CHAPTER I.

SCARABS, CYLINDERS, AND OTHER EARLY SIGNETS.

IN early times, when writing was a rare accomplishment practised by few except professional scribes or members of a priesthood, hard stones or jewels engraved with a name or a device were of special importance from their use as signets, the impression of which gave that authenticity and authority to a document which in modern times is more usually conferred by a written signature. The signet of a king was commonly regarded as an authoritative symbol of his power, which he could delegate to a subject by entrusting to him the royal seal, with permission to use it: as, for example in ancient Egypt, when the Pharaoh of the time invested Joseph with vice-regal power over his kingdom, "Pharaoh took off his signet ring from his hand, and put it upon Joseph's hand," *Gen.* xli. 42, Revised Version. In the same way a duplicate of Augustus' signet was entrusted to a friend in Rome for use during the Emperor's absence on military expeditions; see below, page 49; and cf. Dio Cass. LIII. 30.

Use of signet.

It was not until a comparatively late period, about the 4th century B.C., that engraved gems were commonly treated as personal ornaments. At first they were made and used simply for the practical purpose of signets.

SCARABS: The earliest class of signets which now exist, with the exception of some Egyptian rings made wholly of gold, are in the form of the sacred *scarabaeus* beetle of Egypt, the symbol of the Sun-god Ra, the Fertilizer of

Scarabs set as rings.

the World[1]. The back of the scarab is cut into the beetle form, and the signet-device, usually a hieroglyphic inscription, is cut on the flat underside of the scarab. A hole drilled longitudinally through the scarab allowed it to be set in a simple ring (δακτύλιος) of gold or other metal, with a wire or swivel passing through the perforation, so that, when required for use as a signet, the scarab could be revolved, and its flat side brought outwards and pressed on wax, clay or other soft plastic substance.

Revolving mounts.

Some of the signet-scarabs which are too large for setting in a ring were worn on a string round the neck; a method which appears to have been one of the earliest ways of wearing any kind of signet.

Materials of scarabs.

It should however be noticed that the scarabs of Egypt were made for many other purposes besides that of signets[2], and the majority of them are not cut in hard stone or crystal, but are moulded in clay or worked out of the comparatively soft steatite, a vitreous glaze being applied by the maker both to steatite and clay scarabs[3].

In point of date the oldest scarab-signets of Egypt go back to a very remote period: examples have been found with the names of kings of the 4th Dynasty, dating about 3700 years B.C.

In later times the scarab form of signet was adopted by the Phoenicians, the Greeks and other races, who either directly or indirectly came under Egyptian influence.

Cylinders.

CYLINDERS: another very early class of signet is the cylinder of Assyria and Babylon, measuring most commonly from $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch to $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches long, and about half an inch to an inch in diameter. These are not made of clay, like so many of the Egyptian scarabs, but are cut out of hard stones,

[1] The scarabaeus beetle (Egyptian *Kheper*) was adopted as this symbol on account of its moulding large balls of clay, round like the world, in which it encloses its eggs. The heat of the sun hatches the eggs, and the young beetles burst forth from the clay ball.

[2] The great bulk of them, especially those made of pottery, were sacred charms or amulets rather than signets.

[3] The Fitzwilliam Museum possesses a good collection of this class of scarab: they are described in the forthcoming catalogue of Egyptian objects in the Museum by Mr Budge.

such as green jasper, rock crystal, chalcedony, haematite, carnelian, or more rarely amethyst and lapis lazuli. These cylinders are drilled longitudinally with a hole of sufficient diameter to receive a woollen or linen cord instead of a metal wire, and they were worn as a bracelet on the wrist, or else strung round the neck[1]. Though used primarily by the powerful races of the Euphrates Valley, these cylinder signets were not unknown among other nations, such as the Semites of Phoenicia and Palestine, and even in the early island colonies of the Phoenicians. The "signet and the cord," mentioned in *Genesis* xxxviii. 18 and 25, Revised Version (or "signet and bracelets" of the Old Version) are examples of this use of the cylinder. So also in *Canticles* viii. 6, the phrase occurs "set me as a seal upon thine arm."

Method of wearing cylinders.

A very large number of these Babylonian and Assyrian cylinders still exist; they appear to have been used by all except the very poorest classes. They are usually engraved with the name of the owner in cuneiform characters, together with figures of various deities, accompanied frequently by attendant genii or worshippers. A very favourite subject, especially among the earliest cylinders, is a deity or a king slaying a lion. The sacred tree (Hôm) between two guardian beasts or winged figures of human form occurs very often. This latter is the most characteristic of the designs used by the inhabitants of the Euphrates valley; from them it was adopted by the Phoenicians, and thus spread over an area as wide as the whole range of Phoenician trade, that is throughout the whole of the shores and islands of the Mediterranean. This very early and widely popular design was largely used by the Tyrian builders of Solomon's temple, as we read in 1 *Kings*, chaps. vi. and vii., and in 2 *Chronicles*, chaps. iii. to v., where the device is mentioned as being repeated again and again in various materials under the name of "the palm-tree and the winged cherubim[2]."

Designs on cylinders.

Palm-tree and Cherubim.

[1] In a few cases the cylinder is mounted on a metal pin with a boss at each end to hold it fast, but this is quite exceptional.

[2] The Phoenician scarab illustrated in fig. 13, page 14, has examples of the winged Cherubim of Assyria.

The cylinder signet of a private person commonly has a figure of his special deity, and often a representation of the owner standing by in the attitude of worship. The inscription usually gives the name both of the deity and of the owner; as, for example, a fine haematite cylinder in the British Museum which is inscribed thus, "Abum-ilu the scribe, son of Nur-Martu, the servant of the god Martu (Rimmon)."

Dates of cylinders.

Examples of these cylinders exist extending over a very wide period of time, from about 2600 B.C. to 200 B.C. or even later. Some of them are very fine examples of ancient Oriental art, designed with much spirit and executed with wonderful minuteness and delicacy of touch in the highly decorative and conventional style which is common to all the best Assyrian sculpture, whatever its scale may be.

Those of early date are the finest and most powerful in style; as, for example, a magnificent Babylonian cylinder of jasper in the British Museum, the signet of a scribe, dating about 2600 B.C., on which is cut a very noble figure of the deified hero Gistubar strangling a lion[1]: see fig. 1.

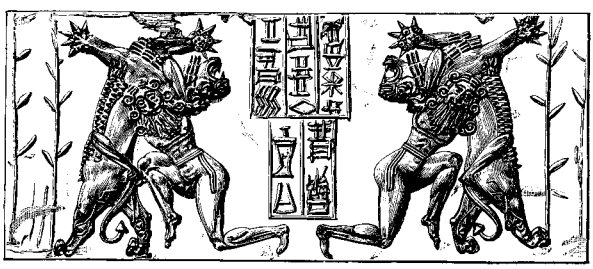

FIG. 1. Impression from an early Babylonian cylinder of the finest style; with the name of the owner and his deity in cuneiform characters, between two representations (reversed) of the same subject—Gistubar strangling a lion: *real size*.

Sargon I.

The equally fine cylinder of Sargon I. (in Paris) is closely similar in style to this, and seems to be the work of the same engraver. The very decorative treatment of the hair, both of the heroes and of the lions, is specially noticeable.

[1] On the fine cylinders of this early period the most frequent subjects are Gistubar and his companion Hea-banî slaying lions or bulls, sometimes separately and sometimes together, like Heracles and Iolaos in early Greek art.

The date of Sargon I. is not known with any certainty. According to some archaeologists his reign was as early as about 2800 B.C. If so, the date of the cylinder shown in fig. 1 would probably be two centuries earlier than is suggested above.

Persian cylinders.

In later times, under the Persian conquerors Darius and Xerxes, Babylon produced cylinders of very minute and delicate workmanship, showing the influence of Greek art, but inferior in spirit and vigour to the engravings of earlier date. The most remarkable example of this, dating from the end of the 6th century B.C., is the signet of Darius Hystaspes, a jasper cylinder engraved with the king in a chariot hunting lions, and with the cuneiform inscription, "I am Darius, the Great King" thrice repeated in the Persian, Median and Assyrian languages. This also is in the British Museum. Lastly, the cylinders of the 3rd century B.C. are very rude in design and of the coarsest, most clumsy workmanship.

Egyptian cylinders.

The cylinder form of signet was also used, though not commonly, in Egypt. The Egyptian cylinders are, as a rule, not made of crystal or jasper, but of pottery or steatite covered with a blue glaze, exactly like the scarabs: on them are cut or moulded, not large figure subjects, but hieroglyphic inscriptions. They appear to have been usually worn round the neck.

The custom of wearing the cylinder-signet as an ornament appears to have led to the use of plain unengraved cylinders, strung on necklaces like large beads. A great many of these in rock-crystal and glass have been found in the tombs of Camiros in Rhodes and elsewhere in the Greek islands and sea-port towns.

Use of cylinder.

When used as a signet the cylinder was rolled over a soft lump of wax or clay, which was thus flattened out over the surface destined to receive the seal, and at the same time received the impress of the cylinder[1]. The fine clay used for sealing not only with cylinders, but also with other forms of

[1] See *Book of Job*, xxxviii. 14, where Heaven, with its night and morning, is described as being "changed as clay under the seal."

engraved gems, was called γῆ σημαντρὶς (σημαίνω to seal). Herodotus (II. 38) describes the Egyptian priests using this clay to mark with their signets the animals which were accepted for sacrifice. Many examples of these clay seals have been found in Egypt, used for many different purposes, both religious and secular; see page 37.

Stamps on pottery.

The method of sealing by rolling an engraved cylinder over soft clay appears to have suggested a form of decoration, which was largely used by the potters of Etruria for the shoulders of their colossal jars (*pithoi*), of which a great number of examples, mostly dating from the 6th or 5th century B.C., still exist.

The patterns on these were moulded in relief on the plastic clay, after the jar was "thrown" on the wheel, but before it was fired, by rolling along a cylinder or disc, on the edge of which the design was sunk. These discs were usually about 9 or 10 inches in circumference, and therefore the pattern repeats regularly at that interval.

The subjects on these bands are rows of animals, Tritons and the like, often very similar in design and style to the sculptured reliefs on the architrave from the Temple at Assos, now in the Louvre.

Cones.

CONICAL SIGNETS: in Assyria, even at an early period, signets of conical form, of the same materials as the cylinders, were sometimes used. These cones, with the device sunk on the broad end, were pressed on rounded lumps of clay in which a piece of string was embedded for the attachment of the seal to a document. The mediaeval system of sealing was similar to this, pendant seals of wax being fastened to parchment deeds by a cord embedded in the wax. Many of the so-called Hittite signets are conical in form, see pages 7 and 8, figs. 2 and 3.

The later Persian signet-gems, from about the time of Alexander downwards, were also very commonly cut, not in the form of cylinders, but of truncated cones. These belong to a period of artistic decadence, and are usually poor in design and coarse in execution; a great contrast to the magnificent vigour of the figures on the early Assyrian

cylinders of about 2600 B.C., and also to the delicate minuteness of the Persian cylinders of the 5th century B.C.[1]

"HITTITE" GEMS, so-called.

"Hittite" signets.

The name "Hittite" has been given to a very remarkable and primitive class of signets, which appear to have been made by some powerful race, whose influence extended throughout a considerable portion of Northern Syria and Asia Minor, at a very early period, perhaps fifteen or sixteen centuries B.C.

These signets do not, strictly speaking, belong to the class of gems; as they are mostly cut out of the softer stones, such as steatite and fine limestones, marbles and serpentine of various colours—black, white, red and brown: a few are on an inferior variety of pale green jasper. They are however of very great interest to the student of early gems, since many of them appear to be prototypes of the lenticular "Island gems;" and others of various forms seem to show the gradual modification of the cylinder into the cone-signet, and the further change from the cone to the hemispherical or annular seal.

Changes of form.

The variety of the shapes of these "Hittite" gems is very great, but none of them appear to have been set in rings; all were suspended in some way by a cord, probably round the neck of the owner.

The following are the chief forms of these signets:

1. Rude *cylinders* of the Assyrian shape.

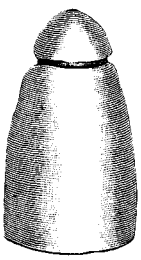

FIG. 2.

2. *Cones*, with the principal device on the base, and the hole or groove for suspension near its smaller end; see fig. 2.

[1] For an account of cylinders and other Oriental gems, see De Vogüé

Cone signets.

If the cone is pierced the hole is drilled at right angles to its axis, not longitudinally as in the cylinders. Some of these conical signets are engraved with figures, not only on the base, but also round the sides of the cone, thus forming a link with the cylindrical shape of signet.

Another variety of the cone is very short in proportion to its diameter, almost hemispherical in shape; see fig. 3.

FIG. 3.

This variety, with its hole for suspension enlarged, leads to the *annular* form of signet.

Ring signets.

3. A *ring-like stone*, in which the perforation is not large enough for the signet to be worn on the finger; it must therefore have been suspended in the usual way by a cord; see fig. 4.

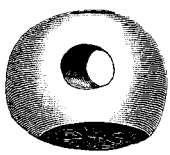

FIG. 4.

A further development of this shape, which rarely occurs,

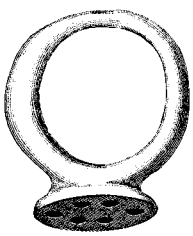

FIG. 5.

Mélanges d'Archéologie Orientale; Paris, 1868; Levy, *Siegel und Gemmen mit aramäischen &c. Inschriften*, Breslau, 1869, and Menant, *Recherches sur la glyptique Orientale*, Paris, 1886.

is an actual *finger-ring* cut out of stone, with one side flattened to form the bezel for the signet device; see fig. 5.

Gable form.

4. Another form among these signets is a *rectangular tablet*, flat on the lower side where the device is cut, and shaped like a low-pitched roof on the other side, giving in section a triangle with one obtuse and two acute angles, the latter being rounded off; see fig. 6. The perforation runs longitudinally through the tablet.

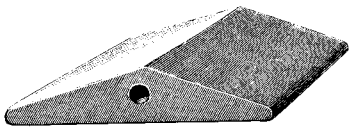

FIG. 6.

Bean form.

5. A great many of these signets have the bean-like, *lenticular* shape of the so-called "Island gems," usually with a longitudinal perforation, but sometimes, instead of that, with a groove cut all round the rim of the disc, allowing a cord or wire to be securely wrapped round the signet.

A few of the conical signets also were suspended in the same way (see fig. 2), not by means of a hole drilled through them, but by a groove cut round the smaller end of the cone. Out of this form the *handled signet* was developed, class no. 7, described below.

6. Another less frequent variety seems to have developed out of the cylinder by slicing its round sides off, making it *square or polygonal* in section, and thus giving four or more surfaces for separate devices, instead of the continuous band of the cylinder.

Signets with handles.

7. *Handled signets;* a large proportion of these signets are cut into various shapes with handles worked out of the same piece of stone. The flat surface where the device is cut is of many forms, circular, oval, square, rectangular or lobed. The handles too vary greatly in shape, some being short projections, only sufficient to receive the perforation for the suspension of the seal, see fig. 7. Others have tall handles, in some cases moulded into ornamental forms at the place

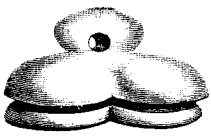

FIG. 7.

where the cord passed through the handle: see figs. 8, 9 and 10.

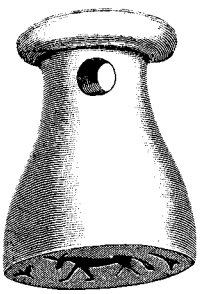

FIG. 8.

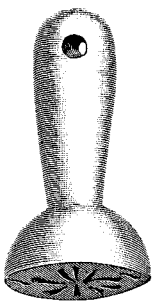

FIG. 9.

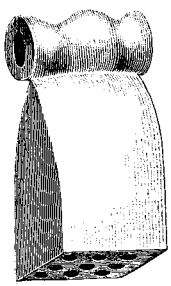

FIG. 10.

Chester collection.

Like the seals shown in figs. 2 to 12, the finest and most elaborate of these handled signets is among the very fine collection of "Hittite" gems, the most important in the world, formed by the Rev. Greville Chester, and now in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford.

This is a large cubical signet cut out of a fine piece of black magnetite, with minutely engraved figures of deities on five sides of the cube. The pierced handle is elaborately moulded, in a fashion which suggests metal-work rather than hard stone. The workmanship of this remarkable signet is very delicate and skilful, a striking contrast to the usual very coarse figures on the "Hittite" seals. Though resembling in general form the handled signets of the "Hittite" class, it is most probably the work of a Phoenician gem-engraver: it was found in or near Antaradus on the coast of Phoenicia[1].

[1] It has been described and illustrated by Professor Sayce, *Arch. Journ.* Vol. XLIV. 1887, pp. 347 to 350.