

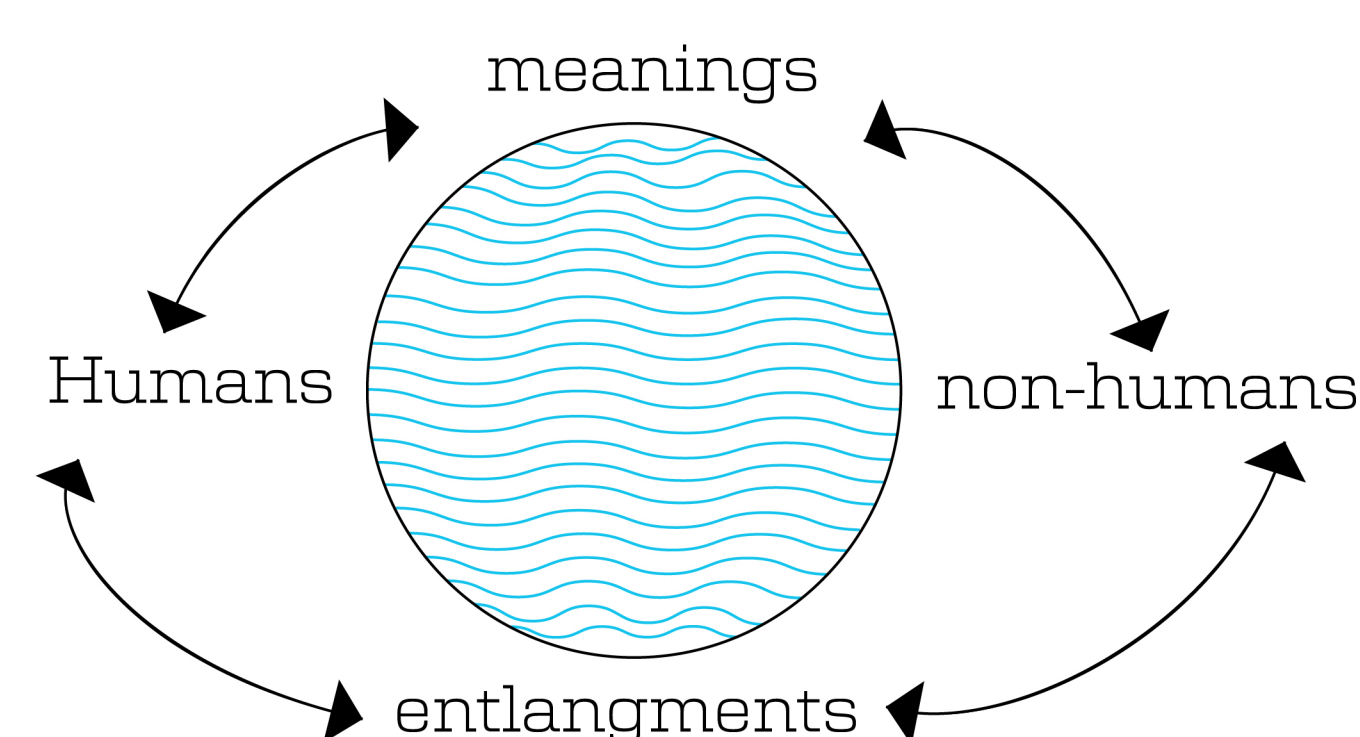
# Shaping images of/by the sea

## Ancient Mesopotamian and Mayan symbolic maritime representations

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### Introduction. Entanglements in aquatic environment shaped human societies

Recent years saw the development of interdisciplinary work intertwined in a broader movement of the Environmental and Blue Humanities. As such, not only new data emerged but also long-term available historical sources were revisited, allowing to understand how past human societies had a closer relationship with the marine and fresh water environments than previous thought. The development of this framework also enables different views on the dynamics of creation of meanings (including symbolic ones), by highlighting the roles of the natural world and its agents in human experiences. Accordingly, it widens the possible analysis within the Nature/Culture scope.



One of this perspective immediate results points to how humans and non-humans are co-constituents not only in the reality perceived by the former, but also in their processes of creation of meanings. Interestingly, when water-scapes' analyses are addressed having this relationship in mind, "new" and fundamental aquatic environments' roles are rapidly unraveled. This is equally relevant in a multitude of time and geographic contexts, showing that human societies might have understood and used concepts of water and water itself as fundamental elements of their cosmologies as well as of their daily lives.

### Ancient Mesopotamian & Maya Societies

For Ancient Mesopotamian and Maya contexts, in the *longue durée*, the marine environments' roles were more than mere natural frontiers – they enabled contacts between several human communities as well as the trade of multiple resources. They also connected and allowed the intermingling between human and non-human realities, aquatic and land, the real and the abstract.



Ancient Mayan and Mesopotamian contexts.

Data source: Natural Earth & Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI)

For ancient Southern/Lower Mesopotamia, the Arabian-Persian Gulf's was navigated at least from the 6th millennium BCE onwards (Carter 2012), thus creating a coastal network to where multiple Asian-origin resources flowed, like precious stones and metals (such as lapis lazuli, copper or gold); maritime mammals (such as dugongs, water-buffalo or monkeys); or other aquatic items, such as shells. Likewise, for the ancient Mayas, the Mexico Gulf and the Caribbean Sea enabled contacts and trade not only within different Mayan communities along the coast, but also with human groups of the Caribbean Islands.

In both cases, maritime resources were extracted and used in daily life, such as fish for nutrition; salt as preserver; shells as raw material to be inlaid in artistic elements (statuettes, musical instruments, among others); or even bones for ritual purposes. In light of the above-mentioned analytical perspective, one must look to these exchanges beyond its commercial value, by having in mind the symbolic values continuously (re)attributed to all these elements.

**By analyzing iconographic expressions of both contexts, namely the ones depicted on ancient Mesopotamian cylinder seals and on ancient Mayan ritual vases, we aim at shedding light on the structural meanings that watery environments enable. Ultimately, our goal is to highlight the importance of objects embedded in and produced for cultural-religious spheres, to better understand the interrelation between humans and the maritime milieu.**

### References:

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- McDonald, J. A., & Stross, B. (2012). Water Lily and Cosmic Serpent: Equivalent Conduits of the Maya Spirit Realm. *Journal of Ethnobiology*, 32(1), 74–107. <https://doi.org/10.2993/0278-0771-32.1.74>
- Restall, M., & Solari, A. (2020). The Maya: A Very Short Introduction. Oxford.
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### Cases Studies

#### CHAM\_WatersIconographicSources\_1

**Title:** BM 2013,6001.85

**Alternative title:** 1144 Lambert Collection Number

**Repository:** British Museum, United Kingdom

**Object Type:** stamp seal

**Material:** lapis lazuli

**Measurements:** 19 x 15 cm

**Cultural Context:** ancient Mesopotamia

**Period:** Jemdet Nasr (ca. 3150-2900 BCE, after Brisch 2019)

**Style:** Jemdet Nasr

**Description:** Oval stamp-seal in black stone; face engraved with depiction of 3 fish and 4 quadrupeds.



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#### CHAM\_WatersIconographicSources\_25

**Title:** BM 2013,6001.1280

**Repository:** British Museum, United Kingdom

**Object Type:** cylinder seals

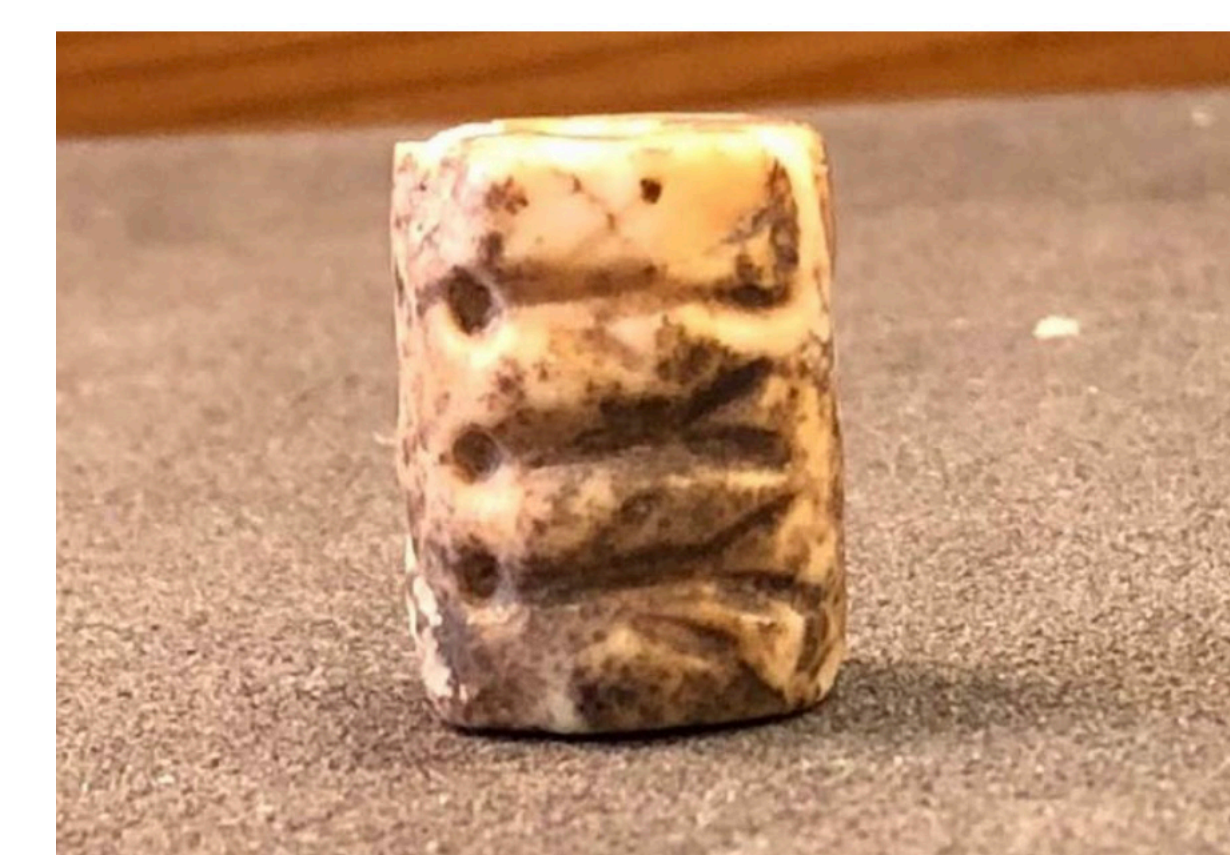
**Material:** Marble

**Measurements:** 2.0 x 1.9 cm

**Cultural Context:** ancient Mesopotamia

**Style:** Jemdet Nasr

**Description:** Marble cylinder seal with some wear; it depicts a row of 3 fishes bordered by 3 dots.



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#### CHAM\_WatersIconographicSources\_22

**Title:** K7982

**Repository:** Unknown

**Object Type:** vessel

**Material:** ceramic

**Measurements:** 20 x 9 x 29.5 cm

**Cultural Context:** ancient Maya

**Style:** codex-style

**Description:** Polychrome vessel with zoomorphic motif in black and possibly a botanical motif. The former appears to be the tentacles of an octopus.

Inside of them a possible botanical motif is inserted, with lines and in a center well drawn out.



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#### CHAM\_WatersIconographicSources\_22

**title:** MID 134\_20160526-100000:10068

**Repository:** Museu Maya de Cancún; Cancún

**Object Type:** vessel

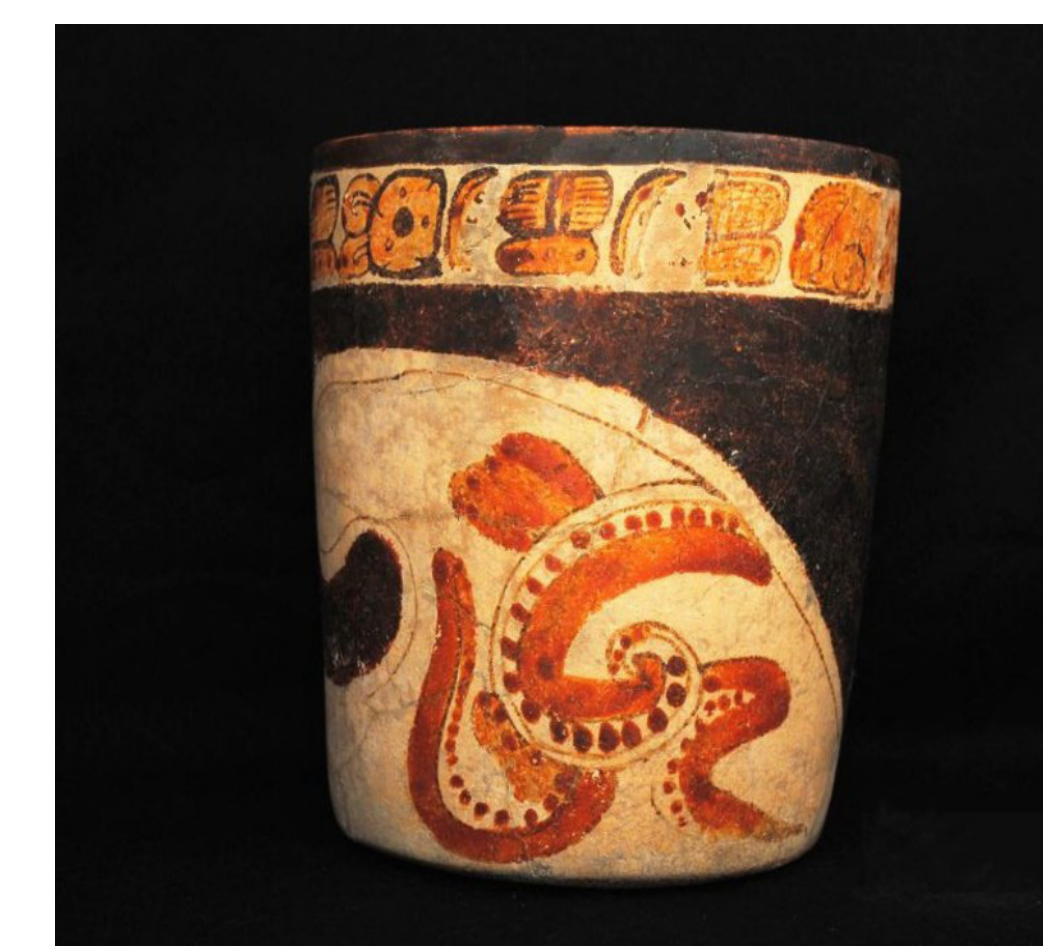
**Material:** ceramic

**Measurements:** Height,Diameter,Circumference 20; 9; 29.5 cm

**Period:** Late Classic Period (ca. 600-825 CE, after Restall, M., & Solari, A. 2020)

**Style:** codex-style

**Description:** Polychrome vessel with glyph band & zoomorphic motif in red, which appears to be the tentacles of an octopus.



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### Discussion

Mesopotamian seals depicts fishes in connection with other elements. In the first example, fishes are represented alongside with domesticated animals. Both terrestrial and aquatic beings were fundamental to daily life, but also gained deep metaphorical meanings, surpassing their physicality – fishes were used in rituals for aquatic deities very early in time (Safar et al. 1981) while the visual depiction or the textual references to cattle systematically appears as a symbol to evoke the flock of deities, both in visual and literary expressions. On the second, fishes appear alongside with 3 dots, which can stand for quantity - if each dot, as it appears in other media stands for 10 (Valerio & Ferrara 2022), the number 30 is unraveled. Yet, it can also imply an association with the lunar deity, Nanna/Sin, also known as "Divine 30" in several ulterior textual references. In the Maya exemplars, the depiction of an octopus' tentacles in objects which were used in ritualistic actions highlights the importance of this animal beyond its "simple" dietary value (Grube & Nahm 1994). In the first case, the probable botanical element can be understood as a doat leaf, pointing to the water-lily "monster" of Mayan mythology (McDonald & Stross 2012). If so, a maritime animal and an aquatic more-than-human being were depicted and in close association in a ritualistic object. Though there is no attested provenance for this artifact, the parallels with the other exemplar makes it highly probable that it was also produced in Yucatan by the same Mayan group(s).