SEALS AND SEALING IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

Case studies from the Near East, Egypt, the Aegean, and South Asia

Studies of seals and sealing practices have traditionally investigated aspects of social, political, economic, and ideological systems in ancient societies throughout the Old World. Previously, scholarship has focused on description and documentation, chronology and dynastic histories, administrative function, iconography, and style. More recent studies have emphasized context, production, and use, and, increasingly, identity, gender, and the social lives of seals, their users, and the artisans who produced them. Using several methodological and theoretical perspectives, this volume presents up-to-date research on seals that is comparative in scope and focus. The cross-cultural and interdisciplinary approach advances our understanding of the significance of an important class of material culture of the ancient world.

The volume will serve as an essential resource for scholars, students, and others interested in glyptic studies, seal production and use, and sealing practices in the ancient Near East, Egypt, ancient South Asia and the Aegean during the fourth to second millennia BCE.

SEALS AND SEALING IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

CASE STUDIES FROM THE NEAR EAST, EGYPT, THE AEGEAN, AND SOUTH ASIA

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CONTENTS

Color plates can be found between pages 226 and 227.

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Genius, and *Minoan Cushion Seals: Innovation in Form, Style and Use in Bronze Age Glyptic* (with A. M. Jasink and G. Dionysio). She blogs at Zenobia: Empress of the East, and regularly reviews for the *Times Higher Education*.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

PLATES

TABLES

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It goes without saying that the compilers of this volume are deeply indebted and thankful to the wonderful objects whose powers of agency are the heart of the following chapters. Without these artifacts we would never come so close to understanding earlier lives of our fellow craftspeople, and, ultimately, our own lives amongst objects.

We'd like to thank all the mentors who have helped to shape our approaches to scholarship and this book. This includes but is not limited to: Holly Pittman, Joan Aruz, Donald P. Hansen, Rita Wright, Mark Kenoyer, Susan Pollock, and Reinhard Bernbeck. Numerous museums and other institutions have opened their doors and collections to us and the researchers included in the volume, and to them we are most appreciative: the Oriental Institute, the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, the British Museum, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), National Museum of India, and the Lahore Museum.

This volume was first envisioned after a conference session in 2011. From that first session at the annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology to the next years' meetings of the Archaeological Institute of America and the American Schools of Oriental Research, a number of scholars discussed their work on seals and sealings and agreed that such a volume as this was long overdue. We thus would like to thank these professional organizations for providing such fruitful events for the blossoming of collaborative work.

A number of institutions over a wide geographical area have served as our intellectual homes over the time we were working on this volume, from Zayed University in Dubai to Colby College in Maine, the University of Houston-Clear Lake, the University of Wisconsin, and Wagner College in New York City. These institutions were integral in providing us with significant financial and logistical support, from the travel funds to attend the above-mentioned conferences to the labour of student research assistants. In particular we would like to thank the Provost's Office at Colby and Wagner for providing the funding for the color images in the book, and to Caroline Pelham (Colby'17) for her invaluable aid in compiling the bibliography. Special thanks also go to Mr. Andrew Townshend for his invaluable assistance in preparing maps.

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Finally, to our family and friends who have been our support and always encouraging even with our absences, especially Leo, Sam, Judy, David, and Bekah.

PREFACE

Joan Aruz

The evocative title of the introduction to this book, "Small Windows: Wide Views," alludes to the defining aspects of the seals and sealings: their minimal surfaces that contain a wealth of imagery and the breadth of their permeation into the fabric of a diverse array of societies. It is a work that follows in the tradition of volumes that cover the wide range of glyptic scholarship by Edith Porada, which extended from Cyprus to Bactria.[1] In fact, the very nature of seals themselves compels such compilations. They are markers of cultural identity, which is embedded in their forms, materials, and imagery. The intimate connection of seals with their owners is emphasized by the use of string-holes or ring settings to keep them physically close to the body as valued pieces of jewelry. An essential element in the trade process, seals traveled or were impressed on goods and documents that traveled, and they were often coveted abroad as amulets, adornment, or perhaps simply exotica. Their places of discovery as well as their depictions reflect the movement both of goods and of ideas, which make them precious witnesses to the exchanges among the cultures represented in this volume and beyond.

Such cultural intersections are explored in a number of contributions, especially the very first confrontation with the newly invented Near Eastern cylinder seal in the mid-fourth millennium BCE. These devices appear soon afterwards in Egyptian graves, probably in the context of the initiation of trading contacts, although the evidence suggests that – with their exotic depictions – cylinder seals were at first markers of status in the Nile Valley and only later used for sealing as a mechanism of control (Hill 2004; Honoré 2007). In tracing the origins, routes of transmission, and the adoption and adaptation of their distinctive imagery, as well as the profound impact of the administrative use of cylinder seals, scholars have underscored the importance of focusing on seals to illuminate any discourse on cultural contact (Hill 2004: chap. 5; Teissier 1987).

It is also significant that Egypt, in the transition from the third to the second millennium BCE, rejected the cylinder seal in favor of the stamp seal – a form that had also been introduced into the Nile Valley in the fourth millennium BCE (Honoré 2007: 34). By this time, most areas of the ancient world

represented in this volume can be easily recognized as primarily cylinder-seal cultures – retaining their original inspiration from the Mesopotamian heartland – or stamp-seal cultures using very distinctive forms and materials that immediately signify their places of origin. Among the latter is the Aegean region, where in the late third to early second millennium BCE Crete was inspired by Egypt to create "white" scarabs and scaraboids among a plethora of seal forms, while an administrative sealing system was adopted on the Greek mainland that appears to derive its main elements from the Near East, particularly Anatolia (Aruz 2008: 25 ff., 53–61; Weingarten 1997a). At the other end of the geographical spectrum, white burnt steatite seals of a square shape first appear in the Indus Valley in the mid-third millennium BCE, establishing there the use of stamp seals – some of which have iconographic features that appear to relate them to the arts of Mesopotamia, Iran, or even further west (Aruz 2003c). The stamp-seal tradition eventually spreads across a vast area extending to the Oxus and Persian Gulf regions. Both imports and the adoption in Dilmun of circular seals that eventually lose their original Harappan associations point to a complex network of commercial interactions, reinforced by such finds as a shell cylinder seal of probable Gulf origin and another with Indus-derived iconography, discovered at the site of Susa. They had been placed, along with copper implements and stone vases, in the Vase à la Cachette, which may represent a merchant hoard (Aruz and Wallenfells 2003: cat. nos. 202–04). A cylinder seal engraved with a worship scene and an Akkadian inscription identifying the owner as an interpreter of Meluhha further emphasizes that west Asian connections with the Indus Valley were consistent enough to require such a specialist (Aruz and Wallenfells 2003: cat. no. 303).

Merchant hoards and, at times, those of craftsmen include seals of various cultures, capturing moments in time during which glyptic traditions intersected in a variety of circumstances. An Assyrian merchant was buried in the early second millennium BCE with seals that may represent his activity over a geographical area extending from central Anatolia to the Indus Valley (Bernhardt-Wartke 1995; Aruz 1995b: 50–51; Harper et al. 1995: cat. nos. 41–43). Around that time in the commercial centers on the central Anatolian plateau, the use of cylinder seals by Mesopotamian and Syrian merchants seems to have inspired their Anatolian counterparts, previously entrenched in a stamp-seal tradition, to adopt the cylinder form and to combine foreign motifs with their own characteristic images and styles of carving. Further south, in Egypt, "foreigners and explorers who travel across the lands . . . delivered" an impressive dedication to the temple at Tôd in Egypt. The hoard included silver in the form of folded vessels and both stamp and cylinder seals derived from cultures extending from Minoan Crete to Bactria-Margiana, the source of their common and highly coveted material: lapis lazuli (Porada 2014;

Aruz 2014: 255–57). Similarly, lapis lazuli provides the shared feature of an assortment of Near Eastern cylinder seals most likely collected on Cyprus for shipment to Mycenaean Thebes, among them an impressive cylinder of an official in the royal Kassite court (Porada 1981: 68–70 [with an alternate explanation], 1982; Aruz 2013: 216–19, 2014: 258–59). Others had been recarved on the island – creating a mixture of Mesopotamian and local depictions that were included along with Cypriot originals and unworked examples in the treasure that was uncovered in a palatial jewelry workshop in the "Kadmeion" complex. It appears that these imports were being prepared – along with a locally crafted agate cylinder seal and both lapis lazuli and agate floral elements – for inclusion in elaborate jewelry that would appeal to the local elite (Aravantinos 2008; Aruz et al. 2008: cat. nos. 176–83). Even Near Eastern cylinder seals of lesser quality and inexpensive materials were appreciated enough in the Aegean world to be buried with their new owners – although such taste had no effect on the predilection for stamping rather than rolling in this part of the ancient world.

Around the same time, at the end of the fourteenth century BCE, a rich shipment headed for an Aegean port circulated in the eastern Mediterranean before sinking off the promontory known as Uluburun. Among its cargo was a collection of Near Eastern cylinder seals, one recarved, as well as scarabs, one of them a gold seal bearing the name of Nefertiti, along with gold jewelry elements – suggesting that they too may have been destined for a jeweler's workshop. The two rather rudimentary Mycenaean seals on board have been interpreted as belonging to the emissaries accompanying the ship (Pulak 2008b; Aruz et al. 2008: cat. nos. 220–32).

While seals by their very nature as portable objects involved in the trading process and as status-enhancing exotica often enrich our picture of the intricacies of cultural interactions, at times they are also reflections of more intimate connections. The coming together of traditions has already been mentioned in connection with the Anatolian adoption of the cylinder-seal form and adaptation of its imagery in order to do business during the Old Assyrian trading period. Other historical realities may also have been reflected in the intercultural styles created in many different situations although, as Jennifer Gates (2002: 118) points out, one must be very cautious regarding the link between "style . . . and ethnicity or group identity without a direct social context that specifies possible function and meaning." In her study of so-called Graeco-Persian seals – which fall outside the limits of this volume – she highlights the complex threads of interaction that led to the creation of such hybrid works. Cited among them is the large circular impression of a stamp seal of the Persian courtier Gobryas, an intimate of Darius the Great, impressed on the reverses of five Elamite documents in the Persepolis Fortification archive. They list large quantities of beer, wine, and cereal rations allotted to him, noting that Gobryas

carried a sealed authorization from the king (Hallock 1969: 213, PF 688; http://OCHRE/Persepolis Fortification Archive, texts: Fort. 758–104, 688, PF-NN 210, 1133, and 2533). While elements of Elamite tradition have been seen in this work, there can be no doubt that the imagery on this seal captures, as I have written before, the moment of attack in the spirit of Minoan and Mycenaean glyptic, a stylistic feature that reappears later in Greek animal studies (Aruz 2008: 237; Gates 2002: 108 ff.). Gates notes that the ethnicity of the seal carver is not of prime significance, and may not be discernible. Yet, while the subject matter of lions attacking a bull had resonance throughout the Achaemenid empire – this work clearly stands apart from glyptic to which it has been compared, such as a seal from Sardis with similar iconography (Dusinberre 2015: 240–41, fig. 143). The commissioning and use of this extraordinary mark of identity – intimately connected with its owner, a royal family member – may well have conveyed a specific message in the context of the Achaemenid imperialism, as did the seals of other courtiers that were created in Assyrian or Babylonian glyptic traditions (Colburn 2014: 788–92).

Close to a millennium earlier, very different conditions appear to have produced "intercultural"-style seals, inspired in part by the movement of craftsmen dispersed to foreign lands in the wake of the collapse of Minoan palatial society on Crete. The finest of these seals exhibit a subtle integration of Aegean and eastern styles, syntax, and iconography and may have been produced for an international clientele, by carvers entrenched in multiple carving traditions. As with the seal of Gobryas, the main focus is on scenes of animal attack, conveying notions of conquest and control that become metaphors throughout antiquity for royal prowess.

Seals – distinctive cultural markers – are invaluable witnesses to the paths of interaction and the complexities of exchange, which are often visible in their physical appearance. They were also survivors, among the most durable of ancient artifacts, produced in great quantities and preserving an enormous iconographic corpus that would otherwise have been lost. Their impressions – placed both on documents and on containers of many types and materials, either singly or in concert with other seals – give witness to innumerable transactions, bringing administrative systems to life. Their engravings, representing a multitude of styles and depictions, materials and techniques, provide a glimpse into the ways that individual patrons and seal carvers may have interacted, and how regional characteristics were developed and transformed. When viewed together, as in this volume, the power of seals to illuminate the past is greatly enhanced and the search for threads that bind them across the expanse of Asia and the eastern Mediterranean is intensified. Their vital role in the understanding of the ancient world deserves such an emphasis.

ABBREVIATIONS

A. Delt	– *Archaiologikon Deltion*
AJA	– *American Journal of Archaeology*
ASAE	– *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte*
BaM	– *Baghdader Mitteilungen*
BASOR	– *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*
BCH	– *Bulletin de correspondance hellénique*
BIFAO	– *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire*
CahArchSubaq	– *Cahiers d'archéologie subaquatique*
CAJ	– *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*
CMS	– Corpus der minoischen und mykenischen Siegel
GM	– *Göttinger Miszellen*
IsIAO	– Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente
IsMEO	– Istituto per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente
JAOS	– *Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JARCE	– *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt*
JCS	– *Journal of Cuneiform Studies*
JEA	– *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*
JESHO	– *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*
JHS	– *Journal of Hellenic Studies*
JMA	– *Journal of Mediterranean Archaeology*
JNES	– *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*
JSSEA	– *Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities*
MDAIK	– *Mitteilungen des deutschen archäologischen Instituts, Abteilung Kairo*
OBO	– Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis
OJA	– *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*
RAssyr	– *Revue d'assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale*
RdE	– *Revue d'Egyptologie*
WorldArch	– *World Archaeology*