

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION: SMALL WINDOWS, WIDE VIEWS

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In the ancient world, stamp and cylinder seals were one of the primary tools of administration, and could play a significant role as markers of social and individual identity. Like mobile phones today, seals played an important role both in how a person functioned in the world and in how others viewed him or her. On a practical level, they could be used to identify the bearer, identify a product, sign documents, seal containers, and lock doors. They could function within large-scale, official, or state-level administrative, economic, and redistributive systems, for small-scale household administration, or for almost anything in between. At the same time, however, most seals are also extraordinary examples of art in miniature, carved with everything from the seal owner's name and position to entire mythological scenes featuring numerous deities, heroes, and monsters. Finally, the combination of the material from which the seals were made and the imagery found on them meant that the seals themselves often also had amuletic, aesthetic, or even economic value and could play an important role as personal adornment. These multiple roles and functions that seals had in antiquity means that in spite of their small size they can provide expansive views into the beliefs, practices, and lives of their owners and the societies in which they lived.

While studies of seals and seal impressions, as well as sealing technologies, have appeared in excavation volumes, scattered journal articles, and conference sessions, as well as in edited volumes, they have generally been oriented toward a specific geographical region or methodological approach. In this collection

we have invited scholars working in four regions of the ancient world where seals have been more or less significant parts of the archaeological record to participate in a conversation that transcends geography, chronology, and methodology. The contributions in this volume represent cross-regional, cross-chronological, and interdisciplinary approaches to the use and manufacture of seals as well as to the practice of sealing in the greater Near East, South Asia, the Aegean, and Egypt.

In recent years, new methodologies, fresh perspectives, and interdisciplinary approaches to glyptic studies have been employed in each of these regions, but no comprehensive collections have been published. This volume showcases ongoing studies that are a development of a scholarly tradition first born out of the cataloguing enterprises of the nineteenth century. The chapters included here build upon the interdisciplinary groundwork laid in the past half-century to advance seal studies in four core regions where seals and sealing played important roles in everything from daily administration to cultural expression. The goal of this collection is not only to bring together junior and senior scholars in the field in order to revisit and reboot glyptic studies in their respective regions, but also to introduce scholars working in different geographical areas to the expert analyses of the materials, methodologies, and issues of neighboring cultures. Contributors revisit established methodologies for examining iconography and chronology, but also creatively explore new methodologies that focus on social identity and stratification, administrative function, iconography, transculturality, production technology, stylistic variation, and cultural appropriation. In addition to highlighting new scholarly approaches, many contributors use innovative technologies in their research methods. The aim, in short, is to present cutting-edge research across regions in a field that is by its very nature cross-regional and interdisciplinary, but is underrepresented as such, in order to both widen our own horizons and present new work on an important class of artifacts.

The chapters in the volume have been organized into four sections by geographical area (ancient Near East, Egypt, the Aegean, and South Asia and the Gulf). We see throughout that in each region seal production and use evolves and changes over time. The introductory chapters to each section present an outline of this basic process. Pittman sketches for us a robust picture of the emergence of the cylinder seal in the Mesopotamian tradition. Wegner provides a typological overview of the evolution in seal forms (including cylinders, stamps, scarabs, and other specialized seal forms) in Egypt and discusses the continuities and discontinuities that characterize Egyptian sealing traditions. Parpola provides an in-depth overview of the development, types, materials, and uses of Indus seals. Weingarten's introduction too presents a chronological outline of seal development in the Aegean, citing various contextual changes that coincide with changes in seal use.

One of the things that has become clear to us in assembling this volume is the degree to which scholars working in each of the four geographical and cultural areas covered are limited by the types of evidence that are available to them as well as by the larger theoretical framework within which individuals in their field work. For example, while scholars working in the ancient Near East have a solid chronological and stylistic framework – supported by both archaeological and artistic evidence – for the development of seal designs over time, archaeologists working in the Harappan world are confronted with a huge corpus of seals dated primarily to a single 600-year period, with less well-defined chronological differentiation. Similarly, scholars working in Egypt often have strong textual records that document state and local hierarchical structures and support the evidence of seals and seal impressions, while scholars working in the Aegean have only the evidence of the seals themselves. As in many disciplines, the evidence available affects the types of analyses that can be done, and the questions that can be addressed. Nonetheless, one of our greatest hopes in framing this volume is that by introducing readers to approaches undertaken by scholars studying seals and seal use in regions and time periods outside their own, we can encourage them to ask new questions and explore new methodologies.

In reading the introductory chapters, as well as the chapters that follow, the first question that arises then is perhaps one of primacy. How is it that, beginning as early as the seventh millennium BCE, this specific technology is found over such a large area? Is the spread of seal production and use over the vast areas of western and middle Asia as well as the eastern Mediterranean basin and North Africa the result of a single moment of invention and its gradual spread, or of multiple, polycentric developments? Is the adoption of seals for decorative or administrative use reflective of a culture's attainment of a certain level of socio-cultural development? Similarly, if we believe that seals were used primarily to control the production, storage, and distribution of goods, does this mean that cultures where seals are used have attained a certain level of economic complexity? Or are seals only one of a number of possible solutions to the issues raised by increasing socio-economic complexity?

Although the volume is organized by region, thematic connections are just as strong as geographical proximity. The ultimate value of glyptic artifacts is their ability to provide modern scholars with a window on an earlier society; by peering through this window we are able to learn more about (1) modes of visual communication (iconography, writing, storytelling); (2) markers of personal and social identity; (3) the processes and practices of seal production, use (administration), and reuse; (4) the connections between groups both within one and among many regions; and (5) the motivations of the communities who used these technologies. In the following pages we highlight these

themes across regions, in the hope that the reader can use this introduction as a tool to navigate through the chapters in an alternate way.

SEALS AND SEALING AS TOOLS OF VISUAL COMMUNICATION  
(ICONOGRAPHY, NARRATIVE, TEXT)

If a picture is worth a thousand words, then is a miniature picture worth fewer? Or, in contexts where we are often lacking textural evidence, is it worth far more? As an artifact class, seals are primarily a means of visual communication, and as such they have the ability to communicate vast quantities and varieties of information. By examining seals, their impressions, and the objects on which these impressions were made, we are able to approach questions of identity, ownership, and social status, as well as attempting to understand the specifics of use and function; ultimately we are able to further understand the meaning they convey. But, as with all things, it is the visual appearance of seals that makes the first impression and as such represents the first step in understanding these artifacts. When scholars examine a seal as an object and contemplate the iconography of the images or the meaning of a text inscribed on it or used with it, they are taking the first step toward understanding the conversation that the seal and its imagery carried on in their original context.

All scholars who work with seals can relate to the final point that Albrecht Goetze made in his preface to the Pierpont Morgan Library Seal Catalogue, published in 1948 as part of the *Corpus of Ancient Near Eastern Seals in North American Collections*, on the image-making power inherent in such a small object. Seals are small, but the images speak volumes, hinting at the variety of images that must have existed on larger works. While many of the approaches in this volume bring new methodologies to the study of seals, several authors return to the fundamental analysis of the imagery found on seals. Parpola presents a detailed discussion of the iconography of Indus seals, asking what the various categories of iconography might mean. Ameri combines an art-historical approach with models provided by recent scholarship on narrative to first define the cast of characters found in Harappan iconography and to then examine the scenes in which they interact with each other or with the inhabitants of the “known” world. Weingarten’s work on cushion seals highlights changes in iconography that are linked with the change in seal shape. Maria Anastasiadou’s contribution focuses on the iconography of an individual seal, comparing the iconography of a two-sided Middle Minoan seal recently discovered in a tholos tomb with a two-sided seal kept at a museum’s collection and probably dated to the Archaic period and presenting us with a stunning case of imitation of a Middle Minoan seal by an Archaic seal.

While the small size of seals means that in many cases artists are limited in the amount of imagery they can include, some scholars (Porada 1980; Hansen

1971) have examined seals as models for larger works, such as sculpture and wall painting, and concluded that in many cases iconography does transcend media, and the imagery found on seals is a reflection of the greater storytelling capacity of larger works. Similarly, Ameri attempts to piece together the individual icons found in the seals of the Indus Valley to create narratives that can give us greater insight into the mythology of the Harappan world. For her, as individual elements are added together in monoscenic compositions, and monoscenic compositions are read with others in a narrative, not only can we attempt to reconstruct mythological contexts but we can also identify a relationship between narrative composition and administrative or social function. Rakic also attempts to connect the changing iconography of seals in the Akkadian period to changes in both the administration and the visual propaganda of that dynasty.

Many seal images either contain textual elements or were meant to be “read” in conjunction with text. As outlined in many of the contributions in this volume there is evidence that seal technologies developed alongside the creation of early scripts, suggesting a strong link between the development of these two technologies from the earliest times. Pittman and Scott each draw attention to changes in seal imagery as proto-cuneiform comes into use. Scott then discusses how the understanding and status of the imagery changes as cuneiform is used to record the same information previously denoted through seal imagery. As Younger asserts, when Linear B first appears in Mycenaean palatial taxation records, the emergence of text alongside seals in administration affected the communicative role of imagery in the Aegean as well. Wegner’s chapter examines the rich textual source material in Egypt that illuminates the ways seals and sealing practices related to the concept and practice of active administrative systems. In Old Kingdom Egypt, as Nolan outlines, seal and text were used alongside each other in integrated systems. Ben-Tor’s work on Middle Kingdom Egypt examines the use of scarabs with royal names, private names, or simple designs in administrative systems and suggests a new life for these objects as administrative tools rather than amulets. Later, as the New Kingdom bureaucracy took tighter control of the administration, textual record keeping also likely changed the role of seals in New Kingdom Egypt, as discussed by S. T. Smith. In the Harappan world, on the other hand, the seals, which are the primary supports for a still-undeciphered script, exist as a constant reminder of an unanswerable question regarding the link between the text and the image. Yet, as Parpola points out, here too there is a change over time, with rectangular bar seals incised with only script overtaking those with figural imagery in the later parts of the Mature Harappan period. In one of the more theoretical chapters in this volume, McGowan explains the multivalency of Aegean seal imagery as another type of communicative language; seal imagery is, in her view, text that can be read in multiple ways.

SEALS AND SEALING AS MARKERS OF PERSONAL  
AND SOCIAL IDENTITY

The visual imagery on seals does not exist in a vacuum, however. Seals, both as objects and as carriers of specific text or iconography, were frequently linked to identity and status. In fact, the iconography of the seals and the question of the individual identity of seal users has been a large component of more recent scholarship (e.g. Charvat 1996; Smith, S. T. 1990; Winter 1987). In this volume Costello contends that control over seal imagery was a sign of control within the community: the banquet seal was an icon of elite power that extended their control over lower social groups. Laursen, examining burial contexts in the Gulf, also identifies seal ownership as a marker of elite status. Furthermore, he states that although seals were used in the Gulf tradition for the administration of goods, they remained a vehicle for the communication of ownership by an individual or group. Parpola too underlines the seal image in the Indus tradition as a marker of individual identity, as does Younger for a portion of the Aegean material, while Hussein seeks to link Talismanic seals with non-elite groups in Aegean society. Parpola's chapter also addresses the question of the relationship between iconography and identity in Indus seal imagery. J. S. Smith problematizes the relationship of seal to owner in cases where seals are recarved. Rakic uses administrative functions of Akkadian seals to link the imagery of identity to the iconography of power. Perhaps, as Jamison suggests, a similar context existed during the Harappan hegemony. And in Egypt, as Regulski points out, the tighter control over seal imagery and seal use as the Second Dynasty tightens their control over administration leads to a decrease in seal use by provincial entities.

Glyptic studies now benefit from other art-historical and anthropological approaches as well. The concept that a seal image may be related to identity is receiving new attention. Scholars are now using gender studies and socio-anthropological investigation to question the ways in which images have meaning within a community beyond linking them to individual characters. Seal imagery is packed with information about social behaviors and beliefs. As discussed by McCarthy, we can use the evidence of seals to learn how groups interacted with one another, whether within small communal settings such as a household or in a larger, palatial context. The interactions he identifies can then be used to establish a deeper understanding of gender roles within those contexts. Costello takes a related approach to the banquet seals of the Early Dynastic period. Her contribution examines the material from which the seals are made, the images they bear as well as the meaning of those scenes, the performativity of seals as jewelry, and the disposal of some of the seals in a lavish public funerary rite. Together, these two approaches demonstrate how seals functioned to constitute power among elite Sumerian women. Regulski

too seeks to disentangle the social relationships of administrative groups in Early Dynastic Egypt by highlighting distinctions between a centralized administrative system and local/regional traditions.

#### PROCESS AND PRACTICE: SEAL PRODUCTION, USE, AND REUSE

Although seal use and administrative practice have been actively studied for a few decades, it is only recently that scholars have begun to examine the production of the seals themselves. Regardless of the approach taken, a close examination of visual details and technological production of seals has become a necessary component of research and allows for a greater understanding of the human elements involved. If, as Scott suggests, the seal imagery at Uruk had active power to represent the social status of humans or indicate commodities that were traded, then it was the creators of the seals who imparted agency and meaning to those images. This latter point is expressly investigated by Green and Jamison, who, by conducting detailed studies of workshop practices and production sequences in the Harappan world, focus on identifying the human creators of bureaucratic tools as agents of meaning-making. McGowan examines the different stones from which seals are produced and the possible deeper meanings of the stone selection so as to provide the seals with an added layer of security. J. S. Smith examines layers of carving (and meaning) in seal production. Anastasiadou questions the act of seal production and image selection by examining an Archaic seal which in fact imitates a Middle Minoan seal. Weingarten's chapter examines the shifting trends in the study of Aegean seals and presents ongoing research on Aegean "cushion seals," a relatively short-lived seal shape that spanned the divides between the Middle and Late Bronze Age and the First and Second Palace periods; the changes in shape happened at a time when production shifted. Only through careful visual and scientific analysis are examinations of this type possible.

Building on the pioneering work of scholars such as Enrica Fiandra, scholars can use the information contained on the reverse of sealings to determine how the seal image and the sealing's function together impart meaning about administrative use. Research that looks more closely at the administrative function of seals is undertaken by a number of authors in this volume. Regulski explores the function of seals in Predynastic Egypt, using Near Eastern models to try to explore the social relationships of administrative groups in Early Dynastic Egypt and highlighting distinctions between a centralized administrative system and local/regional traditions. In a similar vein, S. T. Smith's examination of the change in seal use from the Middle to the New Kingdom periods in Egypt also provides new insight into a strictly chronological approach by including not only a discussion of changes over time, but also



observations on how public and private practices drove those changes. Ben-Tor, on the other hand, tackles the more basic problem of whether and how scarabs were used for administration at all.

As we see in a number of contributions to this volume, archaeological context is essential for an understanding of administrative seal function. Pittman highlights this point in general, but uses it specifically in order to extract the meaning of iconographic groups within the administrative contexts at the site of Konar Sandal South in Iran (KSS). Similarly to Pittman's use of the contexts at KSS, Scott identifies certain administrative groups at Uruk which appear also to work within their own architectural contexts. Comparable work has been done on material from the Aegean mainland (see Younger, this volume). And more specifically, archaeological context has allowed scholars of the Aegean to determine the difference between internal storeroom administration and inter-regional tax administration (Weingarten, this volume). Rakic too examines the administrative function of seal imagery in an archaeological context, concluding that seal imagery was linked to identity or status of particular administrators (individuals). Wegner's case study examines archaeological data from the corpus of over 20,000 sealings from the Late Middle Kingdom (ca. 1850–1700 BCE) settlement and royal cult complex of Senwosret III at South Abydos. In this context we can see that a rapid change in seal practice is the harbinger of social change. Similarly, Nolan examines the ways that groups or administrators used their tools in order to understand the roles of groups within a bureaucracy.

The afterlife of seals is another aspect of their use and reuse that has to date been poorly understood. Both Laursen and J. S. Smith tackle this important time in the life of a seal. Laursen, for example, analyses the "Post-Harappan" life of the Indus Valley sealing tradition by examining a set of circular seals that seem to be hybrids of classic Harappan seals. These rapidly became popular amongst the merchants of the Dilmun Culture centered on Bahrain Island. Over time, the iconography of the seals changed. While the earliest circular seals rarely incorporate features from Mesopotamian glyptic, this becomes a more important source of inspiration for later Dilmun Type seals. J. S. Smith, on the other hand, explores the authority that is retained in Late Bronze Age seals that have been recarved from their original form. Drawing on Thing Theory's concept of the "idea in a thing," this chapter considers the relationship between seal authenticity, recarving, and changing systems of authority, particularly in Late Bronze Age Cyprus.

#### SEALS AND SEALINGS AS EVIDENCE FOR REGIONAL AND INTERREGIONAL INTERACTION

As Weingarten notes, Aegean seal imagery was likely also linked to group identity within various types of settlements. Similarly, seals can also function as



markers of regional or national identity (see Hussein, this volume). The fact that merchants were very aware of the identifying value of seals from different regions is made strikingly clear by the variety of seal types found on the second-millennium ship wrecked off the coast of Turkey at Uluburun. Often a viewer would not even have needed to see the text or imagery incised on a seal to know where the person they were interacting with had come from. Simple visual cues such as the shape or material of a seal (for example, stone cylinder seals from Mesopotamia, round stone seals from the Gulf, or compartmented copper seals from Central Asia) would allow a merchant or administrator to quickly identify the origin of a person or even of a sealed product, as seals of different shapes would leave different impressions (Lamberg-Karlovsky 1975).

We first encounter interregional adaptation of and communication via sealing use in Pittman's chapter. In her work she examines the system of seal imagery used by Iranian administrators as they trade with their counterparts in Mesopotamia. Her research represents groundbreaking work in disentangling the complex set of mercantile relationships between regions in the third millennium BCE; styles of seal imagery which have hitherto been described as "hybrid" can now be identified as belonging to a very specific regional tradition being used in the context of a highly interconnected world. Parpola uses seal imagery from the Indus to identify crucial moments of interregional contact, and Laursen examines how sealing technologies and iconographies are received and adapted by artists in the Gulf who seek to produce seals that are unique to them while at the same time adopting iconographic elements specific to their trading partners. J. S. Smith talks extensively about the power seal imagery had specifically because of its locus in a merchant setting.

There is a great deal to be learned from examinations of local and intra-regional studies of sealing practice. McCarthy looks very carefully at the footprints left by local administrations in early Mesopotamian sealing practices; how might local traditions at sites in the Middle Euphrates and Khabur Basin have affected larger regional practices? Rakic too looks at how a complex system at the very heart of the Akkadian dynasty in turn affected the entire region. In the Indus region Jamison asks how the creation of seals linked local groups. And in Egypt Regulski highlights how a "decentralization" of sealing practice more clearly defines shifts in regional culture.

#### MOTIVATIONS

The greatest value of this volume is that it allows us to observe the production and use of seals and sealing technology over a wide geographical area, during the period when they became most common and also underwent the greatest changes in terms of meaning and use. Viewing these tiny artifacts with such a

large lens allows us to look for commonalities in the way seals were produced and used while at the same time reminding us of the many fundamental differences between these four regions. It is by bringing all these different materials and approaches together that we can begin to understand some of the key motivations in play in the production and use of seals and start to focus more on the human actors involved in the process of ancient administration and image making.

On a fundamental level, seals are a means of communicating information, whether about function, identity, status, quantity, quality, official or unofficial administration. Yet, as a technological innovation, seals provide a means of replicating that single piece of information an infinite number of times (or until the seal breaks). While the most common function of this replication is for practical purposes of administration, both Ameri and Regulski suggest that its ritual functions should also play an important role. This functional aspect of seal use is critical and should not be overlooked. The mechanical replication of the seal design as it is impressed on a soft surface allows for the production of large quantities of precise and identical images, and eliminates the possibility of error in the reproduction of these images. In more recent times the invention of the printing press allowed for the easy production and distribution of written matter to a wide range of people, allowing for the dispersal of information over a far greater area than had previously been possible. While it is unlikely that seal impressions had as wide an impact as printed matter, the impact that the replication of images that they permitted had on the distribution of visual symbolism over a large area should not be undervalued.

Seals and sealings are artifacts of social media. Building social relationships and maintaining an identity within communities was essential for economic success in antiquity, as it is now, and the imagery on seals, as well as the seals themselves, were powerful tools within this endeavor. As we interact today using icons, whether on Facebook (where we can “be” whatever we like through our own chosen images), Instagram, or other social media, it becomes ever more obvious how much power was inherent in the creation and use of seal imagery.

It is with great pleasure and a keen appreciation for the study of seals and sealings that the editors offer this volume to its readers. Whatever the tack chosen by scholars today, whether toward administrative analysis, new chronological implications, technical production, socio-anthropologic examination, intercultural revelations, or symbolic value, we see fresh and exciting approaches developing across regional barriers. Scholars continue to build upon the groundwork laid by the earliest scholars in the field, while sailing ahead to new interpretive frameworks.