first and foremost notable that the symbolic markings only appear on pottery vessels, clay tokens and copper tools dating after *c.*1950 BC (Qala’at al-Bahrain periods IIb and IIc). The latest and most well dated contexts are the two royal mounds in which ‘arrow/palm’ marked vessels were recently discovered. Tentative Bayesian models of radiocarbon dates from these two mounds suggest a time of construction in the eighteenth century BC.¹ During the *c.*1950–1750 BC period the symbolic markings did not form composite sequences, save for possibly some very simple logograms such as the ‘arrow’ followed by ‘two lines’. After a ‘Dark Age’ in the archaeological record, seals of style III appeared in about 1600 BC and from this point the symbolic markings were combined in minor sequences under the influence of cuneiform. They appear to be pseudo-epigraphic in nature but regularities and repetitions suggest that some could be regular logograms.

The evidence generally speaks of a scenario where a series of simple symbols was used at first to identify or invoke a number of different institutions, only to evolve over time and perhaps later develop into a system that could communicate more complex messages.

The use of symbols would have been necessary in Dilmun where the Indus script had been unsuccessful and only a few would have been literate in Akkadian cuneiform. At first the system of symbolic markings was probably built on parallel traditions observed among post-Harappan urban trade partners. When by *c.*1600 BC it became fashionable to write invocations in Akkadian cuneiform on Dilmun seals (style III), the vast majority of Dilmunites must have been illiterates. Drawing on the

¹ This Bayesian model is among others based on five radiocarbon dates from each of the two burial mounds. The radiocarbon dates were funded by the Danish Council for Independent Research | Culture and Communication grant 0602-02482B ‘Collapse: the “Eclipse of the East” and the rise of the Dilmun State in Bahrain, *c.* 2000 BC’.

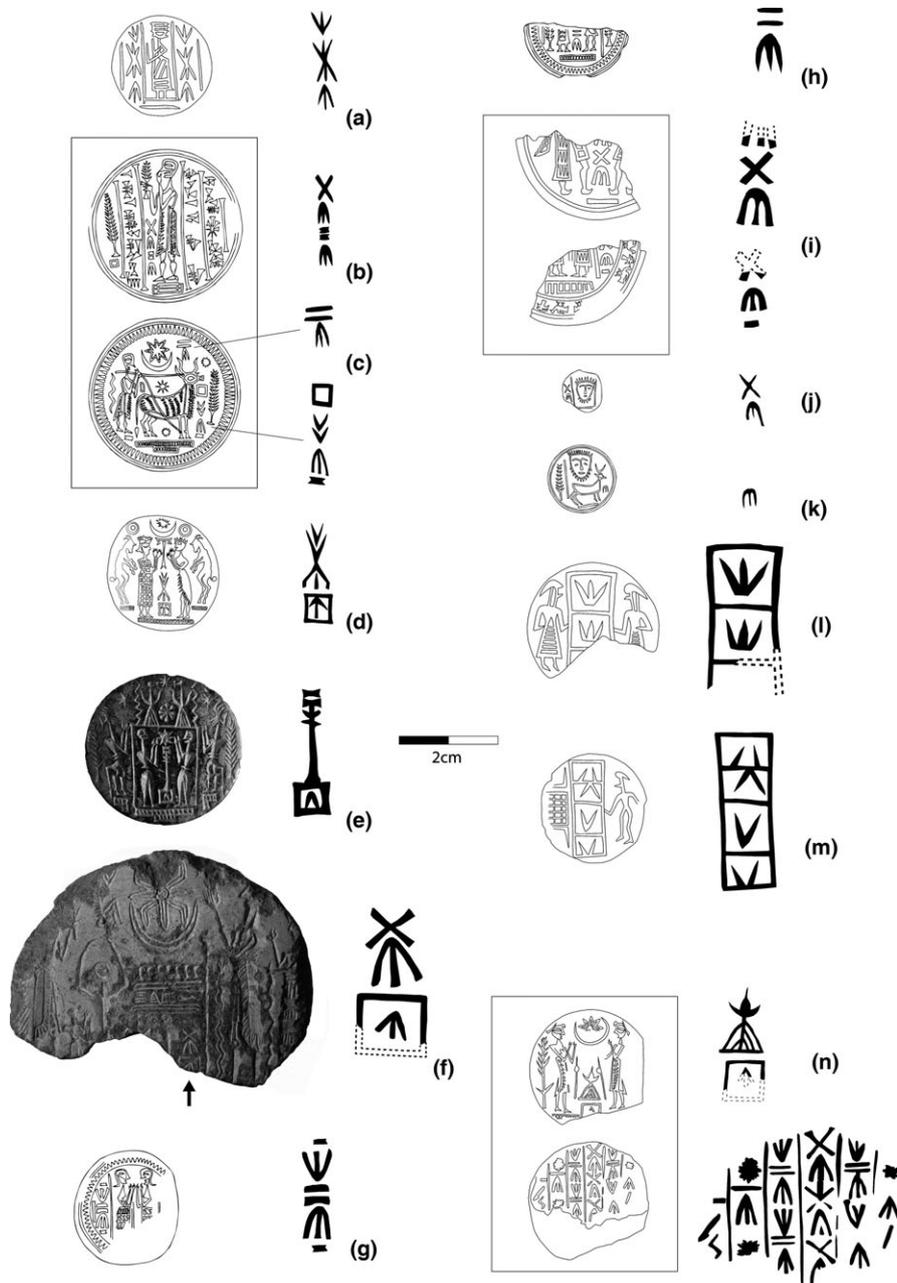


Fig. 12.

Uni- and bifacial style III and ‘epi-Dilmun’ style seals with symbolic markings/pseudo-script: **a.** A’ali Mound Cemetery (redrawn after Al-Sindi 1999: 342, no. 265); **b–c.** Failaka Island (redrawn after Kjærøum 1983: 143, no. 350); **d.** Saar Mound Cemetery (after Al-Sindi 1999: 178, no. 118); **e.** Failaka Island (after Hilton 2014: 125, fig. 285; Kjærøum 1983: no. 304; photograph Jozef Duris KSAM); **f.** Failaka Island (Hilton 2014: 124, fig. 279; Johns Hopkins University excavation Tell F5; photograph Jozef Duris KSAM); **g–n.** Failaka Island (redrawn after Kjærøum 1983: nos. 45, 47, 356, 347, 345, 52, 53 and 348).

existing system of symbolic markings, a series of primitive logograms was composed possibly to convey the same general message to an illiterate population as the cuneiform inscriptions did to the educated few. Judging from the general impression of a pseudo-script-like character of

the longer sequences one should probably not expect that this system ever evolved beyond some rudimentary stage. The symbols may, however, have been much more intensively used than we are able to observe from the archaeological record today.

A brief discussion of some of the individual symbols and their possible meaning may be useful. The 'sheaf of grain' symbol only appears on a single pottery vessel, a seal and as an altar emblem on clay tokens from the Barbar temple. Clearly, this does not leave us with much on which to base our conclusions about this symbol. It should be noted that the symbol also appears in a rock carving made on the side of one of the statue bases found at the Barbar temple (Fig. 13). The carving that may represent a mythological scene features two human figures on the left side and two indistinct objects on the right. Importantly, the standing human figure on the right appears to be holding a 'sheaf of grain' in his left hand. Limited as the evidence may be, it seems almost certain that the 'sheaf of grain' was a religious symbol and one may tentatively suggest that the distinct shape derives from a faggot of firewood used at the sacrificial altar. The same interpretation may be suggested for the X symbol frequently observed on the style III seals (see Fig. 12).

The 'palm branch' appears both on a large number of pottery vessels and on almost all seals of style III. In this connection the general importance of the date palm to the subsistence economy of Early Dilmun society cannot be overstated. Accordingly, it is not accidental that a palm-branch symbol appears next to the famous royal inscription on the stone found in 1879 in Bahrain (Fig. 14). The four-register-long cuneiform inscription in Akkadian is usually translated as 'Palace of Rimum, servant of Inzak of Agarum(m)'. The inscription provides a broad dating between the late Old Babylonian period and some point during the Kassites' rule and is thus not far removed from the two later Early Dilmun royal burials in A'ali (see above). The generally accepted interpretation is that

Rimum was a local ruler, Inzak was the local deity and Agarum(m) was the indigenous name used for Dilmun or parts thereof (Nashef 1986: 354). Nashef has made the important observations that Inzak when spelled Ensag (^dEn-sa₆-ag) 'seems ... Besides a possible interpretation of the name as "the Sweet Lord", the modified name, by using the sign SA₆ = GIŠIMMAR "date-palm" hints at the relation between the deity and the date-palm' (1986: 345). Nashef goes on to offer further observations of interest on the question of Inzak and the date palm: 'I believe that Inzak probably represented the deity of the date-palm. This is indicated in the first place by the date-palm branch engraved on the left side of the Rimum inscription.' (1986: 346). Nashef finally substantiates his claims with the following statement: 'The date-palm branch engraved on the left side of the inscription can only be the emblem of the deity mentioned in the inscription, that is, Inzak of Agarum' (1986: 354). Glassner (1984: 33–47) has demonstrated that inscriptions on style III seals and artefact coterminous with style III from Failaka, frequently invoke the name Inzak (text nos. 1, 2, 39, 40), Inzak of Agarum (text nos. 3, 32) and the temple of Inzak (text. nos. 33, 37). Among these one can point to a steatite vessel fragment (Hilton 2014: 117, fig. 242), carved in the Failaka figurative style (2014: 52–60) with an inscription that Nashef translates as 'Great House of Inzak' and on the basis of

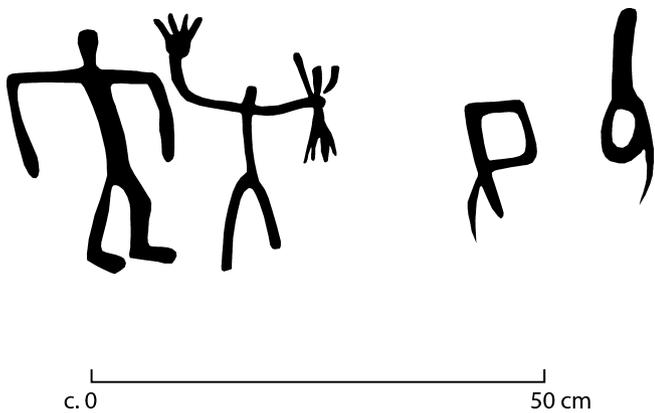


Fig. 13. Rock art found on the side of one of the statue bases by the stairway to the Temple II pool (after Andersen 2003: fig. 215).

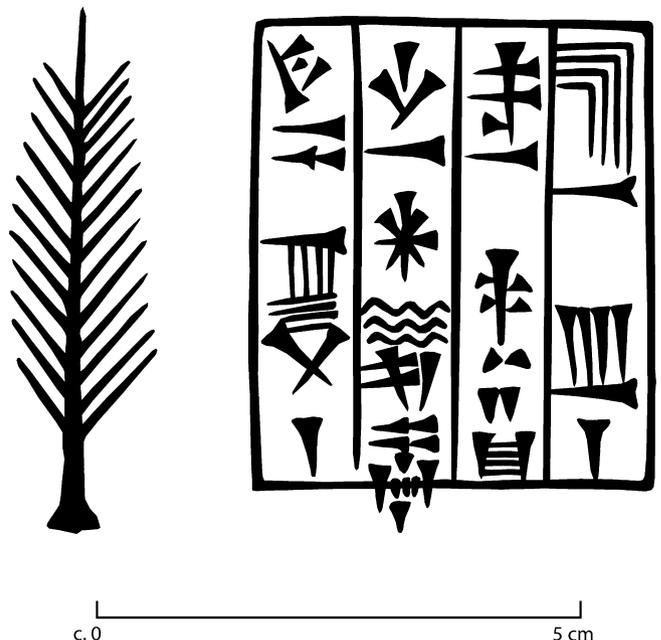


Fig. 14. The inscription on the Durand stone (after Bibby 1969: 13).

which he reasonably concluded that the temple on Failaka was dedicated to this deity (1986: 341).

If this is accepted it naturally follows that our palm-branch-shaped markings also represent emblems of Inzak. This conclusion is substantiated by the frequent appearance on the earlier Dilmun type seals carved in styles I and II, of date palm that typically features prominently in the motive in the central space usually reserved for altars and standards (Kjærum 1983: 70–73). Palm branches are also frequent on the earlier seals but it is not until style III that this particular symbol becomes omnipresent.

In light of the evidence it is further justifiable to conclude that the arrow-shaped symbols that feature as emblems on altars are date palms. Even if hopelessly beyond proof, it is tempting to ‘read’ this composite symbol as an altar of Inzak or a temple of Inzak. If this last speculative suggestion is not accepted the conclusion should still hold that the ‘arrow in box’ symbol found on pottery from Failaka and on tokens from Bahrain had a symbolic reference to the temple institution or cult of Inzak. It would also seem that the upward-pointing arrows and palm branches that appear on pottery found in the royal tombs of A’ali, Qala’at al-Bahrain and Failaka must similarly be associated with the cult of Inzak.

The explanation for the extremely rare ‘date-palm’ markings appearing on pottery both in the palatial storerooms and the royal tombs is probably very simple. One must assume that pottery vessels found in the royal mounds of A’ali as part of the funerary observance for the dead king had been taken from the storerooms of a central palace at Qala’at al-Bahrain. The same explanation must be accepted for the vessel found in the aristocratic tomb OA 208. The association between Inzak and Dilmun’s ruling elite as evinced by the A’ali pottery can thus be made independently of the mid-second-millennium BC inscription of ‘Rimum servant of Inzak of Agaru’ (see above). This shows that, at least by the eighteenth century BC, there existed an association between the deity Inzak and the royal dynasty buried in A’ali. Conceivably, the A’ali dynasty would have profited much from forging strong ties to Inzak as part of their efforts to legitimise the lineage’s right to rule. What this may also be interpreted to mean is that the original emblem of Inzak was also used on the property of Dilmun’s royal house later known as the ‘servants of Inzak’.

The list of symbolic markings discussed in this article is tentative at best, but future discoveries will doubtlessly expand our knowledge on the use of such symbols in Dilmun contexts (Fig. 15). Given the limitations of our

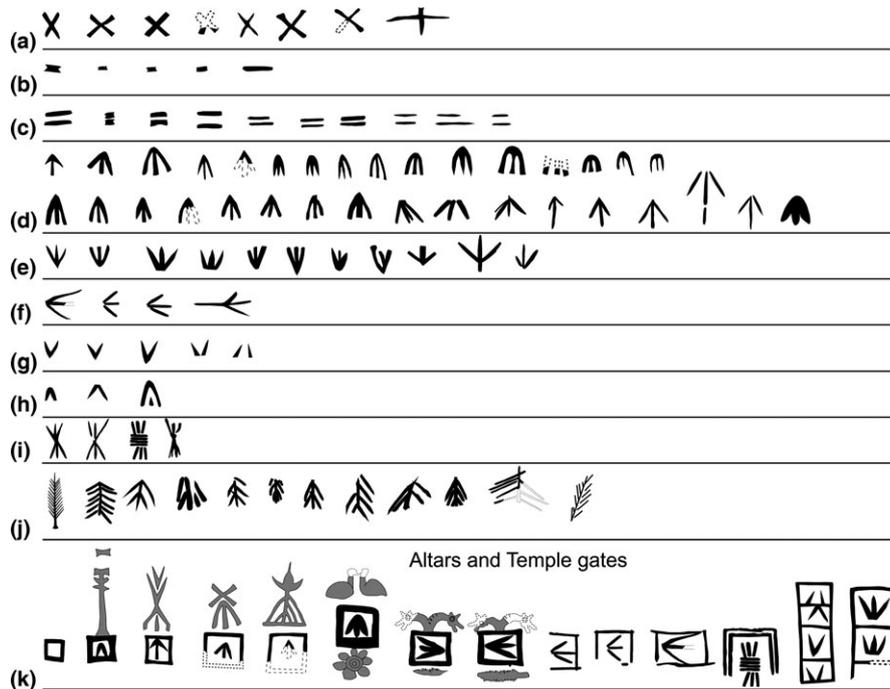


Fig. 15.

A tentative list of symbolic markers in the Dilmun context. The individual symbols are taken from sources illustrated and cited above; the fragmented ‘arc’ symbols (Fig. 3/a–m) are excluded.

current database it is, at this stage, fruitless to attempt to draw further inferences from the syntaxes in which the symbols appear. Should new data materialise, however, it remains a distinct possibility that some of the symbols' evident association with altars and offerings to Inzak or other deities (see. Fig. 15 bottom row) can be used as a guide towards a further understanding of the messages conveyed by the ancient Dilmunites.

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